**Dearth of a Nation**

*A Perspective from Larry Estrada*

The United States has been in a moral quandary about the issue of race from its very inception. The two major documents of the Republic, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution spouted lofty and idealistic platitudes that even at the time seemed contradictory to many of their signers and founders of the fledgling nation. They knew full well that land, class, race and gender would ultimately separate the status and ear mark the beneficiaries of the freedoms espoused by these two wondrous documents.

So it has since its beginning dealt with these evident contradictions and the ideals of a nation that would exemplify a new and democratic vision of self-rule and self-governance, absent the privilege of monarchial entitlement and autocratic subjugation. However, the colonial and national cornerstone for economic survival and prosperity long revealed itself to be in direct contrast to this lofty vision.

The black underclass was brought here chained under brutal and inhumane conditions to toil; with only the desperate hope that one day they or their descendants would earn freedom, both physical and political. Initially, concentrated in the South the growing plantation systems maximized the output of cotton, tobacco, sugar and other raw products for export production on the backs of enslaved labor. The white underclass, many of whom descended from Scots-Irish peasants of the motherland came here either indentured or freely. They tended to migrate and populate the rural parts of the eastern United States, especially along the Appalachian Mountains. With subsequent waves of other European immigrants their labor and militias were to later fuel the theft and expansion of colonized indigenous lands, townships and eventually the industrial north. These two major reservoirs of humanity would in many ways form the later archetypal divisions that presently shape race and political relations within the United States.

The later cycles of Abolition, Emancipation, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow edicts would eventually give way to a new cacophony for justice, change and freedom in the 1950’s and 1960’s. In the face of these mounting pressures and movements the white poor focused on the politics of class and voted their pocketbook while maintaining an historical mistrust for urban elites. Meanwhile, African Americans and other populations of color put their trust in those who would tear down legal barriers and impediments in order gain full participation and voice within the American society. Brown v. Board of Education, The Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 heralded a new dawn for both groups and in many instances formed alliances that brought about mutual prosperity and political ties during the Kennedy and Johnson era.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950’5 and 60’s spearheaded by leaders like the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., Charles Hamilton Houston, John Lewis, Rosa Parks, Shirley Chisholm, Thurgood Marshall, Stokely Carmichael, Cesar Chavez along with the guidance of still living icons such as Mary McLeod Bethune, and Dr. W.E.B. DuBois would bring about a transformative era in terms of race relations and social justice within the American landscape.

*The era became a beacon for continued change and an example that American institutions, inclusive of the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights and the Constitution in line with American juris prudence and progressive legislation could effectively bring about social and political change*. Many believed that the evils of segregation, discrimination, and political disfranchisement were long last resolved and if not totally eliminated, were well on their way to extinction.

*Nevertheless, the gains made during this era did not for the most part change the minds and heart of the bulk of American society*. The nation continued to witness episodes of violence and unrest, as was seen in recent years in places like Ferguson, Charleston and Baltimore. The eruption of major population centers throughout the 70s, 80s and 90s such as Los Angeles, Philadelphia, New York and Boston signaled that racism, prejudice and monumental inequality would continue to ignite further incidents of racial division, mayhem and social upheaval.

The historical consciousness that so often associated white supremacy and intolerance with the hooded robes, pointed hats and burning crosses of the Ku Klux Klan, as it linked social justice and racial harmony with Dr. Martin Luther king Jr. and the civil rights movement had to readjust to the fact that the white supremacy of the present millennium was more pernicious, systemic and widespread. The white supremacy of today, with the exception of Charlottesville and other manifestations of overt hatred acted out across the country, speaks to a different form of oppression. It focuses on the constructed fabric of American society and the archetypal contradictions that continue to reinforce and center economic wealth, cultural and political power overwhelmingly in the hands of a largely white, privileged 1 percent minority. It references the system that holds in place communities of color as well as poor white communities in America that face drastic conditions related to poverty, epidemics, food and health desertification, voting suppression along with increased militarization of law enforcement to maintain “law and order.”

The social media, spin hyped, digitalized society of today can now view and face the personalization of racism and white supremacy magnified by the all too often tragic deaths of individuals such as George Floyd, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Michael Brown, De’Von Bailey, Sandra Bland, Atatiana Jefferson, Andres Guardado, Pamela Turner, Elena Mondragon, Manuel Ellis and Sean Monterrosa … just to name a few. Most of these homicides were precipitated by routine traffic stops, house calls and neighborhood watch groups/vigilantes.

The multitude of protests, vigils and demonstrations held in communities across the country after George Floyd’s murder, watched by nearly the entire country as well as the world, brought home to the majority of American society that race and racism continues to lie at the core of our national distress and inability to heal. A violence that over and over again is perpetuated by the media, social institutions, systemic barriers, societal norms, and unscrupulous politicians that continues to boil, heat, and simmer until the next major eruption.

As we confront this violence we continue to lose our heroes in this struggle. This past week John Lewis’ life was celebrated and memorialized. A life dedicated to change and civil engagement. I first met John Lewis in the mid 80’s at a conference in Washington D.C. centered on voting rights and community mobilization. I remember his retort to a young black woman, a member of the then Colorado Black Student Alliance. She asked Reverend Lewis “ Do you think that the nation is better and we are better off now than we were back in the 1950s.” Lewis pondered her question for nearly a minute, furrowing his forehead and resting his chin on his finger tips as he leaned against the podium. He then stated “Young lady its better than it was but it needs to be soo much better than it is”.

The fact of the matter is that America because of its inability to honestly face and reflect upon the underpinnings of racism has doomed countless generations to division, strife and conflict.

We as the most powerful nation on the planet still have not been able to resolve our original sin.

We now need a new cadre of heroes to lead us forward.

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