

Public Opinion

Column: In Baltimore, don't confuse protesters with rioters or thugs

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You know a situation has badly deteriorated when even the known gang leaders come together to call for an end to violence. That's what happened last week in Baltimore.

As an African-American male, I can sympathize with the family of Freddie Gray, and I can support the community in holding peaceful protests. But I must be clear in saying I was deeply disappointed in how the peaceful protests erupted into violence that left both physical and emotional scars on the Baltimore community. Those who engaged in violence by attacking police, destroying property, setting fires, were wrong on all levels. I oppose this behavior in every way and I can say with confidence that none of it was justified.

That said, in discussing the riot, we must not confuse the protesters with the rioters or thugs. The protesters, in my opinion, were there for Mr. Gray and to make a statement about police brutality. The thugs were there to do what they do best: destroy property, attack others and loot.

Black leaders are quick to invoke the name of Martin Luther King Jr. for different occasions. Yet, I heard many suggest the rioting was an outlet for many years of frustrations, and that it was probably required to get the attention of society and the people in power. Many of my black friends told me that the black people of Baltimore had to do this to get the nation's attention.

But I disagree. In fact, I think this would be a fitting moment to mention MLK. After all, he got the attention of the world through non-violent means. Not only did he get attention, but he also helped to bring about change. He did this

without throwing a single rock and without lighting a single match. Perhaps we can learn from his method.

It appears that while many leaders admire MLK, in practice they're closer to Malcolm X who advocated change "by any means necessary." That ideology may sound good as rhetoric and even be useful as a rallying cry for an urgent cause. However, such thinking comes with a price tag that most people aren't willing to pay.

As a prison chaplain, I see the criminal mind up close and personal on a daily basis. I recognize the criminal behavior. On any given day, you can see the true colors of inmates when they fail to get their way. They use the expression: "I'm gonna flash out!" This means they will go ballistic and attack someone or maybe destroy property if they cannot have what they want on their terms. The thugs in Baltimore exhibited this same behavior: Give them what they want on their own terms or they will flash out."

When I asked some of my black friends about the riot, their response caught me off guard. They said, "Sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do to get attention."

"But they're destroying their own community," I said. "Some are destroying black-owned businesses. You mean this would be OK with you?"

"They have insurance," they replied. "You can always get government money to replace that stuff."

I shook my head.

"In other words," I said, "if someone hurts me or cheats me, I have the right to retaliate by destroying YOUR home? If someone hurts me, then I can go to your home and burn your car?"

"We have insurance," they said.

Some leaders are saying we must pay attention to the poverty and lack of jobs and lack of opportunities in Baltimore. They seem to suggest that opportunities will prevent thugs from being thugs. But I would ask about the many young people who left school on Monday to be part of the riot. That's right, they left school with backpacks and all. A large percentage, no doubt, will not finish high school so they can go on to college and compete in the market place. It seems, then, that they have opportunities, but some of these

opportunities are being wasted. When I lived in Baltimore, I saw young black men who simply refused to work. If they found a job, they soon quit. They preferred life in the fast lane. They thought it was more cool to hustle on the street than to work at McDonald's.

When it all boils down, we don't need a sociologist, a talking head or any deep political thinker to understand what happened in Baltimore. We can figure things out by looking at Toya Graham, the Baltimore mother who snatched her son off the street, gave him a few smacks, and took him home.

Graham is a single mother of six children. She is jobless. She is struggling. Despite her hard times, she still knows right from wrong. And even though she felt that what had happened to Gray — and other black men — was wrong, she did not believe the rioters were justified in attacking police and destroying the community.

Martin Luther King did not believe in returning violence for violence. He said he could not follow the old eye-for-an-eye philosophy because it would leave the whole world blind. He said: "Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral. ...It destroys a community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends by defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers."

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