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White America may have amnesia, but don't ask Blacks to forget

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“Give me Liberty...”

By Preston Love Jr

Patrick Henry, in 1775, spoke to his fellow colonists, and to the British, when he said, “Give me liberty or give me death.”

Nearly 250 years later, I too, scream for liberty.

I make this appeal not to the element of white supremacists and overt racists. I need not waste my time with that audience. Nor do I appeal to my more progressive, less racist white counterparts, who may share my anguish and pain as to our common view of the realities in America. My appeal is directed toward the large segment of our white American communities. These folks are well-meaning but seem to have amnesia when it comes to the history of white America and its treatment of its Black co-citizens.

Don't you remember that in 1865, in the 13th Amendment to our beloved Constitution, slavery was “abolished.” Yet for centuries, manipulation, via indentured servitude and more, minimized that amendment. And you may have forgotten that that slavery provided free labor to build this country and to build generational wealth for countless whites.

Don't you remember the 14th Amendment, which gave everybody equal protection and civil rights in this country? In 1868, so where did the idea of separate but equal come from? Where did separate water fountains and unequal schools come from, after the enactment of the 14th Amendment?

Don't you remember, in 1870, the 15th Amendment to the Constitution that gave all the right to vote -- as long as you were male? Yet John Lewis had his head beaten, and activists were assassinated nearly 100 years later, still advocating for that right.

Don't you remember the horrors of lynching, well into the 1900s?

We as Americans should have been done with slavery, unequal rights under the law and any impediments to voting by the end of the 19th century, and taking the breath and lives of our fellow man. But it never stopped. It took the brutal, vicious and long civil rights movement to push for the truth of those amendments, and all of the horror that the opposition followed, in the form of Jim Crowism and more. Is America asking the African American to also have amnesia, to not remember these horrible deeds, and for us to ignore our memory of America and its promises, its amendments and its deeds?

We counter the amnesia of white Americans with the historical and institutional memory of the African American.

Need I remind you that the Ku Klux Klan was populated by law enforcement officers? The beating of John Lewis was by law enforcement officers. The killing of key civil rights workers in Mississippi was perpetrated by law enforcement officers. A beautiful 14-year-old, poverty-stricken, innocent black girl by the name of Vivian Strong was shot in the back of the head by a police officer in Omaha.

To be clear, we know the vast majority of police are good people dedicated to their job. But death by the police is nothing new. Are you asking us Black folks to forget? Black people have institutional knowledge of all of that, regardless of their age. It is instilled in them by their fathers, mothers and grandparents

So, in 2020, after a series of years of killings by rogue policemen all over this country, culminated by George Floyd's death and punctuated by the shooting of Jacob Blake, if you have amnesia, then you may be surprised at our sustained anger. Plain and simple, you cannot separate the past injustices by claiming amnesia or indifference.

After the Civil War, called the “Reconstruction Period,” there was great hope because of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. But along came Jim Crow. In the middle and late 1960s, there was great hope with the passage of new civil rights laws. But along came the “new” attitude of African Americans, declaring that enough was enough, and America erupted with the race riots and civil disobedience.

In response to the unrest, African Americans saw exponential growth in elected office and movement within corporate America. We had hope again. We even began to run for president: Shirley Chisholm in 1972, Jesse Jackson in 1984, and many others to follow.

We saw economic growth in sectors of the Black community, mostly in entertainment and athletics, and even the election of a Black man to the presidency of the United States. We had not forgotten the past, but we had hope again. Then came a rash increase of racial divisiveness, white supremacy at the highest level, and more rogue police killings of our Black people.

White Americans may have amnesia as to what has happened, but don't ask us to forget. We're demanding reforms in policing and change in all segments of society. The well of hope is getting dry. My message should be clear. In spite of my institutional, historical memory, should we again have hope or will we have more of the same? "Black Lives Matter," signs abound, but should we have hope of sustained change and reform?

Give me liberty. Together, let's convert hope into healing and real progress. Improve your memory so I can will reduce mine.