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a Better Future Now

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Opinion

Why I Went to Jail on October 5

Sometimes friends have to hold friends accountable. That’s why I got arrested outside the White House on Oct. 5. I was there with other civil rights and religious leaders to call on President Joe Biden to do more to protect voting rights that are under attack.

We know that President Biden supports voting rights. He has called anti-voting laws being passed by Republican state legislators the biggest threat to our democracy since the Civil War. We need him to act like he truly believes those words.

We need a federal voting rights law passed this year. More states are enacting voter suppression. They are abusing the redistricting process to rig future elections and give Republicans more power than they would win in a fair system. They want to shut Democrats out of power in 2022 and 2024. They want to stop progress that millions of Americans voted for when we put President Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris in the White House—and mobilized to elect Georgia Sens. Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff.

We have seen this before. When Black people and their allies won political power after the Civil War, white supremacists used violence and illegitimate power to reverse



Ben Jealous
People For the American Way

that progress. State-level voter suppression was a core tactic of Jim Crow. The solution then, and the solution today, is strong federal voting rights legislation that will override those state laws and prevent new ones from taking effect.

“They want to stop progress that millions of Americans voted for

The good news is that the legislation has been written. It has passed the House of Representatives and it has the support of every Democratic senator. If it gets to the White House, President Biden will sign it.

That bad news is that Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and his Republican colleagues are using Senate filibuster rules to keep voting rights from coming up for a vote. This is 2021, not 1921. President Biden and Senate Democrats cannot let McCo-

nnell have the final word on voting rights in this country.

In the 1960s, President Lyndon Johnson did not choose between civil rights and his anti-poverty agenda.

He knew the country needed both and he used his mastery of the Senate to get both passed. That’s what we need from President Biden, who has more experience in the Senate than any president since Johnson. The infrastructure bill is vitally important. So is the Build Back Better agenda. But we need the White House to devote the same level of urgency to the infrastructure of our democracy. President Biden must lead Senate Democrats in passing voting rights this year—and getting rid of the filibuster if it stands in the way.

We need strong, effective moral leadership both inside and outside the White House at this moment. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was a moral movement. It called on Americans to live up to their own ideals as well as to the promises in our founding documents. It brought the public pressure that compelled LBJ to use the powers of his office to pass civil rights and voting rights legislation.

I was proud to stand outside the White House with so many religious leaders: a

Catholic nun representing thousands of her sisters; a Jewish rabbi in whose organization’s office the original Voting Rights Act was drafted; Black Baptist and AME clergy taking their place in the Black church’s long legacy of working for justice. We were joined by representatives of secular social justice and voting rights organizations.

Rev. Timothy McDonald, who pastored in Martin Luther King’s church and who serves as the co-chair of People For the American Way, the organization I lead, led us in singing and prayer and brought powerful words of truth.

I choked up a bit with gratitude for their leadership, and with gratitude for all the members of the movement, including members of my own family, who risked their lives over the years to secure the right to vote for all Americans.

Before I was arrested and spent the night in jail, I delivered a message to President Biden: When the president of the League of Women Voters is willing to risk arrest, when pastors in Dr. King’s lineage are willing to risk arrest, when Catholic nuns are willing to risk arrest to call you to fulfill your promise to make voting rights a top priority, it is time to examine your moral conscience.

How Food Became the Perfect Beachhead for Gentrification

Everybody, it seems, welcomes the arrival of new restaurants, cafés, food trucks and farmers markets.

What could be the downside of fresh veggies, homemade empanadas and a pop-up restaurant specializing in banh mis?

But when they appear in unexpected places – think inner-city areas populated by immigrants – they’re often the first salvo in a broader effort to rebrand and remake the community. As a result, these neighborhoods can quickly become unaffordable and unrecognizable to long-time residents.

Stoking an appetite for gentrification

I live in San Diego, where I teach courses on urban and food geographies and conduct research on the relationship between food and ethnicity in urban contexts.

In recent years, I started to notice a pattern playing out in the city’s low-income neighborhoods that have traditionally lacked food options. More ethnic restaurants, street vendors, community gardens and farmers markets were cropping up. These, in turn, spurred growing numbers of white, affluent and college-ed-

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ucated people to venture into areas they had long avoided.

This observation inspired me to write a book, titled “The \$16 Taco,” about how

“White, affluent and college-educated people to venture into areas they had long avoided

food – including what’s seen as “ethnic,” “authentic” or “alternative” – often serves as a spearhead for gentrification.

Take City Heights, a large multi-ethnic San Diego neighborhood where successive waves of refugees from places as far away as Vietnam and Somalia have resettled. In 2016, a dusty vacant lot on the busiest boulevard was converted into an outdoor international marketplace called

Fair@44. There, food vendors gather in semi-permanent stalls to sell pupusas, lechon (roasted pig), single-sourced cold-brewed coffee, cupcakes and tamarind raspado (crushed ice) to neighborhood residents, along with tourists and visitors from other parts of the city.

A public-private partnership called the City Heights Community Development Corporation, together with several nonprofits, launched the initiative to increase “access to healthy and culturally-appropriate food” and serve as “a business incubator for local micro-entrepreneurs,” including immigrants and refugees who live in the neighborhood.

On paper, this all sounds great.

But just a few blocks outside the gates, informal street vendors – who have long sold goods such as fruit, tamales and ice cream to residents who can’t easily access supermarkets – now face heightened harassment. They’ve become casualties in a citywide crack-down on sidewalk vending spurred by complaints from business owners and residents in more affluent areas.

This isn’t just happening in San Diego. The same tensions

have been playing out in rapidly gentrifying areas like Los Angeles’ Boyle Heights neighborhood, Chicago’s Pilsen neighborhood, New York’s Queens borough and East Austin, Texas.

In all of these places, because “ethnic,” “authentic” and “exotic” foods are seen as cultural assets, they’ve become magnets for development.

Why food?

Cities and neighborhoods have long sought to attract educated and affluent residents – people whom sociologist Richard Florida dubbed “the creative class.” The thinking goes that these newcomers will spend their dollars and presumably contribute to economic growth and job creation.

Food, it seems, has become the perfect lure.

It’s uncontroversial and has broad appeal. It taps into the American Dream and appeals to the multicultural values of many educated, wealthy foodies. Small food businesses, with their relatively low cost of entry, have been a cornerstone of ethnic entrepreneurship in American cities.

Read the rest of this commentary at
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