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Rodney King's plea measures his lasting meaning

By Jesse Washington

Twenty years later, Rodney King's simple yet profound question still lingers, from the street where Trayvon Martin died all the way to the White House:

"Can we all get along?"

Spoken as fires of rage and frustration wrecked huge swaths of Los Angeles, the plea distilled centuries of racial strife into a challenge - and a goal. Today, the various answers to his question measure the lasting significance of King, who died in California June 17 after he was found at the bottom of his swimming pool. He was 47.

"It was a critical question at a moment of crisis that forged our human bonds with one another," said Georgetown professor Michael Eric Dyson. "It grew up out of the hope and the desire, especially of people of color, to see this nation come together."

And it came from an unemployed construction worker who, through an accident of history, now stands among the unforgettable names of America's racial journey - names like Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, and even larger figures who died too young.

The nation first saw King as a black man curled up on the ground by his car, being beaten by four white police officers. On parole for a robbery conviction, he had been drinking, then speeding, and had refused to pull over. Police finally pulled King from his car, then struck him more than 50 times with batons and boots.

One of King's legacies is that he raised the curtain on the video age: If a man had not stepped outside of his home and videotaped the beating, King would have been lost to history.

"The biggest impact was that it was actually on tape," said Dom Giordano, a talk radio host in Philadelphia. "It was so rare, except for something like Bull Connor, to have this type of footage."

King became an enduring symbol of police brutality - proof positive, to many people, that the dogs and fire hoses loosed by Connor, the Birmingham police chief, on civil rights marchers in 1960s Alabama had merely been updated, not eliminated.

"He represented the anti-police brutality and anti-racial profiling movement of our time," the Rev. Al Sharpton said June 17.

The videotape was the central piece of evidence at the four officers' trial, which became a classic piece of modern racial drama. Did King bring the beating on himself by resisting arrest, symbolizing that black people blame racism for the consequences of their own actions? Or was there an ingrained police culture of violence against black people, backed by a system designed for black people to lose?

There were no blacks on the jury in the predominantly white suburb of Simi Valley, Calif. After the police were acquitted - one got a mistrial - Los Angeles was engulfed in a fiery uprising that lasted three days, killed 55 people and injured more than 2,000.

"There was the articulation of a pent-up rage that had not been heard before," Dyson said. "A sense that we do count, a sense that you're going to pay attention to us."

Yet many viewed it as a spasm of lawless, pointless self-destruction, with much of the damage done to black areas. The aftermath highlighted a fundamental division in the way justice, and progress, is often viewed through the lens of race.

"I don't think white America said, now we have to make changes because they rioted," said Giordano. Instead, he sees change as a result of people living, working and starting families with other ethnicities.

Can we all get along? Giordano says yes.

"What has changed is more the meat and potatoes, day to day things," he said. "For every instance like a Trayvon Martin, I do see things routinely that indicate that we are getting along, that we are moving past racial tensions."

A few weeks ago, Giordano had King on his show, which draws a largely conservative audience, to promote his new autobiography. Nobody called in to revisit the trial or to say that King deserved what happened to him.

"That's progress," Giordano said. "I think the audience would have rejected him 20 years ago."

But Michael Coard, a Philadelphia attorney and activist who has brought numerous police brutality charges against police, is not so hopeful.

"That videotape showed white America what black America already knew," he says. "But the sad part is, it showed what white America has been and still is in denial about."

Coard named several unnamed blacks who were killed by police in the past 20 years - Amadou Diallo, Elanor Bumpurs, Sean Bell, and others. "Nothing has changed," he said.

But what about the election of the first black president? "Barack Obama had to get Secret Service protection before any other candidate," Coard responded. "He got four times the amount of death threats as George Bush. Why is that?"

"The video and the verdict grabbed America by the throat and said, what are you going to do about this?" Coard said. "And the answer was, not a damn thing."

Los Angeles' police department certainly changed. Years of investigations revealed corruption and "a significant number of officers in the LAPD who repetitively use excessive force," according to a federal government report. The Justice Department forced the LAPD to implement reforms.

"Some good came out of a very tragic situation. There have been positive changes," said Loyola Law School professor Laurie Levenson, a former federal prosecutor who attended the officers' trials.

"(King) himself was never viewed as a hero. But what happened in that case changed the LAPD and Los Angeles forever.

And what about the nation? Did it heed King's challenge?

"The jury is still out," said Dyson.

He places King's question alongside some of the seminal black expressions of the past century, from W.E.B. DuBois identifying "the problem of the color line," to Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" and Malcolm X's "by any means necessary."



The keynote speaker for the Juneteenth celebration was NC NAACP President Dr. William Barber talking about "The Eradication of Modern-Day Forms of Bondage."

NC NAACP speaks out for man in prison in Georgia

WILSON (AP) - North Carolina leaders of the NAACP spoke out June 15 in support of a Wilson man who they say was protecting himself and his son when he shot and killed a man outside his home in Georgia in 2005.

At a news conference on the courthouse steps in Wilson, the leaders of the state chapter and the Wilson chapter of the NAACP said they believe the justice system is treating John McNeil differently than it does white people who defend their homes.

"The McNeil case ought to concern all of us -- black, white, Latino -- anybody concerned about justice," said the Rev. William Barber, president of the state chapter of the NAACP. "It's a prime example of the age old unequal justice in the court system."

The NAACP said Brian Epp was armed and had threatened McNeil's son just before the shooting. And McNeil has said he had little choice but to open fire when Epp charged at him with a knife during a December 2005 shouting match in Cobb County.

But the victim's knife was found in his pocket after the shooting, and prosecutors decided to charge McNeil with murder. He was convicted and sentenced to life in prison, a decision the Georgia Supreme Court later affirmed in a 6-1 ruling.

The lone dissent came from then-Justice Leah Ward Sears, who argued prosecutors failed to prove McNeil wasn't defending himself.

McNeil's wife, Anita, who's been rediagnosed with cancer, said June 15 that she and their two sons are devastated.

"John is incarcerated today because he chose to use his rights as a homeowner," she said.

An attorney has appealed McNeil's conviction and is seeking a new trial, his supporters said.

Cobb County District Attorney Pat Head, though, stands by the decision to charge McNeil. He told the Associated Press in May that the case is a reminder of the potential pitfalls of self-defense arguments.

"Just because someone hits you in the face doesn't mean you pull a .45 and shoot him in the head," he said. "It can be hard to prove it's self-defense because the jury puts themselves in the same footing as anybody else."

2 nursing homes opening in NC for veterans

RALEIGH (AP) - Two nursing homes will open in North Carolina in the next few months to serve veterans.

A local newspaper reported the North Carolina Division of Veterans Affairs is opening homes in Kinston and Black Mountain.

The skilled nursing homes each will be able to serve 100 elderly veterans.

Greg Hughes with the Durham VA Medical Center says he's glad for the additional spaces. The Durham VA Medical Center will supervise medical care at the home in Kinston.

The Ashville VA Medical Center will handle the new facility in Black Mountain.

Southern Baptists elect 1st black president Trying to Move Away from Support of Slavery and Segregation

By Travis Loller

NEW ORLEANS (AP) - At the end of the day June 20, the presidency of the Southern Baptist Convention will pass to an African-American pastor for the first time.

The nation's largest Protestant denomination voted June 19 to elect the Rev. Fred Luter Jr. to lead them, an important step for a denomination that was formed on the wrong side of slavery before the Civil War and had a reputation for supporting segregation and racism during much of the last century.

In a news conference after the vote, Luter said he doesn't think his election is some kind of token gesture.

"If we stop appointing African-Americans, Asians, Hispanics to leadership positions after this, we've failed," he said. "... I promise you I'm going to do all that I can to make sure this is not just a one-and-done deal."

Faced with declining membership, the SBC has been making efforts to appeal to a more diverse group of believers.

Some Southern Baptists also believe a proposal to adopt an optional alternative name, Great Commission Baptists, will bring in believers who have negative associations with the current name. The results of a vote on that proposal was to be announced June 20.

Luter was unopposed when he was elected by thousands of enthusiastic delegates June 19 at the SBC annual meeting in his hometown of New Orleans.

He spoke about the decline in SBC membership and his own efforts to grow his church, which included intensive outreach to men, and his concern that men in his inner-city neighborhood were not taking responsibility for their children.

He began to cry as he recalled growing up with a divorced mother and no father in the house, saying he asked God, "Let me be that role model to my son that I didn't have." And he recounted how his son followed him into ministry and asked Luter to be his best man at his wedding.

Luter described what he hopes to achieve for the convention, saying he has always had the ability to get along with everyone. He plans to use that skill to bring denominational leaders together to discuss how they can leave aside their differences and work together to spread the Gospel.

Pastor David Crosby of First Baptist New Orleans nominated Luter, calling him a "fire-breathing, miracle-working pastor" who "would likely be a candidate for sainthood if he were Catholic."

Crosby said the SBC needs Luter at the head of the table as it increasingly focuses on diversifying its membership.

"Many leaders are convinced this nomination is happening now by the provenance of God," he said.

Luter wiped tears from his eyes as he accepted the position. Two female ushers from the Franklin Avenue congregation embraced, swaying and weeping with joy.

"I think I'm just too overwhelmed by it right now to speak," said another member, Malva Marsalis.

A minister from Luter's church, Darren Martin, said the SBC's past support of slavery and segregation are well known, but Luter's election was "a true sign ... that change from within has really come. ... Christ is at the center of the SBC."

The proposal to adopt an alternative name was more controversial than Luter's election. The June 19 vote was too close to call by a show of hands so paper ballots were cast.

Those who supported the alternative name argued that "Southern Baptist" can be a turn-off to potential believers.

They said adopting "Great Commission Baptists" as an optional name would help missionaries and church planters to reach more people for Christ.

An online poll by the SBC's Lifeway Research of 2,000 Americans found that 44 percent said knowing a church was Southern Baptist would negatively affect their decision to visit or join.

Those who opposed the alternative said Southern Baptists should be proud of the denomination's name and reputation.

The "Great Commission" refers to Matthew 28:16-20, in which Jesus instructs his disciples at Galilee to go forth and make disciples of all nations.

Online:
Southern Baptist Convention Annual Meeting: <http://www.sbcannualmeeting.net/sbc12/default.asp>