

We've Slaked our Thirst with Poison*
*The politics of division amounts to criminal negligence;
the abused were bound to react.*

by
W. B. Allen

© W. B. Allen 1992

Let me be the odd man out in reactions to the devastating riots in Los Angeles. I was odd man out in calling for resignations from Police Chief Daryl Gates and Mayor Tom Bradley at the time of the Rodney King beating. A tolerance of excessive use of force had been created in the politicized handling of Operation Rescue, and that, I believed, had built an atmosphere that made the King incident almost inevitable. I believed that it was dangerous, unnecessary and absurd to treat the King case as a racial incident rather than an example of police abuse in general.

I have not changed by view. I remain convinced that my odd view was the path of peace, while the hard views that prevailed have brought war.

Now, to say "I told you so" is the equivalent of a plea for sanity and common sense at last.

This is not a time for second-guessing juries, as though we had listened to case presented. We did not do so; the jury did, and we cannot declare the jury wrong.

The Congressional Black Caucus has been irresponsible in condemning the jury, thus inciting further violence. The four officers are not guilty of the charges weighed against them, even if they remain guilty of having beaten Rodney King unnecessarily.

Nor are the four officers to be exalted and the rioters uniformly condemned, as is being done by some politicians opportunistically and cynically exploiting the situation. This is not the time for that politics of hostility which divides the country into friends and enemies, black and white, included and excluded. It doesn't take a genius to see the hypocrisy of such politicians who will indict a law enforcement system that abuse anti-abortion protestors but will give the same system the benefit of the doubt when it abuses minorities.

The riots in Los Angeles do not constitute a mere case for new "law and order" forums to fulminate against criminal elements in communities or to call for government entitlements or empty gestures of brotherhood. Much more is at stake. In important respects, the rioter may be no more criminal than were the East Germans, Czechoslovaks, Yugoslavs, and others around the world who have held our attention in the past three years. While the rioters make no positive contributions toward redirecting our nation from its fatal socialist tendencies, they do respond to glaring weaknesses in this country.

At the root of this civil turmoil is one looming, inescapable fact. We have poisoned the wells of our civil life with a pervasive racial consciousness. So long as we

* Op ed piece published in the *Los Angeles Times* (May 3, 1992).

drink the drafts of resentment to slake our thirst for justice, our country's certain decline toward disorder will continue.

It would be laughable, if it were not so serious, to witness loudmouth commentators and so-called public leaders condemning people for burning and looting "their own communities, their own homes." Do they not yet comprehend that, for too many people, the message has sunk deeply in that they can never be at home in America? What difference does it make where one burns when no place can be called home?

Am I the only one in America who finds it strange to observe the disorder being policed largely by authorities and officers who do not live there? Is it not clear that communities that are not self-governing are incapable of avoiding such crimes as this?

Let me be the odd man out. I believe that we suffer today not from the criminality of a few but from the criminal negligence of many, in and out of office, who are responsible for corrupting the civil and moral discourse of this land. All too many either find it too tempting to resist, or not sufficiently in their immediate interest, to insist on abandoning the language and policies of division.

Let us call this America's racial preference riot. And let us prepare for the future of America's racial-preference spoils, which will be the leftovers of a once-great society, unless we decide once and finally to change our course.

I've changed course. I shall not in this election year lend support to any candidate who fails to address the crisis of violence in Los Angeles and in the United States in a language that shows a readiness to rebuild bridges between communities, as opposed to separating them. No blanket commitment in party loyalty can override this critical need for leadership in our country. Further, I will actively oppose any candidacies that seem to be based on policies of division rather than communities.