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Racial politics — it has always been a riot in the US

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With America's cities descending into lawlessness, it would be easy to conclude that the country is on the verge of collapse. In reality, the problems gripping the US are both more enduring and less apocalyptic than that impression suggests.

After all, as Jamil Al-Amin, the Black Panther leader who is now in prison for killing a sheriff's deputy, once said, race riots are "as American as cherry pie".

As if to prove his point, the standard reference guide on the subject, *The Encyclopedia of American Race Riots*, runs to more than 1000 pages yet is scarcely exhaustive. Nor could it be: the first race riots predate the American Revolution, and any serious list shows that there have been significant riots in every decade since the formation of the United States of America.

However, that continuity masks major changes in the riots' extent and nature. Until the end of World War II, the violence was almost always provoked by whites, usually as a result of conflicts over jobs, housing and status.

But as blacks left the south and filled the urban ghettos of the industrial states, the initiative, often triggered by police brutality, shifted sides. And beginning with the Harlem riots in July 1964, ubiquitous access to live television news gave localised outbreaks national resonance, sparking waves of violence that could involve 20 or more urban centres and last more than a year.

The so-called “long, hot summer” riots that raged from 1965 to the end of 1967 — causing more than 100 deaths — sealed that transition and set a pattern that has recurred, albeit on a smaller scale, since then.

If the riots have persisted, it is because some of their underlying causes have too. It remains true, for example, that while almost no white children are born in neighbourhoods where more than a third of the population is poor, one black child in three grows up surrounded by poverty.

It also remains true that blacks earn 10 to 15 per cent less than similarly qualified whites, as well as being twice as subject to adverse income shocks.

And the probability of a black man being killed by the police is 2½ times higher than that for whites — though it needs to be remembered that blacks are six times more likely than whites to commit homicides, creating risks for police officers in black areas that are orders of magnitude greater than those Australian police officers face.

However, those grim statistics are paralleled by impressive gains. With the racial gap in educational attainment narrowing dramatically, almost a quarter of blacks are in managerial, technical or supervisory jobs, while blacks and whites are now equally represented in what American sociologists define as the “lower middle class”.

Racial differences in incomes have shrunk too, and it was merely a few months ago that the black unemployment rate fell to the lowest level it had reached since records began.

Blacks were therefore not being irrational in shunning Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren in favour of Joe Biden, whose policies are heavily slanted to the black middle class. And it is also unsurprising that much of this week’s violence across the US came not from the marginalised blacks who fuelled the riots of 50 years ago but from fringe groups that, like Europe’s “black blocs”, are intent on mayhem.

When seen in that perspective, Donald Trump was hardly out of line in urging decisive action to quell the arson, looting and other forms of violence. It was, in effect, a major lesson of the

“long, hot summer” that standing by as the violence escalates drastically increases the toll in injuries and fatalities because the longer the rioting persists, the greater is its likely spread, both within cities and nationally.

To make things worse, many of the victims in those episodes were shopkeepers, bystanders and peaceful demonstrators who got trapped in the chaos as it was allowed to engulf new neighbourhoods. And study after study found that the long-run impacts of uncontrolled violence were especially severe as shops and workplaces simply abandoned areas where they could not count on timely police protection, leaving a trail of joblessness, gutted streetscapes and crime in what had once been impoverished but vibrant communities.

Of course, none of all that will stop Trump’s critics from branding his calls for prompt police - intervention as mere pandering to an allegedly racist base. But there is no reason to think that Trump’s electoral base is racist. On the contrary, the 2016 American National Election Study did not find a relationship between animus towards blacks and support for Trump.

Yes, Trump voters valued law and order; but very few Americans have ever approved of arson and looting. Indeed, when pollsters first asked the question in 1967-68, a sizeable majority believed looters should be shot on sight, and what evidence there is suggests that view still prevails.

The Democrats must therefore tread carefully if they are to reclaim their traditional white working-class supporters. That is all the more the case as those voters strongly disagreed with Hillary Clinton’s repeated claim in 2016 that the “hard truth about justice in America” is that law enforcement is pervaded by “systematic racism”.

As for Trump, he could and should have been more statesmanlike in reaching out to the - millions of Americans who are rightly appalled by George Floyd’s death at the hands of the Minneapolis police.

But this is an age of fracture. And rather than causing the fractures, the Trump presidency mirrors them. That it does so in novel ways and to an unusual extent is undeniable. However, it would be a serious mistake to think that today’s divisiveness is unprecedented or the

harbinger of American collapse.

As Herbert Nicholas, perhaps the greatest British scholar of American government, showed in his magnificent valedictory essay, the US never has been — and never will be — Switzerland, with its largely tranquil politics sustained by a culture of consensus and co-operation.

Rather, it is a country riddled with conflicts and riven by cleavages that rarely heal and periodically erupt. Eternally poised on the volcano's edge, there has always been in its politics an undertow of identifying and exploiting “who hates who”.

Yet far from being solely a weakness, the divisions, so long as they can be kept short of violence, have also proven to be an enduring strength. America's founding fathers expected as much, frequently citing Montesquieu's dictum that where there is no turmoil, there can be no liberty.

This time, too, the eruption will abate. And when it does, the liberty will remain, carrying once again into the future the hope and promise of the US.

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