

Liberalism and the Los Angeles Riots

By Dennis Prager

I want to talk to you about liberalism and what happened in my city. And yes, it is my city: I don't want to be melodramatic, but just a few weeks ago the entire sky outside my house was black with smoke. If you have never had that sensation, then it is not possible for you to know exactly what it felt like. I get the chills as I tell it to you.

My reaction was intense anger. I have been broadcasting on KABC, the talk radio station in Los Angeles for ten years. The station called me during the rioting and asked me if I wanted to do two live hours, even though it was not my day to broadcast. I said yes, but then my family begged me not to go—which was quite understandable since on the block of my station a FEDCO, a huge store, was being burned and looted; and next door to my station a Sees Candy was being looted (presumably because the looters had a particularly great need for candy).

But I didn't go for another reason. I called the station and said, "I can't broadcast. I am too angry. What I have to say will not calm the city." By Saturday, I had calmed down just enough to give my commentary. My theme was that I was living in a sea of lies, that Los Angeles and America were drowning in lies—most particularly that evil was not taking place.

Let me give you one example. As I was watching the local NBC television coverage of the rioting, this is the way one reporter described what he saw: "Here I am on the corner of (I forget the streets) and I see five black gentlemen throwing stones at cars." I said on my radio show, "Can you imagine anybody ever saying, 'I saw five white gentlemen in hoods burning a cross.?' " And so, my motto—which I repeated in South Central Los Angeles to black listeners—became "If you can't call a black thug a thug, you are a racist." The inability to call a bad black person a bad person is part of the quarter-century liberal harvest that Betsy Hart, in her introduction, spoke of.

I want to dissect what liberal thought has done to America. But before I do, I need to make two things clear.

One is my own commitment to furthering black/white relationships. It is so deep that one of the reasons I founded the Micah Center for Ethical Monotheism was to combat racism through a program called "Dinners in Black and White." In it blacks and whites will simply have dinners at each others' homes—nothing else. All we want is that they have dinner with each other so that they see each other as people and not members of a race. It is one of the first three programs of my center, and it predated the rioting by months. So, I am deeply, deeply committed to eradicating racism.

My second point is that not every liberal holds every value that I am about to identify with liberalism. I understand that. Therefore, liberals hearing this should not say, "Well, I'm a liberal and I don't feel that way." I frequently hear this from callers to my radio show. I will state a liberal position and then someone will call and say, "Well I'm a liberal and I don't hold that position." So I then raise five other liberal positions, and they tell me that they don't hold them either. So I

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ask, "Why do you call yourself a liberal? If you don't hold these basic positions of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, why do you call yourself a liberal?"

Maybe it is time for people who do not hold the positions I am about to describe, yet who call themselves liberal, to painfully acknowledge what this liberal Jew had to painfully acknowledge — that contemporary liberalism has abandoned us. Indeed, to be loyal to traditional liberal values may demand intense opposition to contemporary liberalism.

The following ideas called liberal by liberals contributed, I believe instrumentally, to what took place in Los Angeles.

Rage is all the rage. Everybody is speaking about black rage. The *L.A. Times* had a five-part series on the roots of the riots, and one of the days the entire issue was titled "Rage."

A word about rage. I would love to know if there were liberals in Germany in 1938, after *Kristallnacht* when white thugs burned Jewish establishments and killed Jews, who said, "Listen, you have to understand the rage of those Germans—they've endured the humiliating Versailles Treaty, terrible authoritarian upbringing and Germany's awful economic problems." Do you think that Nazis didn't have rage? In fact, can you name an evil in the world that is not accompanied by great rage? Do Ku Klux Klanners not have great rage? What about Jeffrey Dahmer? What if somebody said, "Let's try to understand Jeffrey Dahmer's rage, and then we can really get to the roots, the underlying causes of why he murdered and ate people."

Controlling Rage. I am tired of this rage argument. It doesn't hold, and it certainly doesn't justify. And it's a tautology: all evil comes from rage. So what? The difference between moral people and immoral people is that moral people control their rage. Buddhists in Vietnam were enraged by policies of the Diem government. But they burned themselves. If the L.A. rioters had burned themselves, I would have said, "You know something? There is a real rage there which we need to listen to. These are clearly people who want to make a moral point."

But when you say, "I am enraged, so I burn others," am I supposed to listen to your rage? And what about the rage of the Koreans and blacks whose livelihoods were burned? Their rage is not discussed; it is a non-issue.

I said on my radio show right after the riots that I started to understand even better Pastor Niehmohler, the German pastor. His famous statement was essentially: "When the Nazis came after Communists I kept quiet, because I wasn't a Communist. When they came after the Jews, I said nothing, because I am not a Jew. When they came after labor leaders, I said nothing, because I am not a labor leader. And when they came after me, there was nobody left to speak up for me."

That is why we must speak up for the Koreans. I begged my fellow Jews and I begged the Los Angeles community generally, "Speak up, speak up." What happened was evil. It is not enough to say it was "rage."

And by the way, on the issue of rage, I think we are psychologically sophisticated enough to recognize that all of us have rage. What do you do at your psychoanalyst's office if not speak about your rage—at your mother, at your father, at your brother, at your sister, at your kids, at your boss, at your wife, at your husband, at life? Who doesn't have rage? So rage is universal, not an excuse for evil.

Let's now talk about black rage beyond the issue of whether it excuses violence. Does it really exist? Yes it does. But I hold the liberal world, black and white, very much responsible for it. I will tell you exactly why. If for thirty years all you are told is that America is racist—that whites are racist, that whites have it in for you, that no matter what you do, they are going to stomp on you—that would certainly cause a lot of rage in me if I were a black who believed it.

Liberal Lies. It would be as if I raised my Jewish children saying, "America is an antisemitic country where you can't get ahead because they hate Jews. Oh, there are token Jews here and there, but look at the absence of Jews among Fortune 500 executives, and don't think a Jew could ever be elected President; and don't forget all those country clubs that still don't allow Jews; and remember all the swastikas that are up in various places. This country hates you, my Jewish child." Gee, if nearly every Jew and non-Jew said the same thing to my children their entire lifetime, they, too, would be filled with rage. It's hard to fault blacks for their rage: The liberal media, the liberal civil rights organizations, liberal professors, and liberal artists have all told them, "You are hated. This country stinks. It is worse than ever. It has it in for you."

And not only is this country racist, the liberals tell us, it is also sexist. And it has 3,000,000 homeless whom it couldn't care less about. (These are grand liberal lies, but if you repeat them enough, if they are all the media report—that we have 3,000,000 homeless; that the country couldn't care less about its poor; that it causes a high infant mortality rate—they will be believed.) Of course, our infant mortality rate has nothing to do with the fact that many mothers are not taking pre-natal care of their children — to even suggest such a thing is to engage in "blaming the victim." My brother, a physician at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, which is very much in a minority area, tells about all the programs in which they beg pregnant women to come in for pre-natal care. But if they don't come in, and they are on drugs, why is that a sign of an oppressive society?

The litany of American oppression is not over. According to the Left, America is so evil that its government engineered the murder of one of its Presidents—and here, to be fair, I have to distinguish between the Left and liberalism, even though liberals rarely make that distinction. For example, the *New York Times* identifies the Institute for Policy Studies as a "liberal" think tank, and *The Nation* as a "liberal" journal. Well, if they are liberal, what is Left? Beijing's *People's Daily*? But I do want to make the distinction. Liberals have been good on this issue, but the Oliver Stone-Left not only depicts this country in all the ways I just mentioned, but holds that it even murdered its own President. Now, that is something that would engender rage.

And of course, liberal academics and intellectuals tell us that American men are raping women in vast numbers. Another great lie. There is rape, and rape is evil, but the numbers are greatly exaggerated, just like the numbers of homeless are exaggerated.

Paul Conrad, the cartoonist of the *Los Angeles Times*, one of the best known liberal cartoonists, drew George Bush in a Ku Klux Klan outfit when Mr. Bush opposed the recent Civil Rights law. The point was clear: If you don't agree with us liberals on race, you are a Ku Klux Klanner. Well, if I am black and I see such cartoons often enough, what am I supposed to conclude but that this country is worthy of being burned down?

Liberal Heritage. This is my *j'accuse* to the liberal world: You have stated, in essence, that America deserves to be burned. That has been your reaction to Los Angeles and that was the way you portrayed America prior to it. We deserve to be burned, and the burners need to be heard. That is the liberal heritage that we have received over all these years.

Liberals respond to this by saying, "We love our country, and we express this love by criticizing it." I think that Irving Kristol answered that best: What would you say about a husband or wife who constantly spoke about how awful his or her spouse was? Would you be impressed by the person's defense, "Oh, I just criticize the person I love"?

At a given point the issue whether you love in your heart or not is irrelevant; your actions are what matter. And liberal actions—I don't care about liberal motives, I am sure they are pure—have said this country is worthy of burning.

The burning has happened, and it probably will happen again, because the official American media and liberal political reaction has been: "Arsonists, we understand you." We had a United States Representative, Maxine Waters, screaming, "No justice, no peace." In other words, "Do what we want, or we will burn you." Think of that — a member of the U.S. House of Representatives at a rally in Washington led the chant, "Give us what we want or we will burn you." In other words, until then, you deserve to be burned. That has been the liberal message.

America's Perfidy. With all of this teaching of America's perfidy, no wonder there is a lot of black rage. No wonder about twenty percent of blacks, and according to one poll, twenty-nine percent, believe that whites started AIDS in order to commit genocide against blacks. It makes sense. Since this is such an awful country, maybe it's true.

If you think that this depiction of the liberal indictment of America is in any way exaggerated, let me read to you just a few of mainstream liberal comments on the riots.

One of the chief liberal spokespeople on this has been Andrew Hacker, whose recent book, *Two Nations Black and White: Separate, Hostile and Equal*, has been virtually beatified by the liberal press. This is what he wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* on May 13th:

So there is the sheer strain of living in a white world, the rage that you must suppress almost every day.... The conclusion seems all but self-evident that white America has no desire for your presence or any need for your people. Can this nation have an unstated strategy for annihilating your people?

Whites want to annihilate you, black Americans. That comes from a leading liberal academic in a leading liberal newspaper in the city of the riots two weeks after they occurred.

Walter Mosely, a black author of *Devil in a Blue Dress, or Red Death*, and other mysteries that are set in Los Angeles, wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*, May 5, 1992: "America is a brutal land. Its language is violence and bloodshed. That is why [Rodney] King was beaten; that is why another King was assassinated."

There's the liberal message: America, not one despicable racist, murdered Dr. King.

I'll give you another example. Leon Litwack, the A.F. and May T. Morrison Professor of American History at UC Berkeley, wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*, May 5, 1992: "The lawlessness began with the clubbing of black America, the conscious and criminal neglect and fashionable racism characteristic of the Age of Greed, over which Ronald Reagan and George Bush have presided."

That is a distinguished professor of history at Berkeley teaching how this country clubs blacks, has fashionable racism, and is filled with criminals in its establishment. How would you react if you were one of his black students?

That is what has set the agenda for all of what has happened. For thirty years, liberals have glorified blacks who hate America — from the day that the late Leonard Bernstein threw a party at his Park Avenue penthouse for the Black Panthers. Do you understand what announcement was being made? The elite of America only honor blacks who loathe America — the more you hate America, the more the white elite will honor you. If you are a black and you say you love this country, we have only contempt for you. You are an Uncle Tom; you are worse, you are an in-authentic black. But if you truly loathe America, if you truly believe that it is a despicable place, then we will honor you—you will get to the cover of *Time*; you will get the support of major liberal foundations. You are the ones we will hear.

Silencing Thomas. This message has not changed since Leonard Bernstein threw that party. If you are a black who says, "This country is wonderful. Sure it has got racists in it, but it is wonderful, and we have opportunities," you are loathed. A man named Clarence Thomas is the classic example. The day he thanked nuns and his grandparents, I knew he was dead. That was the death knell. What — nuns? A black thanking normative, Judaeo-Christian religion? That has to be silenced. And every effort other than actual murder was used. There was, of course, the attempted murder of a name, which, incidentally, Judaism considers morally equivalent to murder. There is a statement in Hebrew, "He who insults his neighbor in public, it is as if he has spilled his blood." Clarence Thomas had the temerity to say, "This is a good country." And when a black says that, he is in big trouble with white and black liberals.

That is why New York State appointed Professor Leonard Jeffries of the City College of New York to head curriculum review for multi-culturalism— after he had started teaching that blacks are the superior "sun race" and whites are the inferior "ice race." New York liberal educators (pardon the use of redundancy) rewarded Jeffries for his racism. Can you imagine New York State or educators anywhere appointing to such a commission a black who said, "This is a good country. Frankly, color doesn't mean that much to me. I really think that how a human being acts morally is much more important than his color." Such a black would be considered a fascist. According to liberalism, that is what it takes to be considered a reactionary today — to believe that how a human being acts is more important than his or her melanin.

That is why Dartmouth College chose Angela Davis as its model woman when the college celebrated its 15th anniversary of co-educational studies. She was introduced as a great, black role model for black women. The woman who has twice run for vice-president on the Communist Party ticket was the woman that Dartmouth decided to honor on the fifteenth anniversary of co-educational studies.

Remarkable? Not in the least. This is the rule: The more you loathe America, if you are a black, the more we liberals honor you. I think, by the way, that there is a reason for this. Liberals themselves have rage at America.

Different Reaction. For ten years, I have been saying on my radio show that while everyone has tragedy, unhappiness, and rage in his life, the difference between liberals and others lies in their reaction. The non-liberal says, "Life is filled with tragedy." The liberal says, "It is Reagan's fault." Since Marx, the Left has held external factors responsible for people's alienation, for their angst. We all have alienation. We all have angst. That is part of the human condition. But not to contemporary liberalism. To the liberal, our alienation is caused by bad government. That is why so often people call up my radio show or ask at one of my lectures, "Oh, Mr. Prager, how do you expect us to raise good children? Look at all the corruption in Washington."

To me, this question is a classic example of a non-sequitur. I just look at them and I say, "You mean because your Representative bounced checks, you can't teach your child ethics? What were parents supposed to do in the past? What were my grandparents, who lived under the Czar, supposed to say, 'Listen, I can't raise good kids, look at how corrupt the Czar is'?" I think all of us would acknowledge that the Czar was morally inferior even to Congress. Why then didn't they take the easy way out?

The point is therefore always to blame problems on outside forces. There is an anger in liberals, which the torchers of L.A. are expressing. That is what you need to understand. Angry liberals won't torch innocent businesses, but many of them resonate to the burning of America.

Denying the Truth. That is why there is a constant left-liberal defense of the riots. For example, I was in New York last week listening to WBAI, the liberal-left station there. Every time they referred to the Los Angeles riots, they referred to them as “the uprising” or “the rebellion.” And I mentioned Representative Maxine Waters’s “No justice, no peace” chant.

That is why the Rodney King beating is always described in liberal journals — the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, etc. — as “the police beating of the motorist Rodney King.” The implications seem clear. One is that white policemen looked for a black motorist to beat, and the other is that Rodney King was simply “a black motorist.” The truth, of course, is quite different. Rodney King was going 110 miles an hour which is atypical for a “motorist,” even in Los Angeles. And he was driving 80 miles an hour on city streets. As I asked on my show, What if King had run over a black child? He certainly could have. Or a white child? What would have happened then? “Black motorist” constructs a whole lie to deny what really happened.

That is why Jesse Jackson described what happened as “Desperate people do desperate things.” That is true, but it is also true for Jeffrey Dahmer and for white racists. Members of the Ku Klux Klan are also desperate people. Can you imagine any decent white person saying about KKK’ers, “Well, desperate people do desperate things”?

That is why Michigan Representative John Conyers, announced, “Those weren’t criminals, those were outraged citizens.” And Bill Clinton, who is running for President on the Democratic ticket said, “Oh, to be sure, it was heartbreaking to see some little children going into the stores in Los Angeles and stealing from their neighbors, but they live in a country where the top one percent of Americans have more wealth than the bottom 90 percent.” There you go. (Incidentally, what does “heartbreaking” mean? For whom exactly did Gov. Clinton’s heart break? The looted? The looters? America? And why “heart breaking?” How about “morally frightening?”) Nevertheless, I want to give him the benefit of the doubt. He made so many comments that perhaps this was unrepresentative. So let’s forget the “heartbreaking,” it is the “but” that most matters. For liberal spokespeople there is always a “but” when discussing the evil committed by the rioters.

Moral Principle. I asked my nine year old son, “David, would you loot?” He said, “No.” I said, “Why not?” He said, “Because I would get caught.” I said, “What if you wouldn’t get caught?” He said, “I still wouldn’t.” I said, “Why not?” He said, “Because it is in the Ten Commandments.” That is all I wanted to hear. I did not want to hear, “Because I think it is wrong.” I wanted to hear that he knows that there is a transcendent moral principle, that “Thou shall not steal” emanates from something higher than the individual, so that even if everybody around you is doing it and there were rational arguments for doing it, there is still an ultimate argument for not doing it. That is ethical monotheism. I felt good. It was one of the few moments of light for me in a very dark period.

The division of America into race has been overwhelmingly a liberal phenomenon. I will never forget recently having had a liberal black minister on one of my radio shows. I asked her, “Do you believe that all whites are racist, unless you know otherwise?” She said, “Yes.” (I played the tape of this woman — a moderate, Christian, black pastor — right after the riots). Finally at the end of the show, I looked at her and I said, “You know, I think a lot of whites like myself take Martin Luther King, Jr. far more seriously than a lot of blacks like you.” She said, “That is right, you do.” Whereas I believe in Dr. King’s aim of having a color-blind society, she noted that she is African before all other identities — even before Christian, and certainly before American. This is a remarkable development which liberalism doesn’t confront, and indeed has hastened.

