Drip by Drip, the Indignities Go On


By HALFORD H. FAIRCCHILD

"Pluralistic ignorance" is social-science jargon for the phenomenon where masses of people—the majority—readily subscribe to a false idea or belief. Such is the case in the near-hysteria surrounding the second trial of the LAPD officers accused of beating and denying the civil rights of Rodney G. King.

Pluralistic ignorance is displayed in the widespread fears of another conflagration of our city. It is also revealed in all the preparations taken in anticipation of Saturday's verdict involving the four LAPD officers. Mayor Bradley appealed for calm; the National Guard stood ready; the LAPD was on tactical alert; Jesse Jackson pleaded for peace; Maxine Waters warned that looters and arsonists would be killed; the public armed itself in readiness for civil war. These actions assume that the violence of a year ago was the direct result of the Simi Valley verdict exonerating the four LAPD officers in the beating of Rodney King.

In fact, those verdicts were only the spark that lit the fuse of a powder keg that was ready to explode from decades of abuse and neglect.

The real danger in short-term palliative measures is that they distract us from the real causes of the looting and fires of last spring: long-term conditions that reduce the quality of life for many in the inner city to degradation and despair.

Living in an economically depressed and isolated community is like water torture. There is a slow drip-by-drip accumulation of pain and tension that inexorably leads to an explosion. Saturday's mixed verdicts did not drench us with indignation as did last year's, but the exoneration of two of the four officers and the failure to indict onlookers adds to our collective alienation.

The geographical isolation of minorities and the poor facilitates their unequal treatment in the provision of human services. The lack of financial institutions serving our community gives rise to small lending establishments—such as pawn shops—that extort a heavy price for borrowed money. The absence of major food stores leaves room for small convenience stores that charge exorbitant prices that seem like highway robbery.

The concentration of the poor in overcrowded schools with an alienating curriculum produces children and youth who are far behind the norms in basic academic skills.

The spending power of the middle and lower classes worsens as the spending power of the upper classes expands. All of these conditions contribute to the pressure-cooker existence that characterizes life in the inner city—in Los Angeles and elsewhere. Last year, the mounting pressure was primed to explode. The Simi Valley verdict was the match that lighted this combustible mixture.

The preparations for unrest following the federal civil-rights trial ignore the fundamental problems that afflict inner-city life. As we enjoy the peace that follows these verdicts, we must be cognizant that it may be the calm before the storm.

The drip-by-drip accumulation of human indignity continues in South-Central Los Angeles and in similarly economically isolated and disenfranchised communities.

Indeed, the conflagration of last year only made life in our neighborhood worse. Several of the few financial institutions and supermarkets that were here were burned to the ground; dozens of the convenience stores are now vacant lots, and the educational and vocational crises are worse today than a year ago.

Will there be another "riot"? It is a certainty unless we shed our ignorance and exchange it for enlightenment of the true causes of civil unrest. Calling out the National Guard is easy. Placing the LAPD on tactical alert is easy. Making politically expedient statements is also easy. Far more difficult is the task of affirmatively reversing decades of benign neglect of large segments of our citizenry. We must tackle the imposing problems of academic failure, inadequate job training and absent job opportunities. We must achieve the LAPD's mission of protecting and serving all residents equally. Only these more difficult long-term solutions will prevent the fires of 1992 from returning to plague our city and community.

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 Aren't They Really Us?

Responsibility: L.A.'s tragedy is a product of the American political economy and culture.

By HALFORD H. FAIRCHILD

On April 25, my wife, 6-month-old baby and I left for a two-week vacation in Tennessee and New York. We arrived with baseball caps proudly displaying the words: South Central—NFRS. Our friends, a South African, were pleased of the South African businesses in our community. But, who are they? Are they really part of our neighborhood? Are they part of the rebuilding? Are they part of the community? And, what does it mean to be part of the community?

As a way to promote our neighborhood, we must recognize that the conditions for anarchy are built into the fabric of our society. Only long-term solutions that correct schooling inadequacies and that improve housing, health and employment opportunities can help us recognize our personal responsibility for the quality of life in our neighborhood and throughout the nation. Every American citizen must help us recognize our personal responsibility for the quality of life in our neighborhood and throughout the nation.

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