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# OPINION

## America Stands at a Crossroads

Sharp divisions are reflections of our times

BY REV. JESSE L. JACKSON SR.

America stands at a crossroads.

We can take the high road toward equal access to high quality public education, reaffirm our commitment to democratically elected public officials, end the failed war on drugs, recommit to the right of workers to bargain for better conditions, lower our dreadful rate of hyper-incarceration and implement the affordable care act. Or we can travel in the opposite direction and move the nation away from equal opportunity and justice.

One reason our political bodies are so sharply divided is over this question of justice. Some Americans seem to believe that we have done enough to achieve justice. Others understand that the struggle for justice and equality is a continuing American project that requires patience and perseverance.

There are some disturbing trends. A

decade ago there were 40 million uninsured people. Today the number is closer to 50 million. There is greater income inequality and more poverty.

Average Americans have lost trillions of dollars in family wealth - largely the result of unregulated real estate markets. We have not yet regulated exotic Wall Street investments like derivatives. Our incarceration rate continues to grow; we imprison more people than any other developed nation in the world, per capita, while drugs are more plentiful and lower priced than they were a decade ago.

Fewer boys are finishing college and the rate at which we produce engineers is dropping. We rank lower in health outcomes than much poorer nations. These trends must be addressed and reversed if we are to continue to prosper and lead the world.

We seem fatigued with questions of racial and ethnic justice. Affirmative action is under attack, again. Racial profiling, abuse of prosecutorial discretion, excessive use of police force, runaway juries, disparate sentencing and selective prosecution are generally accepted as normal, not exceptional.

While we celebrate the promise of the Lillie Ledbetter Act, too much race discrimination lurks in our work places. Instead of looking at our immigrant population as a strength to be cultivated, we ignore, or pander to them.

Our civil rights apparatus is fraying. There is a trend away from joining and supporting organizations - churches, unions, and civil rights organizations. Rugged individualism is no substitute for institutional voices for justice and equality.

Noah built an ark to withstand the flood. Those who could swim died outside the ark. Those who could not swim survived inside the ark. Good swimmers can't swim 40 days and 40 nights. We need strong institutional bulwarks to protect us from exclusion and prejudice.

Perhaps the most disturbing trend is away from the universal franchise. The right to vote secures every other right. We are encountering stiff headwinds that threaten to undermine democracy itself. Despite "Citizens United," money is not speech. Our elections should not be bought and sold like vacation homes and yachts. Latter day, politically driven obstacles - voter suppression - is un-American. There

is no political goal that justifies dishonest schemes to disenfranchise American citizens.

America is not a race, or a religion, color or language. America is built on a set of noble, but fragile premises: All men are created equal; one person-one vote; majority rule. It is these principles that make the American experiment work - undoing them could unravel the fabric of the nation.

Yet, I remain optimistic. Our union has been in the process of perfecting itself throughout its entire existence. America has been a laboratory experiment in justice and equality.

The enslaved never adjusted to being considered less than human. Women never adjusted to second-class citizenship. Workers refused to acquiesce to exploitation. Seniors refused to accept the indignity of poverty after a life of industry. Young people refused to be seen and not heard. That is the genius of the American experiment - we become a better, stronger nation when we insist that the nation live with its conscience.

Rev. Jesse Jackson Sr. is president and chief executive officer of the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition.

## A Path for Those Who Live in the Shadows

Our strength comes from our diversity

BY MARI CASTELLANOS

President Obama has just released his administration's blueprint for immigration reform. It is notable that this is one of the first acts of his second term in office.

Though some may ascribe political motivation, the President will lay out a pathway for justice, a way for those who have lived in the shadows to come out into the light. This is not just politics; this is doing what is right.

The United States is a multi-racial, multi-cultural country. The strength of the nation comes from diversity and unity. We who are many, who come from many cultures, choose to be one people, devoted to shared principles and committed

to the wellbeing of all.

For over a decade, lawmakers and citizens alike have recognized the presence among us of newcomers from many lands, who have journeyed, like so many before them, fleeing wars and poverty, and seeking work and safety.

Men and women cross barren deserts on foot under cover of darkness. As we increased surveillance in areas close to towns, the pilgrims ventured farther into the desert where many lose their lives. We erected three layers of wall, crowned by barbwire.

Still the migrants came. They fled poverty and violence. Many perished trying. Those who made it across told horrible stories of wars and violence, as Mexican law enforcement battled the drug traffic.

Many businesses were happy to welcome these new laborers. From farms to meatpacking plants, to restaurant kitchens, they were welcomed and often paid

less than minimum wage.

Almost all work at least two jobs to make ends meet. They are human shadows silently walking in the light of dawn and in the moonlight. All fear "la migra", the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) police who raid factories, taking away those lacking proper papers and sometimes leaving behind terrified children, who don't know where their parents are.

During hard times, even tender-hearted people can get tough. Perhaps the economic downturn of the past few years fueled it. Immigrants through many states suddenly had to fear, not only "la migra", but law enforcement agents from states and municipalities who had passed their own immigration laws. In at least one infamous case, they had to endure terrible hardship and humiliation. Immigrants fled once more.

The Latino community mobilized, and leaders denounced the inhuman condi-

tions of the INS detention centers and other facilities where the undocumented were held. Religious leaders of all faiths condemned the treatment of immigrants.

President Obama seems to have heard the cry of the poor, the undocumented immigrant women, men and children who want to remain a family, an American family. The President has introduced his plan for immigration reform. A bi-partisan group of senators have produced a plan as well.

In the Nation's Capital, where Ethiopian and Salvadoran faces abound, where people from the entire world visit to behold the experience that is America, the President and the Congress must find a way to incorporate the undocumented to the American story, a story of resilience and perseverance, a story of freedom and grace.

Mari Castellanos is the policy advocate for domestic issues with the United Church of Christ.

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