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ISSUES

Racial Justice

We must pursue policies that transform this country into a nation that affirms the value of its people of color. That starts with addressing the four central types of violence waged against black and brown Americans: physical, political, legal and economic.

PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

PERPETRATED BY THE STATE

Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Rekia Boyd, Eric Garner, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, Samuel DuBose. We know their names. Each of them died unarmed at the hands of police officers or in police custody. The chants are growing louder. People are angry and they have a right to be angry. We should not fool ourselves into thinking that this violence only affects those whose names have appeared on TV or in the newspaper. African Americans are twice as likely to be arrested and almost four times as likely to experience the use of force during encounters with the police.

PERPETRATED BY EXTREMISTS

We are far from eradicating racism in this country. In June, nine of our fellow Americans were murdered while praying in a historic church because of the color of their skin. This violence fills us with outrage, disgust, and a deep, deep sadness. Today in America, if you are black, you can be killed for getting a pack of Skittles during a basketball game. These hateful acts of violence amount to acts of terror. They are perpetrated by extremists who want to intimidate and terrorize black and brown people in this country.

ADDRESSING PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

It is an outrage that in these early years of the 21st century we are seeing intolerable acts of violence being perpetuated by police, and racist terrorism by white supremacists.

A growing number of communities do not trust the police and law enforcement officers have become disconnected from the communities they are sworn to protect. Violence and brutality of any kind, particularly at the hands of the police sworn to protect and serve our communities, is unacceptable and must not be tolerated. We need a societal transformation to make it clear that black lives matter, and racism cannot be accepted in a civilized country.

We must demilitarize our police forces so they don't look and act like invading armies.

We must invest in community policing. Only when we get officers into the communities, working within neighborhoods before trouble arises, do we develop the relationships necessary to make our communities safer together. Among other things, that means increasing civilian oversight of police departments.

We need police forces that reflect the diversity of our communities.

At the federal level we need to establish a new model police training program that reorients the way we do law enforcement in this country. With input from a broad segment of the community including activists and leaders from organizations like Black Lives Matter we will reinvent how we police America.

We need to federally fund and require body cameras for law enforcement officers to make it easier to hold them accountable.

Our Justice Department must aggressively investigate and prosecute police officers who break the law and hold them accountable for their actions.

We need to require police departments and states to provide public reports on all police shootings and deaths that take place while in police custody.

We need new rules on the allowable use of force. Police officers need to be trained to de-escalate confrontations and to humanely interact with people who have mental illnesses.

States and localities that make progress in this area should get more federal justice grant money. Those that do not should get their funding slashed.

We need to make sure the federal resources are there to crack down on the illegal activities of hate groups.

POLITICAL VIOLENCE

DISENFRANCHISEMENT

In the shameful days of open segregation, “literacy” laws were used to suppress minority voting. Today, through other laws and actions — such as requiring voters to show photo ID, discriminatory drawing of Congressional districts, not allowing early registration or voting, and purging voter rolls — states are taking steps which have a similar effect.

The patterns are unmistakable. An MIT paper found that African Americans waited twice as long to vote as whites. Wait times of as long as six or seven hours have been reported in some minority precincts, especially in “swing” states like Ohio and Florida. Thirteen percent of African-American men have lost the right to vote due to felony convictions.

This should offend the conscience of every American.

The fight for minority voting rights is a fight for justice. It is inseparable from the struggle for democracy itself.

We must work vigilantly to ensure that every American, regardless of skin color or national origin, is able to vote freely and easily.

ADDRESSING POLITICAL VIOLENCE

We need to re-enfranchise the more than two million African Americans who have had their right to vote taken away by a felony conviction.

Congress must restore the Voting Rights Act’s “pre-clearance” provision, which extended protections to minority voters in states where they were clearly needed.

We must expand the Act’s scope so that every American, regardless of skin color or national origin, is able to vote freely.

We need to make Election Day a federal holiday to increase voters’ ability to participate.

We must make early voting an option for voters who work or study and need the flexibility to vote on evenings or weekends.

We must make no-fault absentee ballots an option for all Americans.

Every American over 18 must be registered to vote automatically, so that students and working people can make their voices heard at the ballot box.

We must put an end to discriminatory laws and the purging of minority-community names from voting rolls.

We need to make sure that there are sufficient polling places and poll workers to prevent long lines from forming at the polls anywhere.

LEGAL VIOLENCE

Millions of lives have been destroyed because people are in jail for nonviolent crimes. For decades, we have been engaged in a failed “War on Drugs” with racially-biased mandatory minimums that punish people of color unfairly.

It is an obscenity that we stigmatize so many young Americans with a criminal record for smoking marijuana, but not one major Wall Street executive has been prosecuted for causing the near collapse of our entire economy. This must change.

If current trends continue, one in four black males born today can expect to spend time in prison during their lifetime. Blacks are imprisoned at six times the rate of whites and a report by the Department of Justice found that blacks were three times more likely to be searched during a traffic stop, compared to white motorists. African-Americans are twice as likely to be arrested and almost four times as likely to experience the use of force during encounters with the police. This is an unspeakable tragedy.

It is morally repugnant and a national tragedy that we have privatized prisons all over America. In my view, corporations should not be allowed to make a profit by building more jails and keeping more Americans behind bars. We have got to end the private-for-profit prison racket in America. Profiting off the misery of incarcerated people is immoral and it is immoral to take campaign contributions from the private prison industry or its lobbyists.

The measure of success for law enforcement should not be how many people get locked up. We need to invest in drug courts as well as medical and mental health interventions for people with substance abuse problems, so that people struggling with addiction do not end up in prison, they end up in treatment.

For people who have committed crimes that have landed them in jail, there needs to be a path back from prison. The federal system of parole needs to be reinstated. We need real education and real skills training for the incarcerated.

We must end the over incarceration of nonviolent young Americans who do not pose a serious threat to our society. It is an international embarrassment that we have more people locked up in jail than any other country on earth – more than even the Communist totalitarian state of China. That has got to end.

We must address the lingering unjust stereotypes that lead to the labeling of black youths as “thugs.” We know the truth that, like every community in this country, the vast majority of people of color are trying to work hard, play by the rules and raise their children. It’s time to stop demonizing minority communities.

We must reform our criminal justice system to ensure fairness and justice for people of color.

ADDRESSING LEGAL VIOLENCE

We need to ban prisons for profit, which result in an over-incentive to arrest, jail and detain, in order to keep prison beds full.

We need to turn back from the failed “War on Drugs” and eliminate mandatory minimums which result in sentencing disparities between black and white people.

We need to invest in drug courts and medical and mental health interventions for people with substance abuse problems, so that they do not end up in prison, they end up in treatment.

We need to boost investments for programs that help people who have gone to jail rebuild their lives with education and job training.

ECONOMIC VIOLENCE

Weeks before his death, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to a union group in New York about what he called “the other America.”

“One America is flowing with the milk of prosperity and the honey of equality,” King said. “That America is the habitat of millions of people who have food and material necessities for their bodies, culture and education for their minds, freedom and human dignity for their spirits. ... But as we assemble here tonight, I’m sure that each of us is painfully aware of the fact that there is another America, and that other America has a daily ugliness about it that transforms the buoyancy of hope into the fatigue of despair.”

The problem was structural, King said: “This country has socialism for the rich, rugged individualism for the poor.”

Eight days later, speaking in Memphis, King continued the theme. “Do you know that most of the poor people in our country are working every day?” he asked striking sanitation workers. “And they are making wages so low that they cannot begin to function in the mainstream of the economic life of our nation. These are facts which must be seen, and it is criminal to have people working on a full-time basis and a full-time job getting part-time income.”

King explained the shift in his focus: “Now our struggle is for genuine equality, which means economic equality. For we know that it isn’t enough to integrate lunch counters. What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn’t earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee?”

But what King saw in 1968 — and what we all should recognize today — is that it is necessary to try to address the rampant economic inequality while also taking on the issue of societal racism. We must simultaneously address the structural and institutional racism which exists in this country, while at the same time we vigorously attack the grotesque level of income and wealth inequality which is making the very rich much richer while everyone else – especially those in our minority communities – are becoming poorer.

In addition to the physical violence faced by too many in our country we need look at the lives of black children and address a few other difficult facts. Black children, who make up just 18 percent of preschoolers, account for 48 percent of all out-of-school suspensions before kindergarten. We are failing our black children before kindergarten. Black students were expelled at three times the rate of white students. Black girls were suspended at higher rates than all other girls and most boys. According to the Department of Education, African American students are more likely to suffer harsh punishments – suspensions and arrests – at school.

We need to take a hard look at our education system. Black students attend schools with higher concentrations of first-year teachers, compared with white students. Black students were more than three times as likely to attend schools where fewer than 60 percent of teachers meet all state certification and licensure requirements.

Communities of color also face the violence of economic deprivation. Let's be frank: neighborhoods like those in west Baltimore, where Freddie Gray resided, suffer the most. However, the problem of economic immobility isn't just a problem for young men like Freddie Gray. It has become a problem for millions of Americans who, despite hard-work and the will to get ahead, can spend their entire lives struggling to survive on the economic treadmill.

We live at a time when most Americans don't have \$10,000 in savings, and millions of working adults have no idea how they will ever retire in dignity. God forbid, they are confronted with an unforeseen car accident, a medical emergency, or the loss of a job. It would literally send their lives into an economic tailspin. And the problems are even more serious when we consider race.

Let us not forget: It was the greed, recklessness, and illegal behavior on Wall Street that nearly drove the economy off of the cliff seven years ago. While millions of Americans lost their jobs, homes, life savings, and ability to send their kids to college, African Americans who were steered into expensive subprime mortgages were the hardest hit.

Most black and Latino households have less than \$350 in savings. The black unemployment rate has remained roughly twice as high as the white rate over the last 40 years, regardless of education. Real African American youth unemployment is over 50 percent. This is unacceptable. The American people in general want change – they want a better deal. A fairer deal. A new deal. They want an America with laws and policies that truly reward hard work with economic mobility. They want an America that affords all of its citizens with the economic security to take risks and the opportunity to realize their full potential.

ADDRESSING ECONOMIC VIOLENCE

We need to give our children, regardless of their race or their income, a fair shot at attending college. That's why all public universities should be made tuition free.

We must invest \$5.5 billion in a federally-funded youth employment program to employ young people of color who face disproportionately high unemployment rates.

Knowing that black women earn 64 cents on the dollar compared to white men, we must pass federal legislation to establish pay equity for women.

We must prevent employers from discriminating against applicants based on criminal history.

We need to ensure access to quality affordable childcare for working families.

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