

The Protest Movement - Putting It In Perspective

By William K. Woods

Just as the country was beginning to emerge from phase one of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis Police triggered the largest urban protests and unrest since the protests and riots of 1967 and 68. As the protests continue, it is far too early to write any in depth analyses about them or their impacts on American life. At best, some commentary can be made about their connections to past history and events.

So many of the protests and the urban unrest of our recent past were set in motion by local police actions that led to the deaths of African-American men. Tragic and unnecessary as these deaths were, there often existed sufficient ambiguity about the events to allow the police to avoid legal indictments for their actions. In the case of George Floyd no evidence of potential danger to the police or flight from law can be raised. There on tape for all to see is a man, who already has his hands handcuffed behind his back, lying on the ground with a policeman with his knee on his neck. This procedure continued for over eight minutes with witnesses declaring that Mr. Floyd pleaded that he could not breathe. The stark horror of this event must be cited as a major catalyst for producing this national response with protests taking place in cities across the country.

Prior to current events, Cincinnati experienced riots and protests like so many U.S. cities in the late 1960s. In the summer of 1967, violent police actions against young Black men triggered days of protests and inner-city looting. Martin Luther King's assassination less than a year later set off further unrest in the city's African-American neighborhoods. At that time, a Republican majority on City Council took a tough, unsympathetic position against these events, and no tangible police reforms emerged from these protests. One positive result came from the religious community. Religious leaders joined together to form the Metropolitan Area Religious Coalition of Cincinnati (MARCC) in order to grapple with racism and social and economic inequities.

The urban unrest of 1967-68 came after the Civil Rights movement of the early sixties brought about an end of the legal segregation that had existed in the South for decades. Years of well organized peaceful protests had been met by stiff and often violent opposition. In the the end, however, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 must be viewed as major victories in the struggle for racial equality in this country. As some historians of this period have written, the urban protests and riots of the late sixties that took place in the Midwest, east, and west were often spur of the moment, unorganized reactions by African-American residents who lived with the social and economic inequities that existed in these non-Southern

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City Councilmember
Jan-Michelle Lemon Kearney

environments. These protesters also wanted to experience some of the success of the Civil Rights movement.

In the fifty-plus years since those protests and riots, individual cities have continued to be places where violent actions by the police toward African-Americans occur on an all too regular basis. These incidents sometimes sparked protests and urban unrest. Los Angeles in 1992, Cincinnati in 2001, and Ferguson, Missouri in 2015 are several examples that come immediately to mind.

The event that triggered the protests and unrest in Cincinnati in 2001, was the shooting death of Timothy Thomas, a young African-American, by a police officer in Over-the-Rhine. Thomas was running away from the officer when he was killed, and he had done no crime or posed no threat to justify the shooting. Besides the immediate protests and unrest, Thomas' death prompted a lot of soul searching and reform efforts by government officials, religious and civic organizations, local foundations, and the community at-large.

The most positive reform that emerged from these community deliberations was the Collaborative Agreement, a document incorporating a number of "best practices" for the Cincinnati Police including an emphasis on community policing. This agreement was tied to the Federal Court Settlement of a case brought against the City of Cincinnati, and it was overseen for a number of years to insure local compliance by a Court appointed monitor. Although a lot of the Agreement's reforms still guide City Police practices, some important aspects such as community policing have been sidelined. One of the outcomes of the current protests could be a renewal of the Collaborative Agreement.

Meanwhile, a week of protests have taken place in Cincinnati in response to the murder of George Floyd. A curfew was imposed by the City after some looting and destruction occurred downtown, and approximately three-hundred people have been arrested during this period. A number of groups have been involved in the peaceful protests, and young adults, both African-American and white, have comprised a large percentage of those involved.

On June 4th, the Cincinnati Black United Front and the Ohio Justice and Policy Center put forward a series of reforms that would apply to the Cincinnati Police and the Hamilton County Court System and Sheriff's Department. Besides calling for fair treatment of all citizens, and the elimination of racial disparity in the criminal-legal system, the list includes some very specific actions. When anyone is charged with a crime, the goal should be "to cite and release rather than to arrest." In response to some inequitable arrests for violations of Pandemic public health regulations, one recommendation calls for the County and City to drop all charges. It says: "Address the Pandemic as an issue of public health, not of criminality." Another recommendation calls for the revival of the Citizen Complaint Authority and the City Manager's Advisory Group. Also listed is a call to review current "use of force policies" and the training of police officers.

As previously stated, it is too early to assess the impacts of the protests in Cincinnati and in other cities across the country. A vision of hope was voiced by Former President Barack Obama when he took part in a recent dialogue on the current situation. He declared that what made him optimistic about the potential for positive change was the involvement of so many white and African-American young people in the protests. He talked about a new generation who did not

accept racism, and who were both idealistic and pragmatic in their approach to change. It was refreshing to hear such words.