

THE RODNEY KING INCIDENT, U.S. POLITICS, AND RACISM
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Since the Rodney King verdict and the LA riots, we've had to live with the aftermath: more than 50 people dead, approximately one billion dollars worth of damage, the eerie sense that all of America's inner cities are -- just like south-central LA -- powder kegs waiting to explode.

As if living with such facts wasn't bad enough, during the last month the American public also had to endure another source of LA-related stress: we were forced to listen as our nation's politicians spoke in clichés about the plight of our inner cities. Republicans blamed Democratic "Great Society" programs of 25 years ago for the deterioration of urban America, while Democrats blamed "Republican neglect" during the Reagan-Bush years. As the two brain-dead parties bickered, America's decline continued.

If over the past month one wanted proof of the political establishment's inability to come to grips with the events in LA, one had to look no further than the leading presidential contenders from the Republican and Democratic parties: Bush and Clinton.

When in the wake of the LA explosion Bush traveled to that city, he looked like what he was: a man completely out of touch with the land he governs. He has no more insight into inner city black life than he does into the lives of those blue-collar families, white or black, across the nation who've been brutalized by the decay of American industry. But Bush's biggest crime isn't his lack of understanding; it is the active role he has played over the years in arousing racial tension for political reasons. His use of the Willie Horton ads during the 1988 presidential campaign turned that contest "for the proudest office in the world" into a pigsty of racist sloganeering. Bush's message in the Horton ads was this: "The black urban male is an animal, he is the source of America's ills, we must show him who is boss." This is exactly what the 4 LA police officers did: they showed Rodney King who was boss by beating him mercilessly for the "crime" of being black and for reminding them "of a gorilla". Despite Bush's current proclamations of outrage over events in LA, the truth is that he has played a major role in creating America's seething racial climate.

Unfortunately, the Democratic alternative to Bush is Clinton, a wavy-haired candidate who wears ideas like someone else might wear designer garments -- for their fashion appeal. During the Democratic primaries, Clinton, in order to make himself more attractive to voters, spent more than a million dollars on the political equivalent of a breast implant: he hired high-powered admen to

cosmetically alter him and make him more electable. But Clinton's new look doesn't change the fact that he's a traditional Democrat with (1) strong ties to the right wing of his party and (2) little insight into the urban nightmare symbolized by LA's recent events.

Although Clinton currently attempts to portray himself as a racial healer, he used his position as a leader of the conservative Democratic Leadership Council in the 1980s to denounce what he saw as the Democratic Party's unhealthy dependence on an electoral coalition dominated by blacks and other so-called interest groups. Clinton argued that the way for the party to offset this problem was to establish itself as an anti-liberal, non-bleeding-heart, tough-on-crime, let's cut-back-the-welfare-system formation that was close enough to the Reagan-Bush philosophy to steal Republicans votes. Clinton's views in these areas reflected a social-economic vision that had almost nothing of significance to say about the relationship between the plight of America's inner cities, the institutionalized racial inequities that still haunt our society, and the widening gap between rich and poor. Given this vision, it's not surprising that during the latter 1980s Clinton positioned himself as one of the party's chief opponents of the only truly progressive attempt to broaden the Democratic Party's base during that decade: Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition. Clinton might be "talking the talk" these days, but that's all he's doing: talking. He's about as equipped to lead a battle against racism and inner city decay as Donald Trump is to lead a workshop on the joys of frugality.

But politicians aren't the only ones who distort and mislead when it comes to complex issues like the Rodney King beating and the LA riot. News commentators and so-called experts of various stripes also contribute to our inability to clearly see U.S. social-economic reality. A specific example of a misleading "expert's opinion" was a May 17th Sunday News Journal column by Charles Brandt, a Wilmington lawyer and novelist. Brandt insisted that the Simi Valley jury's verdict was, without question, free of racial bias. Brandt proceeded to claim that King's size ("King is 6_foot_3 and weighs between 250 and 300 pounds") in conjunction with the possibility (later proven to be false) that King was on PCP justified the police's physical abuse. Brandt concluded that those who "condemn the jury as racist" hurt America's young people by undermining their capacity to believe in the American dream. This is like saying that those who struggle against wife battering are the cause of the breakdown of the nuclear family, or those who fight anti-Semitism are the cause of neo-Nazi thinking. I vehemently disagree with such logic.

In his article, Brandt did exactly what we can't afford to do as a nation: he trivialized the degree to which racial tension haunts U.S. life. Recent events in LA can't be viewed independently of the national increase in racial violence during recent years. Whether this violence is physical, as in the race motivated slaying

of a black youth in Bensonhurst, NY, or whether the violence is psychological/emotional as in Pat Buchanan's white supremacist speeches, the fact is that America is racially disoriented.

In part, white America's racial fears are spawned by the fact that all the demographic evidence indicates that at some point in the 21st century people of color may well become the United States' majority population; consequently, sections of the white population live in dread of what will happen when the victims of American racism gain enough power to say no to that racism once and for all.

Another aspect of U.S. racial tension is this: The nation's economic elite, in spite of all its fancy speeches and empty promises, is in fact perfectly content with the existence of a U.S. underclass and the rotting inner cities which that underclass inhabits. This is because to liberate the underclass from economic want would mean paying a price the U.S. economic system don't want to pay. That price is: an economic revolution based on a commitment to full employment and rebuilding the inner cities so the newly employed would have decent neighborhoods to live in. Unfortunately, the U.S. corporate elite want no part of such a program. Take General Motors as an example. While closing down plants across the U.S. and devastating autoworkers, GM has become the biggest private employer in Mexico. GM's abandonment of America while taking advantage of super-exploited labor in Mexico is a good example of the U.S. corporate agenda: an economic scorched earth policy here at home (i.e., a lowering of real wages, the dumping of "unneeded" workers into the underclass, etc.) coupled with aggressive expansion abroad.

While this anti-working people structural crisis deepens, too many leaders try to distract whites by insinuating blacks and other minorities are the cause of our nation's problems.

At the center of this mess of misleadership are the two big political parties, which offer the population at large what the crack dealer offers the crackhead: an escape from reality as opposed to an effort to change reality.

Although many good people belong to the two main political parties, the truth is that the Republican and Democratic organizations have shrunk in size over recent years. This trend is itself a reflection of another trend: the diminishing number of people who turn out to vote in elections. The truth is that the electorate's movement is away from the two parties and their tiring rhetoric, not toward them. Although at this point in history the two parties' increasing irrelevance has not yet become a story covered by the major news outlets, this will change. As people's political alienation worsens over the next one or two decades and mounting numbers of people become independents and/or

nonvoters, the nation's electoral crisis will intensify and pressure will grow for the formation of a new party or parties to combat the old ones.

I personally await that day and will do what I can, in my own small way, to build toward it. I want a new political party, a progressive one. I want a party that puts its neck on the line in the fight to win women the right to equal pay for equal work, a party that isn't afraid to place itself between the cops' boots and Rodney King's body, a party that refuses to tolerate the polluting of our land, waterways and air, a party that is driven by its interest in people's welfare rather than by its enslavement to the whims of the corporate elite.