

The Flames of Unrest

History will likely view the last year as one of significant struggle, with a pandemic, economic recession, and critical periods of civil unrest and social progress. If one current characterization is any indication, the legacy of this time can be encapsulated into one word we've seen repeatedly: "unprecedented." While it is certainly the most eventful year in recent history, the underlying themes are not new in the slightest; in fact, they can be traced back to the very beginning, with our country's inception and its founders. One such founding father, Benjamin Franklin, detailed these ideas in his essay, *Rules by which A Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One*, where he states "[A] great Empire, like a great Cake, is most easily diminished at the Edges." Though the words were penned over two hundred years ago, his message of the danger behind suppressing the subjugated remains universal and continues to resonate today.

Franklin's use of satire in this essay serves as a means to criticize the British monarchy's willingness to disenfranchise those in the colonies when they are Britain's own people. He highlights the absurdity of denying the colonists equal privileges as their fellow citizens and expecting them to remain obedient. Like in many comparable circumstances, it was taken for granted that those on the fringes would remain passive and continue to serve those in power - until they didn't. Until those tired of being devalued take action and division spreads throughout the nation like cracks from an earthquake, gradually but decisively weakening its strength. History has shown us this story time and time again, yet many continue to actively ignore the warnings from the past and in doing so, jeopardize the future.

The metaphorical edges in question speak not only of a country's geographical corners but also to those left on the edges of society. This summer, the death of George Floyd at the

hands of a police officer sparked a nationwide uproar followed by tumultuous weeks of protests, riots, and polarization between those with divided opinions regarding the situation. What struck me the most was the disproportionate outrage directed at the surface-level destruction rather than the flawed structures inherently embedded in society that led up to it. Even more concerning was the understanding that these sentiments were not unique to our time.

In my English class, we read and analyzed the letters Martin Luther King Jr. wrote from his Birmingham jail cell, his exigence being criticism from clergymen who labeled the civil rights movement as too radical, scapegoating riots that had occurred. In these letters, King articulates how too often the privileged divest their condemnation towards the consequences of issues rather than the root causes. This short-sighted and superficial interpretation leads to the dismissal of legitimate concerns as people lack the perspective of being marginalized. Either out of convenience or ignorance, the minimization of the underprivileged's problems has occurred to an *ad nauseam* degree. Neglecting their plight inevitably creates resentment towards both the oppression of leaders and the apathy from the advantaged; eventually, pervasive division creates weaknesses in the very foundation of government. It is no coincidence that riots occur more often in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged areas; as a paper by Holdo and Bengtsson states, "Violence seems justified when the injustices appear so grave that the norm of compliance no longer feels obligatory or...appropriate." Injustice is the kindling for the flames of unrest. The threat of these externalities demonstrates the necessity for recognition and support of the societally disadvantaged to heal the polarization among the population.

This truth was again expressed by inaugural poet, Amanda Gorman, in "The Hill We Climb": "And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us, but what stands before us. We close the divide because we know, to put our future first, we must first put our differences aside."

The potential of the future depends on the unity and progress of today; thus, with regard to the unheard, the oppressed, the “edges,” so to speak, of America’s cake, it is the duty of individuals and institutions to take action until those labels are of the past. When we overlook the marginalized, we disseminate division that ultimately culminates in harm for everyone. And while our forefathers did eventually achieve freedom and establish an independent nation, if we fail to uphold measures ensuring that all have the ability to partake in those freedoms, then America will be doomed to repeat the mistakes that led to its revolution.

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