

THE URBAN POLICY AMERICA NEEDS

Last week's riots in Los Angeles horrified law-abiding Americans everywhere. The disturbances triggered urgent demands for order to be restored. But they also generated calls for action to deal with the deep-seated frustrations of Americans living in poor central-city neighborhoods—frustrations, it is said, that created a tinderbox waiting to be ignited. The danger is that the reaction of lawmakers will be to administer yet another expensive dose of the disastrous programs that are responsible for the collapse of urban communities, rather than to free those communities from suffocating bureaucracy and a numbing welfare system.

President George Bush's first response to the violence in the Los Angeles streets was wise and forceful. Public safety is the first priority of government. And like other responsible political leaders, Bush made it clear to rioter and shocked bystander alike that order must and will be restored. Tough action to guarantee safe streets is in the interest of all racial groups. He also reminded America that the right way to deal with the perceived injustice of the verdict in the trial of the four Los Angeles policemen is through a swift and thorough investigation by the Justice Department and, if called for, prosecution in the federal courts.

Bush next must address the anger and hopelessness that created the environment for the violence. In doing so he must first reject the phoney argument that what is needed is a "Marshall Plan" for urban America. Vast new public housing projects, even more generous welfare benefits for single mothers, and another army of social welfare administrators will do nothing to improve America's cities. Indeed it is such programs, which underpinned the Great Society and continue to be the basis of today's "anti-poverty" strategy, that are the root cause of the problem. Public housing projects in most cases have become crime-ridden prisons of despair; inner-city public schools systematically fail their students and are answerable to no one; the welfare system rewards single motherhood and irresponsible fathers while penalizing working, intact families; and a plethora of rules and regulations suffocate would-be entrepreneurs in poor communities. The last thing urban America needs is to be struck again by that kind of helping hand.

Empowerment and Responsibility. Needed instead is an urban policy that gives inner-city Americans a real stake in their own neighborhoods and their family's future. This means giving these Americans effective control over their own lives. When people feel that others have the power to determine their economic and social future, the result is frustration, resentment, and often racial tension. But having a real stake also means a person must take responsibility for his or her own life. Empowerment implies a corresponding responsibility. And empowerment is impossible without peace and order in city streets.

Thus Bush should demand swift congressional action on measures now languishing on Capitol Hill that would give inner-city Americans real power to determine their own future. Among these:

- ✓ **America 2000**, which would begin to give parents the chance to determine which school their child attends—public or private—and thereby wrest control away from administrative bureaucracies and teacher unions;
- ✓ **Enterprise Zones**, which would reduce tax and regulatory obstacles to Americans taking the risk of starting a business in blighted neighborhoods;

✓ **Public Housing "Perestroika,"** which would allow tenants in run-down, troubled public housing projects to take over the management of these projects from often corrupt local Public Housing Authorities. This builds on the success of tenant-managed projects across the country.

Each of these proposals is bottled up in Congress because the vast, paternalist welfare state bureaucracy exerts enormous pressure on Congress to preserve its power to micro-manage the lives of poor Americans, while the congressional leadership refuses to confront the welfare state lobby. Each proposal is bottled up also because, so far, President Bush has not given vigorous political support to those in his cabinet—most notably Housing and Urban Development Secretary Jack Kemp—who are spearheading the empowerment strategy. What Bush should do is explain to the American people why these measures are needed to revive the cities, and say bluntly who is opposing them.

Bush needs in addition to help the efforts of governors and state legislators to reform welfare, changing it from a system that discourages marriage, work, and family responsibility to one that encourages each of these virtues. Today's welfare system, and the irresponsibility it demands as the price for government aid, is perhaps the leading cause of the destructive social and economic environment in America's inner cities—the environment that made the Los Angeles riots a possibility.

Bush can help such overdue welfare reform in three ways:

First, he can direct federal agencies to give top priority to granting administrative exemptions from federal regulations, a process known as giving "waivers," to innovative state proposals to reform the welfare system in ways that would strengthen intact families and encourage work;

Second, he can raise the profile of the Commission on Urban Families, chaired by Missouri Governor John Ashcroft. The Commission, established this spring, is due to complete its work by the end of the year. That report could become the blueprint for arresting the decline of the inner-city family; and

Third, he can submit legislation to Congress to provide medical insurance vouchers and grant more generous tax relief for low-income working families with children. These measures would give a powerful incentive for many parents to leave the repressive welfare system and seek a job.

The Los Angeles riots did not happen, as some have charged, because of the unwillingness of Americans to spend money on their central cities. They happened because Americans spent hundreds of billions of dollars over the last 25 years creating a paternalistic and oppressive welfare state that has been a disaster for urban America. Now it is time to liberate the inner cities.

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For further information:

Stuart M. Butler, "Guidelines for State Welfare Reform," *Heritage Lecture* No. 346, October 30, 1991.

Robert Rector, "How to Strengthen America's Crumbling Families," *Heritage Foundation Backgrounder* No. 894, April 28, 1992.