History Marched Past my Door Last Night Carrying the Future on Her Shoulders

written by Dan La Botz | June 6, 2020



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A march came by my house in Brooklyn a few nights ago, a river of thousands of young people of all races, wearing masks because of the pandemic, walking together, shouting out the name of George Floyd, demanding justice. I saw history making its way through the city, the young people carrying the future on their shoulders. So it has been everywhere in America for more than a week. And still the protests continue and grow in size. Cracks are appearing at the top of the society and attitudes are shifting at the bottom, and forces are in motion seeking to find a political expression for this inchoate demand for change.

Hundreds of thousands of people in cities and town across the United States have over the past ten days joined in demonstrations protesting the police murder of George Floyd on May 25 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. That day a local store manager had called police to say that Floyd had passed a counterfeit $20 bill. Police arrived, handcuffed Floyd, lay him on the ground and then one of them, Derek Chauvin, kept his knee on Floyd's neck for almost 9 minutes. Floyd kept repeating, "I can't breathe." Bystanders asked the police to stop the strangulation, but they did not and Floyd died. While all four officers involved in the killing were fired the next day, Derek Chauvin was not charged with third degree murder until three days later. It was the failure of the authorities to charge Chauvin and then the other four men that led to the eruption of protests first in Minneapolis, where protestors burned the police station, and then throughout the country.

The protests spread in the first few days to all of the major cities in the country and during the next week to over 700 cities and towns in all 50 states. In the big cities with their diverse populations, black, white, Latino, and Asian marched together, but in cities and towns with mostly white or Latino populations the same sort of demonstrations took place. Even in Montana, where less than one percent of the population is black, there were protests. Everywhere people take up the slogan of 2014 in signs and chants: "Black Lives Matter." Everyplace people link the murder of Floyd to police racism, violence, and murder in their own cities. In Louisville the demonstrators also protested the police murder of Breonna Taylor, a 26-year old African American emergency medical technician, whose home police invaded on March 13 without warning, looking for drugs, and short her eight times, killing her. No drugs were found in the home. In Georgia people took up the right for justice for Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year old man who while jogging on February 23 was shot and killed by a

former police officer, his son, and a third man who claimed they thought he was a thief. It took over four months for the authorities to arrest and charge the killers.

The murder of Floyd reminded everyone of the police strangulation of Eric Garner in New York in July of 2014. Garner had been accused of illegally selling individual untaxed cigarettes, was arrested, restrained, and like Floyd suffocated as he said, “I can’t breathe.” Garner’s murder and that of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in August ignited the Black Lives Matter protests that also swept the United States that year, though the current demonstrations have been more numerous and more militant. Police killings of black men and women, often innocent of any crime and unarmed, have taken place regularly throughout the history of modern America. Though they make up only13 percent of the U.S. population, Black Americans are two-and-a-half times as likely as white Americans to be killed by the police.

So it is not only the police murder of Floyd, but the long history and continuing practice of police harassment, mistreatment, and murder of black people that motivates the protestors. The demonstrators, most of them between 12 and 30, have come out to protest, wearing their masks, despite the continuing spread of the coronavirus, willing to risk their own health and lives to protest the police violence that has taken so many black lives. While the protests were peaceful, after dark arson and looting took place in some cities, though protestors themselves often tried to stop it. In many places the police violently and sometimes viciously and sadistically attacked the peaceful protests, gassing, beating, and tasing them. Police arrested over 10,000 people, but still the rivers of humanity continue to flow through the boulevards and avenues of America. On June 3, the movement won a victory when the Minnesota Attorney General charged all four officers leading to cheers in the streets.

The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and the national lockdown form an important part of the context of the uprising. The pandemic has taken 110,000 American lives, and blacks and Latinos have died at twice the rate of white Americans, their deaths attributable to years of lack of access to health care, to crowded living conditions, and to their continuing labor as “essential workers” in health care, grocery stores, and as bus drivers or postal workers. At the same time, 43 million Americans have lost their jobs and while most have received state unemployment benefits and additional supplements from the federal government, some have not, among them about 4.3 million undocumented immigrants. Even before the police murder of George Floyd the COVID-19 pandemic had starkly revealed the racial inequities in the society and before his deat people lay dying in hospitals with inadequate supplies and equipment saying, “I can’t breathe.”

A Crack at the Top, Shift at the Bottom

In response to the protests governors in 24 of the 50 states called out some 62,000 troops of the National Guard, the state-based military reserve, to attempt to reestablish order. Still the protests persisted and spread. Many cities attempted to impose a curfew, but it was ignored or defied, and police again often violently attacking peaceful demonstrators. With the protests continuing, Trump in a telephone call with state governors called them weak and said they must use force “to dominate” the situation. In Washington, D.C., Trump mobilized, in addition to the Secret Service that usually guards him, virtually every imaginable federal agency to protect the White House: the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Homeland Security, Customs and Border Protection, the Drug Enforcement Agency, Federal Protective Services and others. The mayor of Washington called it “disgraceful,” the nearby State of Virginia recalled it police rather than have them stand along federal troops, and Illinois and Texas rejected any such approach.

The worst was yet to come. On June 1 Trump threatened to call up active duty U.S. troops using the 1807 Insurrection Act. As Senator, Ron Wyden, a Democrat from Oregon, tweeted, “The fascist

speech Donald Trump just delivered verged on a declaration of war against American citizens." That same day Trump had police and troops use tear gas and force to clear peaceful demonstrators so he could walk across the street from the White House with the Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and General Mark A. Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, dressed in fatigues, to an Episcopal Church where Trump posed holding a Bible in his hand. The Episcopal Bishop, Mariann Budde was outraged at the president's violation of a sacred space. She declared that, "In no way do we support the President's incendiary response to a wounded, grieving nation. In faithfulness to our Savior who lived a life of non-violence and sacrificial love, we align ourselves with those seeking justice for the death of George Floyd."

Trump's threat to call out troops led several important figures in the American military establishment to turn against him. His own Secretary of Defense defied Trump, saying that military troops were not necessary or appropriate. Trump's former Secretary of Defense, U.S. Marine Corps General James Mattis, issued a scathing statement that did not mention the president's name, but compared him to the Nazis and said that Trump's call to use the military was a threat to the Constitution and to society. Admiral Mike Mullen, a former chief of staff, criticized Trump for his "disdain for the rights of peaceful protest in this country." Retired Adm. William McRaven, the Navy SEAL commander who led the raid that killed Osama bin Laden, said on a talk show, "You're not going to use, whether it is the military or the National Guard or law enforcement, to clear peaceful American citizens for the president of the United States to do a photo op. There is nothing morally right about that." John Allen, a retired U.S. Marine Corps four-star general, former commander of the NATO International Security Assistance Force and U.S. Forces in Afghanistan, wrote a caustic attack on Trump and warned that we could be witnessing the end of American democracy but ended his essay, "So mark your calendars—this could be the beginning of the change of American democracy not to illiberalism, but to enlightenment. But it will have to come from the bottom up. For at the White House, there is no one home."

The generals were not the only critics. All four living former U.S. presidents—Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama—issued statements expressing their concern about the racist and violent treatment of George Floyd. Bush also delivered a scathing attack on Trump, saying, "Bullying and prejudice in our public life sets a national tone, provides permission for cruelty and bigotry, and compromises the moral education of children." Such criticism of a sitting president by a former president is a break with protocol and tradition. And, as has rarely happened, three Republican senators—Ben Sasse of Nebraska, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, and the only black Republican senator Tom Scott of South Carolina–also criticized Trump. Even televangelist Pat Robertson, the aging leader of the white Evangelical movement, blasted the president for his role.

While there is a split at the top there is also a shift in opinion at the bottom. Polls indicate that there has been a tremendous leftward shift in American attitudes toward racism and the police since the 2014 Black Lives Matter protests. A poll by Monmouth University found that 76 percent of Americans, including 71 percent of white people, thought that racism and discrimination were "a big problem" in the United States. That's remarkable increase of 26-percentage points since 2015. The same poll found that 57 percent of Americans believed demonstrators' anger was "fully justified," while another 21 percent thought it was "somewhat justified." Another poll by CBS News found that 57 percent of all Americans thought that police were likely to treat black people unfairly.

The Demands of the Movement

When the Black Lives Matter movement developed in 2014 it inspired tens of thousands across America to demonstrate against racist police violence, and held many regional meetings, but it failed to bring activists together in some sort of convention to form a new organization. Early on the Reverends Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, both of whom had been candidates for president in the

Democratic Party, moved in on the new movement to attempt to draw it into the historic civil rights channels leading to the Democratic Party. At the same time the philanthropic foundations, NGOs, and Democratic Party moved in to attempt to attract the BLM leadership to their various reform programs. Two years later sixty black organizations produced "A Vision for Black Lives: Policy Demands for Black Power, Freedom & Justice," a remarkable document that laid out six demands intended to end all forms of violence and injustice suffered by black people by redirecting resources from prisons and the military to education, health, and safety; creating a just, democratically controlled economy; and obtaining black political power within a genuinely inclusive democracy. Yet without a national organization and some independent political power to fight for that program it could go nowhere.

This time, once again, the power broker Rev. Al Sharpton wangled his way in front of the movement, giving the moving eulogy at the funeral for George Floyd in which he said, "The reason why we are marching all over the world is we were like George, we couldn't breathe, not because there was something wrong with our lungs, but that you wouldn't take your knee off our neck. We don't want no favors, just get up off of us and we can be and do whatever we can be." Sharpton has called for a march in Washington on Aug. 28, the anniversary of the original March on Washington in 1963 where Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech. Sharpton may once again have found a way to commandeer the movement for his own purposes as a power broker for the Democrats.

Understandably, only a week old, the national rebellion has not yet been able to put forward its own leadership, at least not nationally, so there is no center to put forward a political platform. In some cities with a more radical tradition, such as Oakland, California, speakers at the rallies talk about socialism and revolution, but in most places this is not the case. In general demands have been limited to the question of police reform. The vast protests in the street carried their program on their placards; "Defund the Police" and "Demilitarize the Police" were the most common, with calls to fund education and health care instead. Other protesters demanded that the authorities "End Choke Holds." Some national and local political leaders have called for some time for an end to the practice of the U.S. military giving its outdated equipment such as armored cars, tanks, and weapons to police forces. The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) has raised the slogan "defund the police," but it is phrase that may to the general public mean anything from cut the police budget to abolish the police, the latter being the slogan of some socialist and anarchist groups.

The Democratic Party, and especially its black members are seeking to play the role of interpreters of the movement and its representatives in politics. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi said that the Democratic Party would introduce reforms. "We want to see this as a time where we can go forward in a very drastic way," said Pelosi. "Not incrementally but in an important way to address those problems."

Hakeem Jefferies, chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, made up of dozens of black Democrats, said that the caucus was considering various proposals would be proposing police reform legislation in the coming session. Representative Adriano Espaillat of New York said that he would introduce the Harlem Manifesto to end police brutality, a ten point document that calls for: 1) curbing excessive police use of force; 2) demilitarizing police departments; 3) transparency, meaning standards and accountability; 4) de-escalation and awareness training for officers; 5) establishing dialog and deepening relationships between law enforcement and communities they serve; 6) eliminating inequities in enforcement; 7) removing profit-incentives for policing and incarceration; 8) ending mass incarceration and making a transition to restorative justice; 9) recognizing and accounting for past injustices; 10) making a transition away from a policing first model. In fact, these reforms have been on the American agenda since the 1960s, but have never been adopted. Many would argue they are not possible without more profound changes in American capitalism,

including the dismantling of structural racism in all areas of life, from housing and education to employment.

The American Left was completely overwhelmed and unable to play a significant role in the recent protests. The anarchist Left, generally disdainful of the massive peaceful movement that often engaged in peaceful civil disobedience, worked to augment the militancy of the movement, sometimes leading attacks on property. In many places black community activists opposed the destruction that would damage their communities, and even when the attack was on luxury stores in rich neighborhoods, peaceful protesters sometimes tried to prevent the violence. There have also been suggestions that far right organizations also joined the protest in an attempt to create more conflict that might lead to a race war. There is no doubt that the after-dark violence became an excuse for more violent police repression.

DSA, while it issued a strong statement condemning police violence, failed to mobilize the organization. Local DSA chapters did generally organize themselves and join the protests as did thousands of it individual DSA members. And about 1,500 new new activists joined the organization that boasts more than 60,000 members. Still, the Left—despite the COVID-19 crisis, the Second Great Depression, and the national rebellion against police racism and violence—has not been capable of raising a broader social program to seize the imagination of the broader society.

The task of the Left at the moment is to develop an analysis and a political perspective that can respond to the complex political crisis—environmental, health, economic, and racial—and to create an organization with a strategy to fight for a broad, socialist political alternative. There are activists in DSA and other socialist organizations working to develop such a perspective, strategy, and organization. Our principles remain the same: rise up from below, fight for democracy, and advance the struggle for socialism.