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America Hasn't Learned a Thing: Racism, Militarism and Materialism Still Reign Supreme

“In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it is perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in. [Y]ou can be filled with bitterness, with hatred, and a desire for revenge. We can move in that direction as a country, in great polarization...filled with hatred toward one another. Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand and to comprehend, and to replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand with compassion and love... What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness; but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or they be black....”

—Robert F. Kennedy on the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

I was sitting in a crowded bar, drinking a beer, when the news broke that Martin Luther King Jr. had been shot and killed.

The room erupted in cheers.

It was April 4, 1968.

I've never forgotten that moment.

Twenty-two years old and a junior at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, I was horrified that King's death was being greeted with such glee. Then again, as hard it is to

believe it today, [there was rejoicing all across the country](#) on that dark day that this man—a black activist—a troublemaker—an extremist—had been silenced for good.

Despite having been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, graced countless magazine covers, and consorted with movers and shakers throughout the country, [King was not a popular man by the time of his death](#). In fact, a Gallup poll found that almost two-thirds of Americans disapproved of King.

Fifty years later, the image of the hard-talking, charismatic leader, voice of authority, and militant, nonviolent activist minister/peace warrior who staged sit-ins, boycotts and marches and lived through police attack dogs, water cannons and jail cells has been so watered down that younger generations recognize his face but know very little about his message.

There's a reason for that.

As a nation, we have a tendency to sentimentalize cultural icons in death in a way that renders them non-threatening, antiseptic and easily digested by a society with an acute intolerance for anything controversial, politically incorrect or marred by imperfection.

This revisionist history—a silent censorship of sorts—has proven to be a far more effective means of neutralizing radicals such as Martin Luther King Jr. than anything the NSA, CIA or FBI could dream up.

This was a man who went to jail over racial segregation laws, encouraged young children to face down police dogs and water hoses, and who urged people to turn their anger loose on the government through civil disobedience. King called for Americans to rise up against a government that was not only treating blacks unfairly but was also killing innocent civilians, impoverishing millions, and prioritizing the profits of war over human rights and dignity.

King actually insisted that [people have a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws](#).

This is not a message that the government wants us to heed.

No, the government wants us distracted, divided, warring against each other and helpless to free ourselves from a lifetime of bondage and servitude to the powers-that-be.

It's working.

In life, King was fiery, passionate, single-minded in his pursuit of justice, unwilling to remain silent in the face of wrongdoing, and unafraid of offending those who might disagree with him.

In death, King has been reduced to a lifeless face on a stone monument: mute, immobile and powerless to do anything about the injustices that continue to plague the nation.

America hasn't learned a thing.

The “[giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism](#)“ that King railed so passionately against have yet to be conquered.

In fact, the evils of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism have got us in a death grip.

America is still waging endless wars abroad, prioritizing profit margins over principle, and adopting [institutionalized racist policies](#) that result in a disproportionate number of people of color being stopped, searched, raided, arrested, thrown in jail, and shot and killed by government agents.

Fifty years later, we are repeating the mistakes of 1968.

As [Julian E. Zelizer writes for *The Atlantic*](#), “Rather than deal with the way that racism was inscribed into American institutions, including the criminal-justice system, the government focused on building a massive carceral state, militarizing police forces, criminalizing small offenses, and living through repeated moments of racial conflict exploding into violence.”

“[America looked away](#),” concludes Zelizer.

Unfortunately, modern America is doing more than just looking away from the evils of racism, materialism and militarism in its midst.

We have compounded those evils with ignorance, intolerance and fear.

Callousness, cruelty, meanness, immorality, ignorance, hatred, intolerance and injustice have become hallmarks of our modern age, magnified by an echo chamber of nasty tweets and government-sanctioned brutality.

“Despite efforts to curb hate speech, eradicate bullying and extend tolerance, [a culture of nastiness has metastasized in which meanness is routinely rewarded, and common decency and civility are brushed aside](#),” observed Teddy Wayne in a *New York Times* piece on “The Culture of Nastiness.”

Every time I read a news headline or flip on the television or open up an email or glance at social media, I run headlong into people consumed with back-biting, partisan politics, sniping, toxic hate, meanness and materialism. Donald Trump is, in many ways, the embodiment of this culture of meanness. Yet as Wayne points out, “[Trump is less enabler in chief than a symptom of a free-for-all environment that prizes cutting smears](#)... Social media has normalized casual cruelty.”

Whether it's unfriending or blocking someone on Facebook, tweeting taunts and barbs on Twitter, or merely using cyberspace to bully someone or peddle in gossip, we have become masters in the art of meanness.

This culture of meanness has come to characterize many aspects of the nation's governmental and social policies. "Meanness today is a state of mind," writes professor Nicolaus Mills in his book *The Triumph of Meanness*, "the product of a culture of spite and cruelty that has had an enormous impact on us."

This casual cruelty is made possible by a growing polarization within the populace that emphasizes what divides us—race, religion, economic status, sexuality, ancestry, politics, etc.—rather than what unites us: we are all human.

This is what writer Anna Quindlen refers to as "the politics of exclusion, what might be thought of as the cult of otherness." She writes:

"Otherness posits that there are large groups of people with whom you have nothing in common, not even a discernible shared humanity. Not only are these groups profoundly different from you, they are also, covertly, somehow less: less worthy, less moral, less good. This sense of otherness is the single most pernicious force in American discourse. Its not-like-us ethos makes so much bigotry possible: racism, sexism, homophobia. It divides the country as surely as the Mason-Dixon line once did. And it makes for mean-spirited and punitive politics and social policy."

As Quindlen rightly points out, only the deepest sense that "they" are not like us, that "they" do not love or live or hurt like us makes it possible to decree that they are undeserving of whatever rights and privileges we might claim for ourselves.

This is more than meanness, however.

This is the mindset adopted by the architects of the American police state.

The aim is not merely dissension and division, although that is effective at keeping "we the people" under control.

This is a psychopathic mindset at work.

It doesn't matter whether you're talking about Democrats or Republicans.

Political psychopaths are running the show and have been for the past 50 years or more. Such leaders eventually create pathocracies—totalitarian societies bent on power, control, and destruction of both freedom in general and those who exercise their freedoms.

"At that point, the government operates against the interests of its own people except for favoring certain groups," author James G. Long notes. "We are currently witnessing deliberate polarizations of American citizens, illegal actions, and massive and needless

acquisition of debt. This is typical of psychopathic systems, and very similar things happened in the Soviet Union as it overextended and collapsed.”

When our own government no longer sees us as human beings with dignity and worth but as things to be manipulated, maneuvered, mined for data, manhandled by police, conned into believing it has our best interests at heart, mistreated, jailed if we dare step out of line, and then punished unjustly without remorse—all the while refusing to own up to its failings—we are no longer operating under a constitutional republic.

Instead, what we are experiencing is a pathocracy: tyranny at the hands of a psychopathic government, which “operates against the interests of its own people except for favoring certain groups.”

Worse, psychopathology is not confined to those in high positions of government.

It can spread like a virus among the populace. As an academic study into pathocracy concluded, “[T]yranny does not flourish because perpetrators are helpless and ignorant of their actions. It flourishes because they actively identify with those who promote vicious acts as virtuous.”

People don’t simply line up and salute. It is through one’s own personal identification with a given leader, party or social order that they become agents of good or evil.

To this end, “we the people” have become “we the police state.”

By failing to actively take a stand for good, we have become agents of evil.

It’s not the person in charge who is solely to blame for the carnage. It’s the populace that looks away from the injustice, that empowers the totalitarian regime, that welcomes the building blocks of tyranny.

This realization hit me full-force recently.

I had stopped into a bookstore and was struck by all of the books on Hitler, everywhere I turned.

Yet had there been no Hitler, there still would have been a Nazi regime.

There still would have been gas chambers and concentration camps and a Holocaust.

Hitler wasn’t the architect of the Holocaust. He was merely the figurehead.

Same goes for the American police state: had there been no Trump or Obama or Bush, there still would have been a police state.

There still would have been police shootings and private prisons and endless wars and government pathocracy.

Why? Because “we the people” have paved the way for this tyranny to prevail.

By turning Hitler into a super-villain who singlehandedly terrorized the world—not so different from how Trump is often depicted—historians have given Hitler’s accomplices (the German government, the citizens that opted for security and order over liberty, the religious institutions that failed to speak out against evil, the individuals who followed orders even when it meant a death sentence for their fellow citizens) a free pass.

The German people chose to ignore the truth and believe the lie.

They were not oblivious to the horrors taking place around them. As historian Robert Gellately points out, “[A]nyone in Nazi Germany who wanted to find out about the Gestapo, the concentration camps, and the campaigns of discrimination and persecutions need only read the newspapers.”

The warning signs were definitely there, blinking incessantly like large neon signs.

“Still,” Gellately writes, “the vast majority voted in favor of Nazism, and in spite of what they could read in the press and hear by word of mouth about the secret police, the concentration camps, official anti-Semitism, and so on. . . . [T]here is no getting away from the fact that at that moment, ‘the vast majority of the German people backed him.’”

Half a century later, the wife of a prominent German historian, neither of whom were members of the Nazi party, opined: “[O]n the whole, everyone felt well. . . . And there were certainly eighty percent who lived productively and positively throughout the time. . . . We also had good years. We had *wonderful* years.”

In other words, as long as *their* creature comforts remained undiminished, as long as *their* bank accounts remained flush, as long as *they* weren’t being discriminated against, persecuted, starved, beaten, shot, stripped, jailed and turned into slave labor, life was good.

This is how tyranny rises and freedom falls.

None of us who remain silent and impassive in the face of evil, racism, extreme materialism, meanness, intolerance, cruelty, injustice and ignorance get a free pass.

Those among us who follow figureheads without question, who turn a blind eye to injustice and turn their backs on need, who march in lockstep with tyrants and bigots, who allow politics to trump principle, who give in to meanness and greed, and who fail to be outraged by the many wrongs being perpetrated in our midst, it is these individuals who must shoulder the blame when the darkness wins.

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that,” King sermonized.

The darkness is winning.

It's not just on the world stage we must worry about the darkness winning.

The darkness is winning in our communities. It's winning in our homes, our neighborhoods, our churches and synagogues, and our government bodies.

It's winning in the hearts of men and women the world over who are embracing hatred over love.

It's winning in every new generation that is being raised to care only for themselves, without any sense of moral or civic duty to stand for freedom.

John F. Kennedy, killed by an assassin's bullet five years before King would be similarly executed, spoke of a torch that had been "passed to a new generation of Americans—born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage—and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.”

Once again, a torch is being passed to a new generation, but this torch is setting the world on fire, burning down the foundations put in place by our ancestors, and igniting all of the ugliest sentiments in our hearts.

This fire is not liberating; it is destroying.

We are teaching our children all the wrong things: we are teaching them to hate, teaching them to worship false idols (materialism, celebrity, technology, politics), teaching them to prize vain pursuits and superficial ideals over kindness, goodness and depth.

We are on the wrong side of the revolution.

“If we are to get on to the right side of the world revolution,” advised King, “we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society.“

Freedom demands responsibility.

Freedom demands that people stop sleep-walking through life, stop cocooning themselves in political fantasies, and stop distracting themselves with escapist entertainment.

Freedom demands that we stop thinking as Democrats and Republicans and start thinking like human beings, or at the very least, Americans.

Freedom demands that we not remain silent in the face of evil or wrongdoing but actively stand against injustice.

Freedom demands that we treat others as we would have them treat us. That is the law of reciprocity, also referred to as the Golden Rule, and it is found in nearly every world religion, including Judaism and Christianity.

In other words, if you don't want to be locked up in a prison cell or a detention camp—if you don't want to be discriminated against because of the color of your race, religion, politics or anything else that sets you apart from the rest—if you don't want your loved ones shot at, strip searched, tasered, beaten and treated like slaves—if you don't want to have to be constantly on guard against government eyes watching what you do, where you go and what you say—if you don't want to be tortured, waterboarded or forced to perform degrading acts—if you don't want your children to grow up in a world without freedom—then don't allow these evils to be inflicted on anyone else, no matter how tempting the reason or how fervently you believe in your cause.

As long as we continue to allow ignorance, intolerance, racism, militarism, materialism and meanness to trump justice, fairness and equality, there can be no hope of prevailing against the police state.

Martin Luther King Jr. dared to dream of a world in which all Americans “would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

He didn't live to see that dream become a reality.

It's still not a reality. We haven't dared to dream that dream in such a long time.

But imagine...

Imagine what this country would be like if Americans put aside their differences and dared to stand up—united—for freedom...

Imagine what this country would be like if Americans put aside their differences and dared to speak out—with one voice—against injustice...

Imagine what this country would be like if Americans put aside their differences and dared to push back—with the full force of our collective numbers—against the evils of the police state...

As I make clear in my book *Battlefield America: The War on the American People*, tyranny wouldn't stand a chance.