

“What Will You Do? Protest takes us only so far. Americans must reject recrimination, face old problems squarely, and seek justice for all.”

By Condoleezza Rice

Words cannot dull the pain of George Floyd’s family. Like many black families before them, they find themselves in the spotlight for reasons that every parent, sibling, and spouse dreads. While his death has catalyzed a symbolic call to action, he was not a symbol to his loved ones—he was a father, brother, and son. I can only pray that they find the “peace that passes understanding.”

In the wake of Floyd’s death, Americans and people around the world are experiencing shock, grief, outrage—a set of emotions that too often are repeated. If the past is a guide, these feelings will fade and we will return to our lives. But something tells me—not this time. Floyd’s horrific death should be enough to finally move us to positive action.

Perhaps this is like the moment in 1955 when Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus. Or perhaps this is like that fateful Sunday in September 1963, quite personal to me, when a bomb in a Birmingham church killed four girls from my neighborhood and shook our nation to its core. Some six decades later, perhaps all of us—regardless of skin color—are, to quote Mississippi sharecropper and civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, “sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

Our country has often moved forward and been made better through peaceful protests. But our cities must stop burning. Innocent people, including many minority and immigrant business owners, have watched their livelihoods go up in smoke. There is no excuse for looting and criminality, and offenders must be stopped. But a call for calm is not enough, either. This time, we must remain vigilant and maintain our determination to make a difference. Beyond justice for Floyd, systemic change is necessary to make our institutions more just.

Yet all the structural reforms in the world are insufficient to remove the shadow hanging over every incident of this kind. To be black is to be forced to overcome implicit and explicit reactions to the color of your skin. It might be dismissiveness or underestimation or presumption of how you think. In some circumstances, it might be fear. We encounter these responses even among decent people who sincerely do not want to react that way.

The good news is that these emotions can be overcome—and often are—with the respect that builds when people know one another as human beings—as friends, neighbors, co-workers, and teammates. Still, we simply must acknowledge that society is not colorblind and probably never will be. Progress comes when people treat one another with respect, as if we were colorblind. Unless and until we are honest that race is still an anchor around our country’s neck, that shadow will never be lifted.

Our country has a birth defect: Africans and Europeans came to this country together—but one group was in chains. In time, the very Constitution that counted slaves as three-fifths of a man became a powerful tool in affording the descendants of slaves their basic rights. That work has been long and difficult, but it has made a difference. We are better than we were.

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