

## One Step Back

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We've all heard the lament that at times it seems as though we are taking one step back for every two steps forward. It's a common situation when pursuing a goal, whether it be lofty or practical. Roadblocks pop up and we get frustrated. As long as we don't quit outright, we take a step back and move around the blockage. From this, we learn that persistence is often a most valuable asset.

Not long ago, I was having a conversation with a person who maintains a different socio-political perspective than I do and the comment was made with regard to the civil unrest that has permeated our evenings of late. The riots and looting represented one step back and are in direct opposition to protests seeking to take one step forward towards social justice. There was some logic, therefore, to the claims that the unrest was required in order to expose the injustice and move forward.

But was that the whole story?

I could see how, over the course of millennia, the saying had been played out again and again: sometimes with violence and sometimes more peaceably. And I could see how civilization had dealt with progress on the front of justice and equality. At one point in our global history, every society on the planet engaged in the practice of slavery and of bartering young girls for possessions such as cattle, sheep, and land. While many of us would like to think those days are gone, there are others who believe that slavery, in particular, still exists but in a different form. Positing that our capitalistic system has precipitated the practice of economic slavery.

Ultimately, though, returning to the old saying about stepping forward and backward, the most important question to ask is who it is who decides which way is forward and which way is backward? In my societal view, which is not always global and not always over millennia, but can be at times limited to our own national history, the first step forward was in declaring our independence from the British. The step forward included a violent step away from peace, the revolution, but it ultimately was a step forward. The next step forward included another step backward, the War Between the States. The outcome, however, was forward. The United States was the first nation

to outlaw slavery entirely. Others had outlawed importing and selling people, but did not require divestiture.

Despite that step forward, there was resistance and backward steps were small and less recognizable because they were less violent. The two largest losses occurred early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Immediately following the end of the War Between the States, the military and federal agencies were fully integrated. Some former slaves even found themselves sitting as congressmen. But in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an executive order was issued re-segregating the military. The resistance crept forward and justice slid backward. The second step backward was not a single step but a drifting movement along several fronts.

Our independence from England was a rejection of more than Britain. It was a rejection of a system in which too few people had too much power. The early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the creation of agency after agency that served to aggregate power back into the hands of fewer and fewer men. From the 17<sup>th</sup> amendment through the creation of the FBI to the Federal Department of Education and more recently, Homeland Security, more and more power has landed in Washington despite the ninth and tenth amendments. The raw power of expedience and a willingness in people to rely on others to solve problems was creating the same system we had rejected in 1776. Concurrently, the financial power of the elite and the organizational power of the political parties only further served to reverse the effect that the American Revolution had on distributing power among the masses, creating a society of personal freedom and self-determination . The power disseminated in 1789 was slowly collecting together again. These steps backward are steps towards an oligarchy with such power as has never been seen. But are they also steps toward even more injustice and inequality?

The answer is very probably, 'yes.' They may even result in a de facto monarchy or dictatorship should the newly powerful determine that public safety is more valuable than public freedom.

During the course of our history, injustice and inequality has waxed and waned, and we are certainly in a better condition than we were in 1772, yet remnants remain and are growing as the new oligarchy grows in stature. But is the injustice and inequality which we experience today based on race or economics? The position of

those protesting is that it is race-based. The position of the rioters is that it is an issue of economic slavery. The fact is that it is neither.

The inequities are the result of the collection of power into the hands of the few. Sometimes those few are of a particular race. Sometimes they are of a particular political party or ideology. Sometimes they are of a particular economic class.

The good news is that once we recognize that race and economics are only misperceptions of the real problem, individuals can evade inequality and injustice through education, persistence, and even through luck. The bad news is that a particular demographic cannot do the same. As the rioters burn the cities, the real intent is to wrest the power from one group to another, not to free those experiencing injustice. As one race bemoans the perceived privilege of another and seizes its own superiority also based in race, equality will not be achieved, but inequality will be shifted onto others. If either movement is successful, the power will remain aggregated. It will simply be in different hands.