“Why We Can’t Wait” is the title of a 1964 book by Martin Luther King Jr. Describing the early-1960s mindset of many whites regarding Blacks in the U.S., he observed: “Undeniably, the Negro had been an object of sympathy and wore the scars of deep grievances, but the nation had come to count on him as a creature who could quietly, silently endure, silently suffer and patiently wait.”

The fallacy of this self-serving narrative became evident as the 1960s progressed. The recent wave of protests activated my memory of King’s incisive commentaries. The protests have also resurrected my vivid images of the 1960s urban upheavals. I still remember watching armored tanks patrolling Cleveland streets and the widespread devastation of the Hough neighborhood.

I suspect others of my generation are also experiencing a sense of déjà vu. Cleveland was just one of 150 cities where residents rose up between 1965 and 1968, protesting systematic discrimination and widespread social disparities. As is the situation today, they took to the streets after other efforts to air grievances and seek relief were rebuffed. And, again, mirroring the 1960s, the first response of many observers is to focus on violence and looting, rather than trying to understand the structural violence that has precipitated massive responses to George Floyd’s murder.

There are, of course, obvi-ous differences between the 1960s and now. Current activists have been raised to expect equal treatment and unfettered opportunities to live and thrive. They see prominent Black elected officials and high-profile athletes and celebrities. They have also witnessed election of a Black president.

At the same time, they are frustrated as new hurdles are erected and the lot of many African Americans has not improved. In 2018 the poverty rate for African Americans was 20.8% compared to 11.8% for the overall U.S. population. Activists have appropriately targeted one of the most egregious prac-tices of the old order – social control via police brutality.

Their sense of urgency is fueled, in part, by overt efforts to reverse gains made by marginalized groups over the last half-decade. Such reactionary actions include racial gerrymandering (Sarasota?), spurious claims of voter fraud, reduced enforcement of Civil Rights laws, attacks on public education, gentri-fi-ca-tion and displacement, etc.

Regrettably, all three branches of the national government are complicit in this attempt to resist social equity. The COVID-19 pandemic has added another layer to the stultifying barriers created by systemic racism. Ironically, this horrific public health crisis comes on the heels of efforts to retract health coverage provided to the formerly uninsured. Black Americans, with underlying health conditions fueled by limited access to care, have experienced disproportionate mortality. African Americans are also overrepresented as “essential” workers, enduring high risks of exposure to the coronavirus.

Black businesses have had inordinate difficulty accessing loans via the CARES Act. Educational achievement gaps may widen as a result of unequal access to online instruction.

In 1967 King asked, “Where Do We Go From Here?” Answers must be sought at the national, state, city and neighborhood levels. Former Presidents Johnson and Clinton provided national leadership during turbulent times. Johnson established the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, better known as the Kerner Commission, in 1968. The “One America in the 21st Century: The President’s Initiative on Race” was created by Clinton in 1997. Its advisory board was charged with studying “critical substantive areas in which racial disparities are significant, including education, economic opportunity, housing, health care and the administration of justice.”

The time is now for initiating a 21st century version of the Johnson and Clinton initiatives. However, it is highly unlikely that the federal government will take a leadership role. Instead, think tanks, community foundations, churches and other nongovernmental bodies will have to take responsibility for advancing such an initiative.

As Martin Luther King declared in 1967, “We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late.”

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