

State of Equality and Justice in America: America stands at a crossroads

Written by Rev. Jesse L. Jackson Sr.
Tuesday, 19 February 2013 12:40

Editor's Note: *"The State of Equality and Justice in America" is a 20-part series of columns written by an all-star list of contributors to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law.*

The contributors include: U. S. Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.) LCCRUL 50th Anniversary Grand Marshal; Ms. Barbara Arnwine, President and Executive Director, Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law (LCCRUL); Mr. Charles Ogletree, Professor, Harvard University Law School/Director, Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice; the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson Sr., President/CEO, Rainbow/PUSH Coalition; the Rev. Joseph Lowery, Co-founder, Southern Christian Leadership Conference; U. S. Rep. Yvette Clarke (D-N.Y.); and 14 additional thought leaders and national advocates for equal justice.

Here's the fourth op-ed of the series:



America stands at a crossroads. We can take the high road toward equal access to high quality public education, reaffirm our commitment to democratically elected public officials, end the failed war on drugs, recommit to the right of workers to bargain for better conditions, lower our dreadful rate of hyper-incarceration and implement the affordable care act. Or we can travel in the opposite direction and move the nation away from equal opportunity and justice.

One reason our political bodies are so sharply divided is over this question of justice. Some Americans seem to believe that we have done enough to achieve justice. Others understand that the struggle for justice and equality is a continuing American project that requires patience and perseverance.

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There are some disturbing trends. A decade ago there were 40 million uninsured people. Today the number is closer to 50 million. There is greater income inequality and more poverty. Average Americans have lost trillions of dollars in family wealth - largely the result of unregulated real estate markets. We have not yet regulated exotic Wall Street investments like derivatives. Our incarceration rate continues to grow; we imprison more people than any other developed nation in the world, per capita, while drugs are more plentiful and lower priced than they were a decade ago. Fewer boys are finishing college and the rate at which we produce engineers is dropping. We rank lower in health outcomes than much poorer nations. These trends must be addressed and reversed if we are to continue to prosper and lead the world.

We seem fatigued with questions of racial and ethnic justice. Affirmative action is under attack, again. Racial profiling, abuse of prosecutorial discretion, excessive use of police force, runaway juries, disparate sentencing and selective prosecution are generally accepted as normal, not exceptional. While we celebrate the promise of the Lillie Ledbetter Act, too much race discrimination lurks in our work places. Instead of looking at our immigrant population as a strength to be cultivated, we ignore, or pander to them.

Our civil rights apparatus is fraying. There is a trend away from joining and supporting organizations - churches, unions, and civil rights organizations. Rugged individualism is no substitute for institutional voices for justice and equality. Noah built an ark to withstand the flood. Those who could swim died outside the ark. Those who could not swim survived inside the ark. Good swimmers can't swim 40 days and 40 nights. We need strong institutional bulwarks to protect us from exclusion and prejudice.

Perhaps the most disturbing trend is away from the universal franchise. The right to vote secures every other right. We are encountering stiff headwinds that threaten to undermine democracy itself. Despite "Citizens United", money is not speech. Our elections should not be bought and sold like vacation homes and yachts. Latter day, politically driven obstacles - voter suppression - is un-American. There is no political goal that justifies dishonest schemes to disenfranchise American citizens. America is not a race, or a religion, color or language. America is built on a set of noble, but fragile premises: All men are created equal; one person-one vote; majority rule. It is these principles that make the American experiment work - undoing them could unravel the fabric of the nation.

Yet, I remain optimistic. Our union has been in the process of perfecting itself throughout its entire existence. America has been a laboratory experiment in justice and equality. The enslaved never adjusted to being considered less than human. Women never adjusted to second-class citizenship. Workers refused to acquiesce to exploitation. Seniors refused to accept the indignity of poverty after a life of industry. Young people refused to be seen and not heard. That is the genius of the American experiment - we become a better, stronger nation when we insist that the nation live with its conscience.

Rev. Jesse Jackson Sr. is President/CEO of the Chicago-based Rainbow/PUSH Coalition. This article - the fourth of a 20-part series - is written in commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. The Lawyers' Committee is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization, formed in 1963 at the request of President John F. Kennedy to enlist the

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private bar's leadership and resources in combating racial discrimination and the resulting inequality of opportunity - work that continues to be vital today. For more information, please visit www.lawyerscommittee.org.