

The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

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Cover Story

“Can’t we all get along?”

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BC Guest Commentator**

There are images that remain indelibly imprinted on ones psyche with such transformative emotional and unforgettable consequences that, I am convinced, one carries them to our very graves. For me, one such image is that of Emmett Till whose decomposed and emaciated body was laid in state in an open coffin, so many years ago, in a Chicago church. To this day it still haunts me. I can see him and feel his pain. The impact of his picture on the front page of a Chicago newspaper initiated my peripheral involvement in the struggle for civil rights. Never had I dreamt that I would ever be willing to put my body on the line, here in America, for a cause.

As a new arrival to these shores from a land – the Republic of Panama – where, on the former Canal Zone, American racism poisoned our lives with its pungent and nauseating odor. We lived under the segregated structure of “Gold” and “Silver;” “Gold” for the privileged “whites” and “Silver” for the marginalized “Blacks and Latinos”. Yet, contradiction of contradictions, some of us flocked to the “land of opportunity” where we were led to believe that democracy, equality and justice reigned. In Chicago I learned a different lesson one that I still carry with me.

Sadly, since then, there have been many images that further served to foment my social and political activism; the assassination of JFK and his brother Robert; of Malcolm and Martin, all unforgettable painful and wrenching testimony to the nature of naked power, greed, avarice and of man’s inhumanity to man. Concurrently I also carry the images of Lumumba and Biko.

When I learned of the death of Rodney King, two images returned shaking my entire being and rekindling to some extent some of the fury I felt so long ago. The first image was that of his being stomped and beaten by policemen - men who had no regards or respect for his humanity - and who, were paid to be "the protectors" of the people. The second was the sound of his pitiful and pleading voice, his face reflecting the brutal beating he had endured, asking the world at large "Can't we all get along?"

As these two images imprisoned me and I remembered the nation's response of disbelief and relief - many feared another explosive rebellion - I silently recalled having chuckled at the luck of the nation for we had dodged a potential bullet. Rodney King's words of compassion had spared us! One would have hoped that his act of magnanimity and his undeniable expression of a commitment to one of Christianity's credos "love thy enemies" would have propelled the country on a path towards the eradication of racism and economic and social inequality. Obviously, his was but one voice! It never happened. As a nation we continue to swim without much regard to the health of human kind, in a sea where the toxic fumes of racism is destroying us all. The Trayvon Martin case in Florida, the "Stop and Frisk Laws" of New York City and the killing of a Black man in his home by a policeman - also in New York are indicators that not much has changed.

It is true that we have elected a Black President which some interpret as visibly underscoring the demise of racism in America. Some even suggest that we are now living in a "Post Racial" society. For me, those who so believe or say that they do, are either, by design, lying to the nation for their own purposes or are fooling themselves. Racism is alive and well and, in some cases, thriving.

Here in general terms are a few examples of what I perceive to be our reality:

The increasing attempts by some states to repeal laws that were designed to overcome the dark past of the nation and now move to replace these laws with new ones that would once more place the marginalized in their former position of servitude; the blatant and cruel attempts to eradicate social, economic and political programs aimed at reducing inequality and promote equality and justice are under constant attack; the overt expression of contempt and disrespect, by some, of the office of the president and the man himself; the

unwillingness of many in the mainstream and cable media who, aware of the economic conditions which this president inherited and who are cognizant its slow and painful recovery – but recovery - continue to ask “what will the president do to take the country out of its perilous and tenuous tiptoeing on the cliff of disaster?” This, they ask, in light of the three year litany of “No’s” by the Republican obstructionist party - a party that from the inception of the President tenure in office have expressed their commitment to making Barack Obama a “one term” president.

The real tragedy is that many of those who could raise their voices and help the middle class and the poor, those who are feeling the economic pain and are desperately seeking relief, either refuse or are reluctant to do so.

There are some within the President’s party who, under normal circumstances, would be raising their voices vociferously in support of accomplishments who persist with unrealistic and apolitical expectations. It is as if he could, for example, simply say “tomorrow I will unilaterally implement a FDR like work creation program.” Given the temper of the times, the ugly and incessant machinations of the “Rovians” and the infusion of mega millions to “retake” the country, this vision of the President, in my view, is utopian.

How else can one explain the apparent closeness of the poll between two candidates where one of them, the President, has a world view, compassionate, and is the intellectual superior to his opponent – a man who was ridiculed in his party’s primaries as a “liar” and a would be practitioner of “vulture” capitalism and what President George H.W. Bush once called “Voodoo economics.”

What troubles me is my belief that we are also witnessing a not too subtle subliminal and psychological reluctance – mostly on the unconscious level—by those who historically held and controlled the pedestals of power and who cannot fully accept the fact that a Black man - one whose ancestors they have been taught to despise - who they must now address as their “Commander in Chief”.

This statement is not intended as an attack on white males but rather a description of a phenomenon which, in my view, is the operative principle in the use and retaining of power. Power is rarely if ever relinquished or shared - even if it is morally right; hence, human beings, be they Black, White, Yellow, Red or Green; do not surrender

power and control. Thus, the present affliction of those who seek to retain dominance for their own purposes - profit over people! President Obama once suggested that a national conversation on race was needed. It has never happened. It is still needed.

Finally, while we cannot reverse the "past", it is my conviction that, with the knowledge of that "past," we can, together, work towards the transformation of the "present" and build a bright and better tomorrow. Perhaps Rodney King's unanswered question will then be answered in the affirmative.

BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator, *Carlos E. Russell*, PhD is Professor Emeritus C.U.N.Y. - Brooklyn College. *In the sixties, he served as an Associate Editor of the Liberator magazine. As such, he was one of the first to interview Malcolm X after he left the Nation. He is best remembered as the founder of Black Solidarity Day in New York in 1969 and as the Chair of the Black Caucus of the Conference on New Politics in 1967. In addition, he was a consultant to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the planning for the [Poor Peoples March](#). Excerpts of his participation can be seen in [Citizen King](#) and [Eyes on the Prize \(PBS Mini Series Boxed Set\)](#). Born in the Republic of Panama he has served as that country's representative to the U.N and the O.A.S. with the rank of Ambassador. He has also served as the nightly host of "Thinking it Through" a talk show that was aired on WLIB in New York. He is a playwright and poet as well. Click [here](#) to contact Dr. Russell.*



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