

Paving The Way To Hell

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We often hear the phrase that the path to hell is paved with good intentions. The post-World War II years were met with what sociologists called “urban flight”. People like my parents left the cities to move out to the suburbs and the country. As the inner cities deteriorated, White city dwellers, African-Americans, and various ethnic groups who could afford it, left not only the inner city but also departed the business districts. The urban flight resulted in acceleration of urban decay. With the shrinking tax base, there was less money available for police, fire protection, and the infrastructure that made city living desirable.

The matrix began to change with Lyndon Johnson’s short-lived War on Poverty. Americans quickly discovered that we could not afford to wage war in Southeast Asia, address the crime and poverty problem in our cities left bereft of tax-paying citizens, and put a man on the moon all at the same time; something had to give way.

Once the war in Vietnam was over, Richard Nixon and his successors began to address the demands of big city mayors and governors in states whose cities were left charred and ruined from the riots of the 1960s.

Civil rights leaders rightly demanded that no one would live in the big cities unless they were not merely rebuilt, but also protected from dangerous criminals. Mayor Rudy Giuliani, now much discredited, was elected and served successfully on a pro-law-enforcement campaign. Hiring police and building excellent fire protection was appealing to those who thought about moving back into the cities, but most of all to those poor and disenfranchised who lived there. The rebuilding of the American city, which began in earnest in the 1980s, could not have occurred without a robust police force, competent fire protection, and a serious effort at rebuilding the infrastructure. These changes may not have been directed specifically to help African-Americans or other minorities, but that was the practical effect of the reforms.

By the 1990s, the cities were becoming attractive again. “Gentrification” was the new term of art. Burned out ghettos were beginning to come back, job zones were created in the big cities, and the White flight was reversed. It became trendy for Whites and Blacks to live together in heterogenous neighborhoods throughout New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and the other former carcasses of decay that were such a blight on the American dream.

It does not take a lot of historical perspective to realize that the current attack on police, fire protection and inner-city services are likely to create another urban flight. African-Americans, minorities and Whites who can get out of cities will do that. Already, the migration from places like New York City is alarming those who are responsible for collecting taxes and financing municipal services.

Those who claim to be advancing the civil rights of the underprivileged are stripping the inner cities of all the advances which they have made in the last 30 years. Once again, our cities risk a return to the bad old days when they were havens of crime and decay facing the unhappy prospect of becoming derelict. Nobody is going to want to live in a place bereft of police protection and a safe environment to walk the streets and raise kids.

Those who believe that the triumph of political ideology is more important than living in a safe and sane environment may be victorious temporarily, but they will arouse the sleeping giant of what was once called the "silent majority". As Americans flee the cities, there will be a backlash against those whose self-serving destructive ideology surmount fundamental American values. Democracy can only exist in circumstances where citizens feel that it is safe to express heterogenous ideology without fear of reprisal or riots. When downtown merchants must board up their stores and fear for their own lives, civilization is doomed.

At one time, Harlem, New York, roughly defined as 125th Street, was a mixed neighborhood. My parents talked about dancing at the Apollo Theater, a hangout for Blacks and Whites alike. Unfortunately, in the late '30s and during the war years, pogroms, riots, drove the Jewish population out of Harlem, creating an impoverished ghetto that would last for decades. My father mourned the destruction of the community where he and his brothers grew up. The Rieders family had moved to Washington Heights, at the top of Broadway, simply to live in a safe and secure abode.

Thanks to the incredible influence of Columbia University, Morningside Heights spread its tentacles towards 125th Street in Harlem. With Columbia came money and political savvy. By the time my daughter was in graduate school at Columbia, the Harlem neighborhood had returned to much of its prior vitality as it existed before World War II.

One can only wonder what will happen in the future to communities like Harlem and their hard-fought success, when residents must live in fear of imminent destruction. We know the answer, because it has happened previously. When neighborhoods and communities become unsafe, patrolled not by police but by vandals and criminals, even those with the most meager means will flee to safety.

The lesson for all of America, witnessing what someday will be called "The COVID -19 Meltdown", is that destruction will not empower or rebuild minority communities. Only hard work, dedication and loyalty to American principles of freedom and progress will assure that our American cities restore and maintain their former greatness.

*Clifford A. Rieders, Esquire
Rieders, Travis, Humphrey,
Waters & Dohrmann
161 West Third Street
Williamsport, PA 17701
(570) 323-8711 (telephone)
(570) 323-4192 (facsimile)*

Cliff Rieders is a Board-Certified Trial Advocate in Williamsport, is Past President of the Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers Association and a past member of the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority. None of the opinions expressed necessarily represent the views of these organizations.