

Bill Kaplan: George Floyd and solidarity

Posted on Monday, Jun 22, 2020

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The backdrop to the police murder of George Floyd includes institutional racism, the COVID-19 pandemic and the worst economic downturn since the 1930s. To date there are over 2.2 million COVID-19 cases nationally, including over 24,500 in Wisconsin (WI), nearly 120,000 U.S. deaths and over 700 in WI. No zip code, despite glaring racial disparities, is immune. The NYT reports: "The La Crosse, Wis., area is experiencing a period of explosive case growth." Similarly, there are church clusters in WI.

Meanwhile, Trump and Pence downplay COVID-19 surges in the Sun Belt, including Oklahoma (OK). Incredibly, Trump held a reckless indoor reelection rally in Tulsa, OK, despite the pleas of the Tulsa Health Department. However, the rally registration page made clear that attendees were expendable: "By attending the rally, you and any guests voluntarily assume all risks related to exposure to COVID-19 and agree not to hold Donald J. Trump for President ... liable for any illness or injury."

Originally scheduled for Juneteenth, a day recognizing the end of slavery in Texas, public outrage forced Trump to move the date. But choosing Tulsa sent a disheartening message. In 1921, a white mob massacred hundreds of blacks in Tulsa. Tone deaf and a dog-whistle signal. Trump's nativism and racism keep dividing and stirring up the nation, including WI.

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In the 1960s I rallied with Martin Luther King, marched with Milwaukee Rev. James

Groppi and in 1981, while a congressional staffer, came to Milwaukee to investigate the apparent police murder of Ernest Lacy. I am proud of peaceful protesters throughout WI, condemning police violence and racism. The integrated movement is inspiring. We should not allow the mindless, reprehensible property destruction by a few in Madison and Milwaukee to tarnish most protesters. They are helping WI to have an overdue reckoning with racial disparities and injustice.

COVID-19 has struck black people (and Latinos) hard. They comprise a disproportionate number of cases and deaths. This on top of economic and health disparities documented by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. “(The) problem ... began from the time black people started migrating to Milwaukee They settled there as the city’s manufacturing economy began to dwindle, when jobs disappeared or moved to the suburbs (and overseas). Many black people found themselves trapped in substandard living conditions ... without stable jobs to help them reach a better life” (NYT). What now?

The protesters must vote in November for change. I would suggest concrete practical advocacy – not ‘defund the police’. For example, WI Democratic Governor Tony Evers and Milwaukee Democratic Mayor Tom Barrett have called for banning police chokeholds and more. However, increased spending for social programs requires change in the GOP-led state legislature. It is long past time to reach out to the tens of thousands of rural voters who voted for both Obama and Trump – to listen and make common cause.

“Progressives must find a politics that links worker (and farmer) rights with civil rights, racial and gender justice with social justice more broadly” (E.J. Dionne, Washington Post). Solidarity.

-Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 – 2009.