The Minority Executive Directors Coalition

Statement on the Acquittals of the L.A. Police Officers
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The Minority Executive Directors Coalition (MEDC) abhors and is outraged by the April 29th acquittal of the four Los Angeles policemen who brutally beat African American motorist Rodney King, and deplores this appalling travesty and denial of justice.

The verdict of "Not Guilty" rendered by the Simi Valley jurors and its aftermath of wide-scale rioting is terrifying and ugly evidence of the institutional classism and racism that divides America and prevents the majority of its citizenry from living the American Dream. The acquittals are an undeniable confirmation that the American justice system is as racist as its leaders, and that the system has failed its people -- one third of whom are of color. Yet for all its flaws, the American justice system has been a primary tool of recourse by oppressed citizens for wrongs lodged against them. The reverberating tragedy of this verdict is that after thirty years of struggle the clock has sprung back to a time when the criminal justice system was our unabashed enemy.

Since the gains made in the Sixties and Seventies the majority of Americans, particularly people of color, have reposed into passive postures even as those gains erode or are systematically eliminated by federal funding cuts of vital health and human services and restrictive rulings of a conservative Supreme Court. When we are active, we generally confine our activism to our smaller communities as the larger community -- our nation -- disintegrates around us. And while we are effective at pulling together pockets of activism to address issues that come and go, we have failed to mobilize, lead and sustain leadership of the masses to consistently advance civil, political and economic justice across the nation. We have not sustained a large-scale voter education and registration drive, thereby acquiescing our tremendous voting power, nor have we set aside polite, oblique discussion for hardcore dialogue. We have failed to hold our leaders truly accountable to address the needs of our communities. We have grown complacent -- though are in the process of change.

If anything good is to come out of this grotesque failure of our justice system, it is that we are once again galvanized to activism on the national front. We have been asleep, and the verdict has shocked us out of our slumber. But now that we are awake, what course must we take?

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Unified activism is a tool of which we must make more use. Despite the media's play-up of racial divisions, communities of color across the country have been dialoging and coalescing for a number of years. The Minority Executive Directors Coalition, a group of fifty-six directors of health and human services programs in Asian and Pacific Islander, African American, American Indian and Latino Seattle-King County communities, has worked to advocate for improved services in its communities and educate city, county and state officials on the unique needs of these communities. Latino, African American and Asian groups in Los Angeles have been engaged in dialogue even before the verdict.

Many civil rights organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, the Japanese Citizens League, Urban Leagues and the American Jewish Committee have worked together for decades to address like issues and develop cooperative programming. Community-based organizations serving constituents from various ethnic and racial groups work closely together on a daily basis to meet people’s needs. Nationwide, there are countless examples of the longstanding cooperative relationships between communities of color.

In fact, the obsessive focus of the media and pundits on racial divisiveness among people of color not only misrepresents the issue, but deflects attention from the real one: that the division exists between the economic classes, a division symptomatic of our system's inherent economic stratification; and that racism is one tool of used by the system to further stratify the poor and disfranchised.

Opportunists notwithstanding, the violence that followed in the wake of the acquittals was not merely, as President Bush stated, "the brutality of a mob, pure and simple." Whether or not the rioting, looting and wanton killings were committed by thugs, gang members, youth caught up in the melee, poor people, or everyday folk frightened for their lives, the mayhem was a mass reaction to a system that brutalizes its people everyday. To deny that the rioting was a statement of public outrage at a nation that abrogates its responsibility to its citizens is to pretend that the post-verdict violence was coincidental to the verdict and had no bearing on the acquittals. To simplify the complex phenomenon of rage and extreme frustration to “thuggery” is to turn one’s back on the national disaster of the violence, squalor and lost opportunity of our slums.

President Bush’s failure to understand or acknowledge that fury over an unfair system has been simmering for several years and that the verdict was simply the straw that broke the camel’s back betrays his and his Administration’s appallingly aloof regard for, and inattention to, the needs of communities of color. His sounding of the Republican "law and order" party-line not only plays into right-wing fears of Nat Turner-like insurrection but ironically legitimizes the perceived need for harsh police tactics to quell the brutality of mobs while denying the legitimacy of public outcry and ignoring the cause(s) of violent unrest.
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The President has failed to realize that when basic rights are denied to a nation's citizens rebellion is spawned, pure and simple. His conscious misapprehension of the events surrounding the verdict was compounded by his initial refusal to comment on the acquittal of the officers, which was still further compounded by his unforgivably tardy arrival onto the scene of one of our country's worst domestic disasters (had there been an earthquake or other such natural disaster, Bush would have been there the day of the disaster -- not a week after the fact). The President's blaming of the post-verdict unrest on the Democrat-led Congress and the failed War on Poverty Programs that have been eliminated or drastically curtailed by a 12-year Republican reign since their inception over twenty years ago is not unlike Chief Daryl Gates blaming his failure to effectively contain the L.A. rioting on civil rights leaders of the African American community. By failing to accept at least some responsibility for what occurred, neither accept responsibility for addressing the problem.

As Bush hides behind his weary "it's the Democrat's fault" campaign rhetoric while attempting to exploit the tragedy of the verdict as a breeding ground for election year promises, we must use our power to vote, educate and organize to pull him and other leaders who refuse to meet our needs out of office. As we recover from our horror and anger at the acquittals, we cannot let ourselves sink into disilllusionment and destructive rage, but must instead find hope in our communities' abilities to unify, work together and organize. Unity is cohesion and cohesion is power. We must have faith in our power, and use it to replace leaders who defy our needs with leaders who will meet them. Peaceful protest, community organization and education, and the ballot are our tools, our power, and we must use -- not relinquish -- this power to build our place in this nation.
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