

Without strong laws, instability can occur

■ **OUR OPINION:** A society with a history of justice will be healthier than one without

Many of us put a lot of trust in our city, state and national governments to enforce the rules and regulations we have decided to live by as a society.

Rules, or in this case, laws, are the accepted set of guidelines that a society adopts to keep the peace. In other words, we have law enforcement agencies to help keep cruel people from wreaking havoc on a law abiding citizenry, and a legal system that should punish them when they do.

That's all very well and good. So, what's the point?

The point is, what would we have if we didn't have law and order?

Well, we would have a lack of law, or lawlessness (anarchy for social scientists), of course. Many would argue that our society already shows a hefty level of disrespect for authority.

This great nation is experiencing a severe crime and punishment crisis, but at least not all of us are running around shooting and clubbing each other in the streets. If and when it ever got that bad, the governor would call in the National Guard, or the president would send in troops to help bring the situation under control. To that end, our Constitution and Bill of Rights give us guarantees as to what extent federal troops can intervene in our civilian affairs — whether those affairs are civil or not.

But, what are people to do when the government itself is a perpetrator of unrest?

For the most part, Americans are flabbergasted by societies that fail to "keep the peace" within their own borders. We stand back and say "why doesn't their government just step in

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and stop the killing, rioting, pillaging?”

Next to the bloodshed in Bosnia and numerous other wars that dot the globe, the killing spree that bloodied the nation of Rwanda last year stands out as one of the more atrocious, more recent examples of a society gone berserk.

The event that touched off Rwanda's anarchy is largely believed to be the still-unexplained airplane crash that took the life of Rwanda's president 18 months ago. The ensuing killings, led by roving bands of Hutu militia members, civilians and others with ties to the government, took the lives of some 500,000 to one million Tutsis and Hutus.

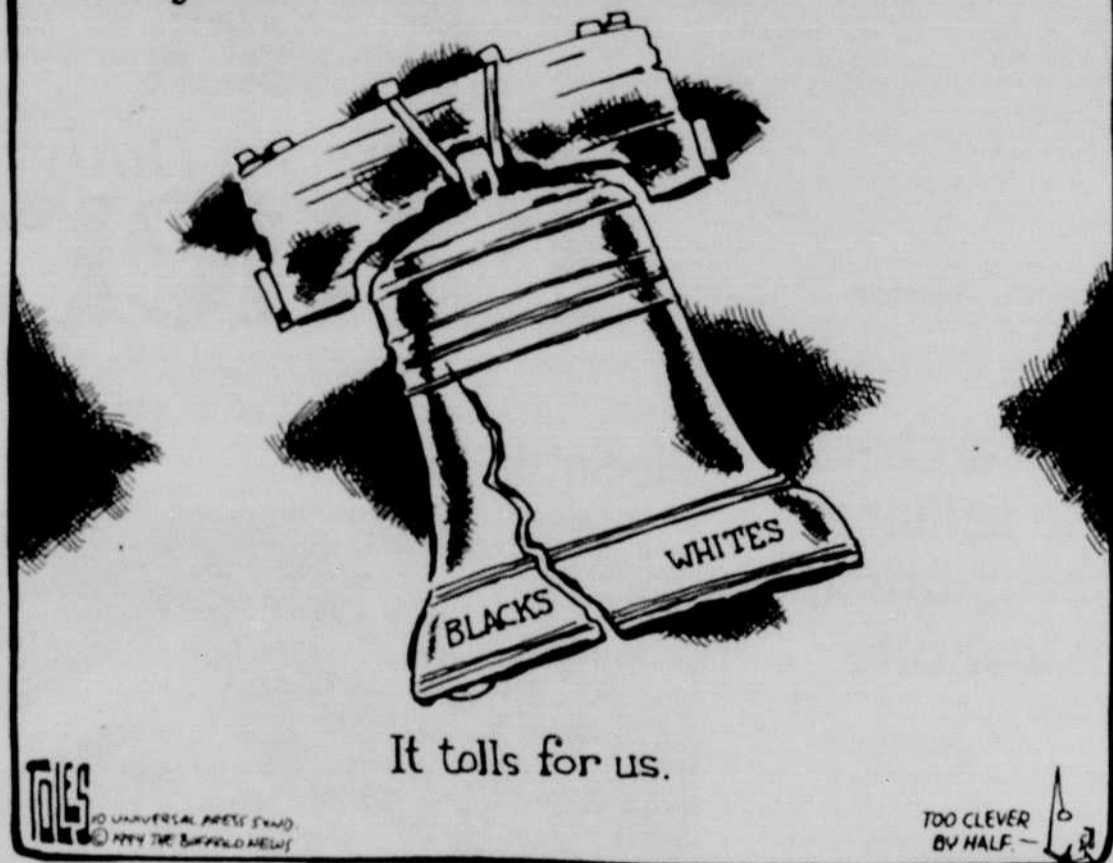
It turns out the war was probably a complete "inside job," a deliberate campaign of genocide implemented by a group of Hutu government officials and their associates who are now in exile in Kenya.

The bad news? These ring-leaders are under the protection of Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi, a man whose country itself is beset with rising crime, corruption and political discrepancies.

Moi says he will continue to provide sanctuary to the leaders until the people responsible for the death of Kenya's president are caught.

In the meantime, we hope Kenya, Rwanda and other countries can somehow find their own formulas for lasting stability and peace.

Murray & Herrnstein's 'The Bell Curve'



Verdict forces us to confront our demons

I never expected the verdict to have such an impact on me.

I paid as little attention as possible to the Trial of the Century. I didn't argue DNA or question the sincerity and veracity of the witnesses. I just didn't care.

But when I caught a cold and was laid up on the couch with only daytime TV to keep me company, I tuned in to what I thought would be soaps and cheesy talk shows and instead caught Marcia Clark's soliloquy of a closing argument.

I should probably clarify here.

While I hadn't wrapped myself up in the specifics of the trial, I was aware of and amazed by the key issues the trial had dredged up: domestic violence, racism, our dubious justice system, media manipulation, etc.

It seemed every pertinent social issue was there. And of course I had an opinion. I thought O.J. was guilty.

And when the jury came back with a verdict after four hours, I figured it had agreed with me. I sat in front of the television, as did 80 percent of people in the United States, and listened to the court clerk announce that the jury had *not* agreed with me (nor with a majority of white America) after all.

And I felt sick. Not the horrified, hopeless, punch-in-the-face sick I felt when a jury found four white L.A.P.D. cops not guilty of beating Rodney King. More of a deep-sigh, I-know-my-truth-to-be-self-evident kind of sick.

And of course, being a journalist/media whore, I started looking for the fresh angle from which I would write my commentary.

At first I thought about writing about how justice is for sale in this country. But that was too obvious.

Money can buy anything; that is a basic tenet of our capitalist society. The O.J. verdict was just a giant affirmation of that system.

Then I decided to write about our ailing jury system, using the O.J. and King cases as evidence that the system doesn't work.

My commentary would criticize the jury system, not to mention the jury itself, and call for a professional jury: a tribunal or some group of persons who could pass reasonable, logical, well-informed judgment on our nation's accused.

While pondering my jurisprudence utopia — which I later concluded to be both elitist and racist — it occurred to me that I was one of them: The disdainful-looking white people who heartily disapproved of the verdict, the self-righteous masses whom the legal system had wronged.

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I found myself on one side of this great racial divide, and it isn't the side I'm used to being on.

But according to the media, I was just following the color line.

Newscast after newscast cut back and forth showing first the elated black people contrasted with the dismayed whites. (You had to be either black or white to be shown. Journalists did not interview those people who do not qualify as one or the other.)

After watching a few of these newscasts, the full force of their message, the magnitude of the racial divide in this country revealed itself to me like a kick in the stomach.

I live in this country; I grew up in L.A. But I have a different perception of reality than a large chunk of black people. And this divide does not speak solely to class.

A black friend of mine who grew up in the same neighborhood as I, who seemingly had a similar upbringing, saw this case in an entirely different light. This woman and I looked at the same picture and saw two *drastically* different images.

And how I evaluate and judge this trial and O.J.'s guilt is largely a product of my white, middle-class upbringing.

Yes, I was certain he was guilty, but where do I get off assuming that I could see some absolute truth? I cannot.

I cannot suppose to understand the black experience in America, just as I cannot pretend to understand the reasons why a jury acquitted a man whom I saw as plainly guilty.

I have no answers here, no condemnations or recommendations. But at this point I keep hearing people say they want to put this whole, messy, drawn-out ordeal behind them. "It's time to move on."

And that is wrong.

The drama of the trial, the part we paid attention to, *that* was the frivolous part.

The verdict is as much a judgment on us as it is on O.J. or the justice system. We've been given a blindingly clear view of the racial divide in our country. If we don't heed that lesson, we are all guilty.

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