

## OPINION

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# America is Literally Violently Ill

## MLK said we need a revolution of values

BY DAVE RAGLAND WITH MATT MEYER AND NATALIE JEFFERS

2015 was a year of exceptionally overt police violence against black folk and tragic mass shootings. A common response to these events has been that they are the result of “sick” individuals. Many conservatives have suggested that the shooters were mentally ill: that the problem was a proliferation of bad people, not a proliferation of guns. When, however, the murderers happen to be people “of color,” the narrative often changes to one of terrorism and extremism (though the NRA position remains consistently pro-gun, even defending the rights of the San Bernadino terrorists to acquire their weaponry).

In fact, according to the Department of Health and Human Services, just 3.5 percent of violent acts are attributable to mental illness. And in fact, police have frequently simply treated nonviolent mental illness as a capital offense requiring instant lethal force.

But what about inciting people to violence? We should not fail to recognize the systemic interplay between race, class, NRA lobbying, and gun-related deaths. The myth of black criminality is conveniently used to replace an institutional analysis of what is wrong with our country. These myths, both for police and for the majority of Americans, justify summary executions, the refusal of police to acknowledge the

wrong-doings of fellow officers, and the courts’ general unwillingness to hold individual officers accountable, opting instead to prop up a system of cover-up, delay, and denial. The rare exceptions boldly highlight the rule.

America is literally violently ill. This society is feverish on the valorization of violence. Victims of violence – speaking out and demanding accountability for racism (such as in Charleston or Ferguson), or regarding violent sexism (as in Planned Parenthood) – are blamed as the cause. This

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‘blame culture’ is a symptom of America’s frankly sick relationship to violence.

In order for healing to occur, we must trace our disease back to its sources, which include: The slave-owning colonies that revolted against the British created a “democracy” for whites only. Since America’s founding, whites have used widespread violence against blacks, indigenous popu-

lations, and women to gain free labor and land. Civil Rights law professor Michelle Alexander chronicles the continuation of slavery from slave patrols to our current prison system, which disproportionately incarcerates blacks and Latinos. It seems our denial of the past leads us to denial of the present crisis.

Without facing our shared history frankly, including greater attempts to make amends, we cannot expect anything different from our future. To be clear, the authors do not support any violence. Having

It is no coincidence that this year of violence and fear was also marked by a huge increase in gun sales, stoked by politicians who suggest that survival of the American status quo is dependent on being armed against black, brown, immigrant, Muslim, and other “categories” that engender fear from impressionable white Americans. Yes, caution is important, but if we went by the statistics, perhaps we would disband all sports, or emasculate all men—they are the rapists and molesters of little girls, after all. But in America, we value each individual—we don’t judge them by what “race,” religion, class or other category into which they were born.

While many Americans try to protect some tiny bit of existential comfort gained in part from injustice, countless others are humiliated, discriminated against, jailed and killed through violent policing and the consequences of being born the wrong race and class. We are all, however, born into a systemic culture of silence and denial, trained to overlook how – from the beginning – militarization has mixed with money and racial matters to build this world-class empire.

America is ill, and the cause is the ingrained violence that comes from racism, materialism, sexism, economic injustice and beyond. We must, as a nation, cure this illness before it becomes terminal. In Dr. Martin Luther King’s 1967 speech, he urged that America needed “a radical revolution of values” – exhorting us to move

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# Natalie Cole: Still Unforgettable

## A model for redemption and a legacy in her own right

by Marc H. Morial

Natalie Cole was an accomplished product of her deep-rooted musical heritage. A chart topping R&B crooner in the 70s, Cole went on to even greater popularity and accolade with her smooth transition to jazz and pop music standards—successfully reinterpreting American classics and singing the tunes that once made her father an international recording star.

Cole’s budding music career began at the tender age of six, singing on a Christmas album with her father Nat “King” Cole. Born in 1950, Cole grew up surrounded



by music and music royalty. Her father was already a rising music star and renowned jazz pianist. Her mother, Maria Cole, was a one-time performer with the Duke Ellington Orchestra. Cole once said that her father—who died of lung cancer in 1965 when Cole was 15-years-old—had been everything to her, and that was more than evident in the turn her ever-evolving career would take; reuniting her voice with her father’s through the miracle of technology.

Cole got her start in the music industry as an R&B singer. Her singing style was a marked departure from her father’s style. Where Nat was cool and refined, Natalie was warmer and soulful. The American music buying public went on to embrace Natalie Cole’s new sound and solo career. Ten years after the death of her famous father, and a brief detour from music that earned her a bachelor’s

degree in child psychology, Cole went on to win two of her nine career Grammys. She earned one for Best New Artist of 1975 and the other for Best Female R&B Vocal Performance for her up-beat, chart topper “This Will Be (An Everlasting Love).” Her career soared with four gold and two platinum records. Her first platinum album, “Unpredictable,” spawned another R&B hit and slow jam standard “I’ve Got Love on my Mind.” Her fourth album “Thankful,” which also went platinum, gave us the gift of another signature hit “Our Love.”

Despite her musical legacy and birthright, despite her own undeniable, autonomous claim to success, Cole suffered setbacks and faced demons that threatened to dismantle everything her beautiful voice had built.

Cole’s star dimmed in the 80s, much of it due to alcohol abuse and cocaine addiction. At the height of her troubles, her moth-

er filed a petition for conservatorship to handle Cole’s affairs when she no longer could. After spending time in rehab, her career came back to life in the late 80s with a cover of Bruce Springsteen’s “Pink Cadillac” and the soaring ballad “I Live for Your Love.” It was in 1991 that Cole would go on to achieve her greatest success with an album that was as much a nod to the past as it was an acknowledgement of the future of music and its capacity. Cole reunited with her father’s voice and paid tribute to him with new arrangements of songs once made famous by Nat “King” Cole on the album “Unforgettable...With Love.” The album, complete with a technologically assisted father-daughter duet of “Unforgettable” 25 years after his death, earned Cole six Grammys, including Song of the Year, Record of the Year and Album of the Year, and the album sold 14 million copies worldwide.

In 2008, Cole announced that she had been diagnosed with hepatitis C, a liver disease spread through blood, which she blamed on her past intravenous drug use. Her growing health concerns never stopped Cole from working and creating that beautiful music that attracted so many fans.

But Cole was more than her voice and her many accomplishments in music, film and entertainment. In an interview with People Magazine, Cole is said to have described herself as “a walking testimony [that] you can have scars...you can go through turbulent times and still have victory in your life.”

Natalie Cole was a fighter, a model for redemption and legacy in her own right, whose influence and signature on America’s cultural landscape will remain unforgettable.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.