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Foreword

Laird Blue

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Colloquy: Racism in the Wake of the Los Angeles Riots

FOREWORD

The video of the police beating Rodney King brought racism into our living rooms much as the nightly news brought war and death into our homes during the Vietnam War. But an ocean divided us from Vietnam. This racist attack happened on *our* streets and it forced us to face the brutal hatred amongst us and within ourselves. What Americans saw made every one of us uncomfortable for different reasons. It compelled us to look inward to see the racism, however slight it may be, most of us harbor in our hearts and minds. While few condoned such an outward and cruel expression of racism, many Americans felt pangs of guilt. Guilt for our own hidden racism. Guilt for telling or laughing at racist remarks and jokes. Guilt for tolerating societal racism. Guilt for seeing the racism we are confronted with every day and calling each incident an "aberration."

Some call what followed in Los Angeles a riot. Others declared that it was a revolution. I believe that it was a combination of both. Frustrated by these events, I saw no legal solutions to the myriad of problems that the riots/revolution presented. This was especially frustrating for me because I am an idealist, one who believes the law can solve problems. I sensed a similar frustration and a feeling of powerlessness from my fellow classmates. What began as a quest for answers grew into a critique of racism in America.

The video of the beating forced the world to witness the fact that racism is alive and thriving in the United States. The acquittal told many of us that the American society condones racism. The acquittal proved to some that our judicial system is inherently racist. The riots told the world that blacks were fed up with the societal racism. The riots showed us that the Kerner Riot Commission's Report is still valid today, twenty-five years after it was released, and only months before the "follow-up" study is to be issued by The Milton S. Eisenhower Institute.

Today the world realizes that all of the rhetoric following the riots was only talk, for today the new President and the resurgence of discord in the Persian Gulf are the top stories in the news. Even the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Herzegovina has taken a "back page" to these stories. While the beating of Rodney King obliged us to acknowledge that racism still exists in America, other racial incidents seem to escape our consciousness because they do not make national television or the front pages of the newspapers. If they do, it is only for a single fleeting moment.

In 1991, six Japanese youths were beaten with baseball bats by four

young white men in Denver.¹ In Oneonta, New York at the State University of New York at Oneonta, the University vice president released a list of the names of all black and hispanic males to the state police after a seventy-seven-year-old woman was attacked by a "dark skinned" male.² During the Denver celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday in January of 1992, the Ku Klux Klan held a rally on the steps of the State Capital Building.³ Cross burnings are still prevalent as evidenced by the recent Supreme Court case, *R.A.V. v. City of St. Paul, Minnesota*.⁴

Pregnant women are discriminated against based on the fact that they are pregnant.⁵ Institutional discrimination still exists in housing, both in the inner cities and in the suburbs. This racism is often disguised in a shroud of "legitimate" rationalizations, the most common being the fear that property values will decrease if blacks or hispanics move into the neighborhood. Gays and lesbians are being discriminated on a systemic level with the passing of Colorado's Amendment Two which prohibits local communities from including "sexual orientation" in their anti-discrimination statutes.⁶

Even the conduct of police officers was curbed only temporarily, as exhibited by the behavior of officers in other cities. Since the riots in Los Angeles, Detroit police officers beat a black man to death (there was no video).⁷ White Nashville police officers stopped a black undercover fellow officer for an expired license plate, dragged him from his car and beat him.⁸ It appears that when the all-white jury acquitted the officers that beat Rodney King, the lesson to be learned from the beating and public outrage were lost on some law enforcement officers.

The list appears endless. While the readers will recognize most of these incidents, it is unlikely that they will look at them as a whole and recognize a pattern of societal racism. If all of these events occurred in one city and in a short period of time, we would be forced to view them as a whole, and we would see the societal racism involved. But since they are interspersed throughout the country, we are able to disaggregate them, look at them one at a time and say that each was an isolated incident.

This Colloquy strives to show the reader that these events, Los Angeles in particular, are not isolated aberrations in our societal consciousness, but part of a whole that must be confronted. How many more

1. Patt Morrison, *Race Relations; Cultures Clash In Denver As 6 Students are Mugged*, L.A. TIMES, Dec. 18, 1990, at A5.

2. Diana Jean Schemo, *College Town in Uproar Over 'Black List' Search*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 27, 1992, at 33, 40.

3. Ann Rovin, *Klan Rally Sparks Violence at Denver King Celebration*, L.A. TIMES, Jan. 21, 1992, at A14.

4. 112 S. Ct. 2538 (1992).

5. Barbara Presley Noble, *An Increase in Bias Is Seen Against Pregnant Workers*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 2, 1993, § 1, at 1.

6. COLO. CONST. art. II, § 306.

7. *7 Officers Suspended in Fatal Detroit Beating*, WASH. POST, Nov. 7, 1992, at A2.

8. *Two White Nashville Police Used Unnecessary Force*, REUTERS, Dec. 16, 1992, available in LEXIS, Nexis Library, Reuter File.

Rodney Kings are out there who did not have an amateur video photographer present? For every incident involving racism we hear about, dozens more go undocumented and unnoticed—especially in the “white” communities where covert racism is often the rule rather than the exception.

While these articles focus on the racism of whites against blacks, many of the arguments and observations presented are equally applicable to women, Native Americans, Gays and Lesbians or other racial and religious minorities. As I read and re-read these articles, I noticed that in many instances any racial or religious minority could be substituted for the word “black.” All minorities have experienced the humiliation, the sense of powerlessness and the rage that the residents of South Central Los Angeles felt on April 29, 1992. As the federal civil rights trial of the four police officers begins, America once again must confront the horror of Los Angeles.

Laird Blue

