

The new 'normalcy' still includes inequality for minorities

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Activist members of the NAACP and unions march and rally in New York on Human Rights Day Dec. 10, 2011, against the implementation of stricter voting laws, including the requirement to show identification prior to casting a ballot. (Newscom/Richard B. Levine)

Viewpoint

On Aug. 28, 1963, hundreds of thousands of Americans marched on Washington to demand "jobs and freedom." As the nation engages the 2012 election, the echoes of cries for jobs and freedom from 1963 ought to pierce the conscience of every American.

Martin Luther King Jr. titled an early draft of his "I have a dream" speech "Normalcy never again." King addressed a normalcy wherein the contentment of a white majority lacked the "fierce urgency of now." White Americans did not feel the whips, cattle prods and fire hoses that stung and broke human bodies yet could not dampen the burning desires of a people for justice.

Normalcy then was contentment with a rate of African-American joblessness twice that of whites. Normalcy was the reality of relatively privileged white Americans, not only the overt supremacist, but good people of faith, who failed to see how the conditions under which their African-American brothers and sisters lived represented the dark side of white America.

The new normalcy is certainly not the same as 1963.

People of color can see someone who looks like them in the highest positions of government, including the presidency. Yet, as King underscored in 1963, how can we claim that in 2012 America has honored its "sacred obligation" to the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Emancipation Proclamation "insofar as her citizens of color are concerned"?

The new normalcy is African-American and Latino households making 57 cents for every dollar of white median family income in 2010. The new normalcy is that blacks are still twice as likely as whites to be unemployed.

As of the 2010 Census, the new normalcy is a largely separate and unequal society in educational, health and economic opportunity. Despite increasing diversity, white Americans on average live in metropolitan neighborhoods that are 75 percent white. As King recognized, the problem of segregation is that it blocks access to economic opportunity, contributes to racial stigmatization and undermines democracy.

The new normalcy seven years post-Hurricane Katrina is that life expectancy for African-Americans living in the New Orleans' Treme neighborhood is 55 years whereas life expectancy for their white brethren in the nearby Lakeside neighborhood is 80 years.

The new normalcy is lack of public outrage over the fact that we incarcerate more people than any nation in the world and that we incarcerate African-Americans at a rate higher than that of apartheid South Africa.

The new normalcy is voter disenfranchisement. Although voter fraud is largely a myth, 10 states have implemented unprecedented restrictive voter ID laws. More than 10 million voters live 10 miles or more away from the nearest state ID-issuing office open more than two days a week, including at least 1.2 million African-American and 500,000 eligible Latino voters. As columnist E.J. Dionne explains, restrictive voter ID laws may rig the 2012 election, because these 10 states make up nearly half the Electoral College votes necessary to win the presidency, 127 of 270.

Perhaps more disheartening, whereas the 24th Amendment to the Constitution outlawed the poll tax that cost \$10.64 in current dollars, procuring the documentation required to obtain a "free" state photo ID can cost anywhere from \$15 to \$30 for a birth certificate. A new passport or renewal costs \$135 and \$110 respectively. Not unlike 1963, it strains credulity to claim that requiring a photo ID does not function like a poll tax.

Since 2008, when presidential candidate Barack Obama faced criticisms from the political left and right that he was either too black or not black enough, that he was playing the race card or that race would be used against him, or that he was not a U.S. citizen, the new normalcy is the invisibility of enduring issues of racial injustice. When, if ever, have white presidential candidates been similarly questioned about their racial identity and commitment to racial justice?

We are unlikely to address the most pressing issues of racial justice until -- as King insisted -- a "biracial army" should "storm the battlements of racial injustice."

A nonviolent biracial army may not be forthcoming until a critical collective of white Americans recognize that our "freedom is inextricably bound" to the freedom of people of color. When, where and how will good white people of faith commit themselves to "normalcy never again"? That question goes to the heart of King's dream and the very soul of America.

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