Lott, Bratton: History forgives and instructs

S

en, Trent Lott, R-Miss., is ex-
corated for what he intended to be an endearing comment to a 100-year-old Southern 
politician on his birthday. William J. Bratton, the newly appointed Los Angeles police chief, is lambasted for his tough talk about gangs.

But when their comments are placed in historical context, complaints about their speech are misguided. Even worse, the condemnation of Lott and Bratton shield us from a much broader culpability and distract attention from needed social reforms.

We inherit the values and norms of society. Our beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviors mirror our culture; they are products of historical processes. Too often, we forget our history. More often, we deny its relevance.

The historical processes that resulted in Strom Thurmond’s segregationism and William Bratton’s stance against urban gangs occurred during the last 500 years. It is a period of exploration, discovery and conquest. The South’s “peculiar institution” of slavery persisted for three centuries. The idea that African people were chattel — things — was necessitated by the brutalities of slavery.

Slavery ended in 1863 but was followed by nearly 100 years of judicially sanctioned Jim Crow practices where segregation meant a great deal more than separation. The “white” and “colored” facilities — bathrooms, water fountains, soda machines, etc. — clearly communicated ideas of superiority and inferiority to their users.

Segregation embazoned white supremacy and was intrinsic to the Southern way of life. Blacks and whites, more often than not, acquiesced to their historically prescribed roles and relationships.

Strom Thurmond, a Jim-Crow-era South Carolina senator, was a staunch segregationist. To blame him for this is like blaming someone for getting wet after being thrown into the ocean. We should also wink with understandings when hearing of Trent Lott’s desire to keep his University of Mississippi fraternity all white in the 1950s.

Chief Bratton’s reference to gang violence as “homeland terrorism” is a fair description of our current situation. Los Angeles is experiencing a record year in homicides; the bulk of it is gang related and centered in poverty class African American and Latino communities.

Community leaders, rather than criticizing Bratton for his anti-gang rhetoric, should be identifying and lobbying for lasting solutions to the gang problem.

Inner-city crime and violence result from the same historical processes that produced Thurmond, Lott, Bratton and everyone else. Segregation is outlawed, but most Americans live in homogeneous communities. Like the white and colored drinking fountains of the old South, residential separation reflects and perpetuates racial inequality.

Every major metropolitan area has a concentrated area of African Americans. These urban spaces are characterized by disrepair, failing schools, unemployment, poverty, gang violence, homelessness and inadequate human services. History produced this lower-common-denominator-reality of African American living conditions.

The criminal justice system provides tertiary prevention to gang violence by incarcerating convicted criminals, but gives short shrift to secondary prevention programs to rehabilitate, train and employ. Police must collaborate with community based programs to identify and redirect at-risk youth.

Community leaders must engage in primary prevention by continuing to eradicate the legacies of slavery and the remnants of Jim Crow. They must actively promote their communities, attract investments and demand equal access to public resources. Schools must be held accountable to produce competent citizens with marketable skills. Our national economies must emphasize development, full employment and humanitarian aid; and these require achieving world peace without war.

The outrage against Lott and the critique of Bratton shield a much broader culpability, and thereby obscure needed reform.

If we know our history, we can forgive each other for being its products and begin to work together to solve its consequences.

— Halford H. Fairchild is a Professor of Psychology and Black Studies at Pitzer College. He may be reached at Hfairchild@Pitzer.edu.