

## **What Is To Be Done (and How We Do It)**

**Submitted by Marilyn Katz**

### **Part I Thoughts on the Emerging Agenda –**

“The black revolution is much more than a struggle for the rights of Negroes. It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws – racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism. It is exposing evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society. It reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws and suggests that radical reconstruction of society itself is the real issue to be faced.” It is time that we stopped our blithe lip service to the guarantees of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. These fine sentiments are embodied in the Declaration of Independence, but that document was always a declaration of intent rather than reality. There were slaves when it was written; there were still slaves when it was adopted; and to this day, black Americans have not life, liberty nor the privilege of pursuing happiness, and millions of poor white Americans are in economic bondage that is scarcely less oppressive. Americans who genuinely treasure our national ideals, who know they are still elusive dreams for all too many, should welcome the stirring of Negro demands. They are shattering the complacency that allowed a multitude of social evils to accumulate. Negro agitation is requiring America to re-examine its comforting myths and may yet catalyze the drastic reforms that will save us from social catastrophe.”

These words were written more than 50 years ago by Dr. Martin Luther King – they are no less true today. If there had been any question, the pandemic—and those it has most impacted—and the recent string of murders of Black people by police, made clear a reality that for too long many refused to see.

Millions of people across the world have responded by coming together to protest the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, but the underlying conditions of racism that brought them and so many other minorities to early death at the hands of the State, or alone in a hospital room.

While the demonstrations, statements and discussion are exciting and edifying, if there is to be lasting change it is imperative to act. The moment is now to transform the lessons we have learned into an action agenda that demands attention today - or the moment may be lost. It is critical to go beyond words: we as a nation must confront the realities that for too long many had refused to see.

As someone who marched with King, I know we are stronger today. In 1968, thousands took to the streets; today there are millions demanding change. Back then, people

demonstrated to become part of the system and stop the war. Today, people are demonstrating to transform the system itself and to question the role of its guardians—the police.

True transformation requires rejection of the goal of “returning to normal” after the pandemic has ebbed and the immediate anger has cooled. These dual crises are an urgent, painful reminder that “normal” does not work—is indeed harmful—for millions of Americans.

What have we learned these past weeks and months? And what actions do those lessons compel? Here is a beginning of an Agenda for Justice

**Lesson:** The compensation system is upside down. It was not the bankers or the lawyers or hedge funds execs upon whom the nation relied these past months, but those who stocked the shelves, picked up the garbage, grew and transported the crops, tended to the sick, the elderly and the very young.

**Change:** Enact nation-wide minimum wages laws that guarantee a living wage – a minimum wage that takes a single person not simply just above the poverty line, but one that allows for housing, education, leisure, good food and only one job. Let the new floor be \$40,000 per year.

**Lesson:** The gig economy is not freedom—it is exploitation. Once touted as liberating, the “gig” economy has been revealed for what it is – a union-busting, pension-ending, exploitive, fraudulent system in which the workforce participants take all the risks while those who create the ‘apps’ to help them get work reap all the benefits. Without resources, access to health insurance, unemployment benefits, current or future savings, or pathway to future employment the gig economy has created a new underclass whose future is precarious.

**Change:** Mandate that anyone who works for a company that provides and advertises a service or a product is contractually entitled to benefits, pensions, health care and all other entitlements.

**Lesson:** Universal health care is a necessity, not a privilege. Because the health and well-being of everyone is affected by the health and well-being of all, healthcare is not a luxury for the few but a matter of public safety.

**Change:** Enact universal healthcare.

**Lesson:** The US workforce is the world's most productive, but more than 90 percent of new wealth created by that workforce goes to the top one percent. In 1990 there were less than a 1000 people/couples who declared an income of more than 10 million – by the year 2000 that number had risen to more than 6,000 and has continued to rise.

**Change:** Guarantee every individual a minimum income of \$35,000 per year with more per child; cap upper level of incomes.

**Lesson:** Using property taxes to fund government services is disastrous for individuals and communities alike. The most regressive of all taxes, the stays the same if you have a job or not, doubling the misery of those who lose their income by forcing them also out of their homes. Similarly, jurisdictions that use property taxes to fund schools and other municipal services, and the homeowners who pay these taxes, suffer in a downturn when incomes and property tax revenues decline.

**Change:** Replace property taxes with an income tax to fund all public services.

**Lesson: Access to the internet is essential.** Without access to the internet, individuals, families, and their children cannot take advantage of remote learning opportunities, use telemedicine when in-person care is not available, connect effectively with government agencies, social service organizations, and other providers, have access to basic goods and services, apply for employment, communicate with loved ones, and more.

**Change:** Provide high-speed internet to every household and regulate connectivity as a utility, like electricity and gas.

**Lesson: How police and prison systems function is inconsistent with a just society.** Most people consider the police and prison a necessity. However, recent events from the decriminalization of marijuana once white corporations found a way to profit from it after decades in which black and brown people languished in jail (and still do) to the unparalleled incarceration rates of black men and the killings of George Floyd are stark reminders not only of the brutality and racism of some but of the origins of American policing and penal systems and the role they play in society. What is increasingly understood is not simply the actions of bad actors but the reality of the creation, history, and present-day function of laws and law enforcement at every level. The question is not only how the law is imposed but are the laws and the order that are defended by the police what we wish to uphold.

**Change:** Redefine “public safety:” who is responsible for it; and what success looks like. Redefine and limit the role and power of the police. End the militarization of the police. Reduce the prison population by ensuring that it is used only for those who commit crimes of that harm others. Rethink the ‘criminal code;” decriminalizing a variety of actions and activities (as has been done with marijuana); limiting the role and power of the police; and increasing resources for restorative justice, the social safety net, and community-level services. It is time to ask “whose law; whose order is this? And is it just

**Lesson:** For most Americans, housing is precarious – threatened both by eviction and foreclosure should a family or individual lose their job, fall ill, etc. At the same time, we know that decades of federal policies have created the situation where Blacks have been unable to increase wealth through home ownership (the main source of American’s wealth) and have been systematically and intentionally relegated to housing that is in the worst condition and isolated from the transportation system, schools, jobs, and amenities that are the basis for the vaunted ‘American ladder of opportunity”

**Change:** Provide compensation for Black communities by ensuring adequate investment in housing, schools and infrastructure and encouraging the creation and sustaining of Black and minority owned businesses as well as the locating of entities that provide good paying employment.

**Lesson:** Fueled to keep power in place, racism cripples our society and fuels a madness that threaten even the façade of democracy. Being personally anti-racist is nice but not sufficient to address the crisis of structural racism is embedded in government and government policies since the origins of the republic and re-affirmed in the compromises that led to the end of reconstruction at the end of the civil war.

**Change:** It is time to end those vestiges of white supremacy that infect every aspect of our lives, from the senate to the electoral college, to courts, and policies. We can start with 1) ending or reconstituting the electoral college in a way that ends the dominance of a minority; 2) reconstitute the supreme court and once again enlarge the numbers 3) provide statehood for the District of Columbia and give the people of Puerto Rico, Guam and Samoa the opportunity to freely choose independence (free of U.S. military presence and domination) or state hood.

## **What is to be Done Part II: Never give up your independence or your base**

We are Progressives. After four years, during which we proved ourselves to be a fierce opposition, we now face the question of how to conduct ourselves with friendly leaders in the White House, Senate and House.

To some, the answer may be self-evident; it is not. At our best, we build organizations and movements and create vibrant coalitions—through them we fight and, often, win elections, changes in law, and in the hearts and minds of people. We are allies and supporters of progressive elected officials and laws at every level of government; we have organized the campaigns, crafted the political strategies, and done the media, communications, and policy work for mayors, members of Congress, and presidents.

What we emphatically are not—nor should we be—is THEM. And it is here, in our understanding of how to pursue agendas and how to relate to our allies in government, that lies our greatest potential strength and our greatest.

Most progressives agree on the fundamental tenets of an agenda (see the attached papers). There is less clarity and consensus around how to pursue it.

Unlike the extra-parliamentary segments of the right, progressives have never quite figured out how to effectively engage in an inside/outside game—despite the fact that Democrats held the top office for 16 of the last 28 years.

During the Clinton era, admittedly a period of relative quiet in progressive movements, there was relatively little interaction between social movements and the administration, even though some very progressive individuals held positions of power and influence.

While the repressive laws and atmosphere that followed 9/11, and the prospect of war, rekindled independent organizing, what really ignited the mass movements of the time was the fact that there was a Republican at the helm, and he was taking the country to war.

Interestingly, the movement against the war in Iraq took a very different turn than the vast and varied anti-war movement of the 60s. Unlike their predecessors, young activists, tired of having their protests fall on the deaf ears, decided to take power, with the charismatic but untested Barack Obama as their leader and their vehicle.

While a variety of consultants think it was their brilliant use of the internet, targeting, and social media that created the movement, that is not the case. Their contribution was revolutionary, but its value was in making it possible for the thousands of groups and millions of people who were self-organizing to attach themselves to a structure and see the growing power and impact of their work.

Yet once President Obama was in office, the unprecedented level of organization and mobilization fell apart—victim to competing agendas, and to conflicting feelings within the new administration about the value—or danger—of mass movements.

Some groups decided to take Obama's agenda as their own and trim their aspirations to fit his actions. Others were disappointed and became incessant critics (some continuing to this day). Many others just withdrew from civic action.

However, the most serious consequence is that millions of ordinary Americans, who had become activated and pinned their hopes for change on the new president, once again found themselves alone. Alone, as they battled the Great Recession and its lingering effects, the decline after so much optimism and progress in communities across the country, and often paralyzing storm of uncertainty and bewildering change. So, HOPE turned into cynicism—fertile ground for Fox News and Donald Trump.

It is not fate, however, to repeat the past. We have seen from places as disparate as Georgia and Wisconsin that what works is a steady commitment, not only to a candidate but to an underlying agenda reflecting progressive values and the needs of communities and their people.

While it is true that politicians, like all people, dislike criticism (particularly from those close to them), the best of them know that a progressive opposition is an essential element of fulfilling their promises and realizing the goals of those who supported and voted for them.

We are Progressives. Moving forward then, taking a page from Georgia and Wisconsin, we need to build organizations and relationships, based on agendas that reflect what we believe and what people need. If we do, we will provide President Biden, Speaker Pelosi, Majority Leader Schumer, and all the other leaders now in power and place, the space and support to do the right things, and the candidates of 2022 a path to victory.

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