

Symbolism Without Substance: From Jena to Ferguson

a guest editorial

by

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Remember the Jena Six? Some 15,000 to 20,000 protesters went to Jena, Louisiana in 2006 to demonstrate against injustice. After all the speeches, threats, marches, and church rallies, the people went home and nothing really changed. The prosecutors did their thing and the system rolled right over Mychal Bell and the other five defendants. It was business as usual. Did we learn anything from Jena that we can apply in Ferguson?

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What will take place in Ferguson when the protesters leave? What happened in Sanford, Florida when they left? What has happened in Staten Island since Eric Garner was choked to death and the marches have ended? The latest report says the prosecutor is still trying to “collect the dots,” much less connect the dots, and most have forgotten about Garner and his family and moved on to Ferguson, as it now becomes the crisis du jour for Black people.

Eleven years ago Kenneth Walker was shot and killed by a police officer on I-185 in Columbus, Georgia. He was in a car that was pulled over by mistake. He was on the ground, unarmed, when a police officer shot him twice in the head. After protesters and marchers went home, the officer was acquitted.

There are many instances of Black men killed by police with impunity. So what’s my point? Well, as I watched the church services and listened to the speeches in Ferguson, I eagerly awaited the speakers’ solutions. I could have missed it, but I never heard a solution that centered on economics. I heard the obligatory voting solution, in light of an embarrassing 12% turnout among Black voters, but an “I Voted!” sticker will not stop a policeman’s bullet, and voting alone will not change our condition in this nation.

I also heard the praying solution, and I do believe that prayer changes things. However, I am suggesting that the folks in Ferguson and all across this country not only pray but fast as well. That combination will definitely create change.

Be clear now; I am not talking about giving up food for a period of time. The kind of fasting I am suggesting is a “product fast,” which does require doing without and less buying; but isn’t the cause worth it? Maybe the “leaders” who came to Ferguson were afraid to call for a product fast because they could lose a check or a contract or an endorsement or their status among corporate giants. Capitalism can tolerate marches that call for voting and prayer, but it has a great deal of angst when a decline in consumption and sales occurs.

“Black-Out” Days and other shotgun approaches are nice gestures but have no overall affect; they are simply more symbolism without substance. They make you feel good but won’t cause anyone to change. Folks just go out the next day and buy what they want.

A product fast is quite different. For instance, Black folks consume a lot of soft drinks, gym shoes, liquor, fast foods, and other items we don’t think we can do without. Just stop buying some of these products until corporate CEO’s tell the politicians who would tell the governors who would tell the mayors and prosecutors who would tell the police chiefs who would tell their officers to stop violating our rights. You better believe their voices will be heard.

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Money runs politics, and when campaign donors are against something they will get results from the politicians they support, especially when their bottom-line is adversely affected. For example, can you imagine Starbucks CEO, Howard Schultz, Coca Cola CEO, Muhtar Kent, Pepsi Cola CEO, Indra Nooyi, NBA Commissioner, Adam Silver, Nike CEO, Mark Parker, McDonald's CEO, Donald Thompson, Diageo Liquor's CEO, Ivan Menezes, and even Anheuser Busch's CEO, Thomas Santel, standing before national media and calling for an end to injustices against Black people? Nothing personal against these companies; it's just as they say in war, "collateral damage." But the damage would stop when the folks who run this country speak out.

Al, Jesse, and others have been marching for decades, and we got Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Sean Bell, Oscar Grant, Timothy Thomas, Nathaniel Jones, Kenneth Walker, Patrick Dorismond, Amadou Diallo, John Crawford, Ezell Ford, and nameless others.

Stop the insanity of doing the same thing and hoping for different results. We need leaders who are unafraid to call for economic solutions, not leaders who will hurt you if you get between them and a news camera or microphone. Get the folks who are really in charge of this country to speak out, and we will see a positive change. Start your local Prayer and Fasting campaign now; and use the money you save to build businesses, create jobs, and recreate real Black communities.



James E. Clingman is a writer on economic empowerment for Black people. His weekly syndicated newspaper column, *Blackonomics*, is featured in hundreds of newspapers, magazines, and newsletters. He has written six books, the latest of which is *Black Empowerment with an Attitude*, and has been the featured speaker for numerous organizations, schools, churches, and events across the United States. Former Editor of the *Cincinnati Herald* newspaper, Clingman is the founder of the Greater Cincinnati African American Chamber of Commerce, and has been instrumental in establishing several other Chambers of Commerce around the U.S., as he continues to promote economic freedom for African Americans. He was an Adjunct Professor at the University of Cincinnati for twelve years, where he taught Black Entrepreneurship and the History of the Black Church. He has received many awards for his journalistic work, including the prestigious Black Press of

America's 2008 Black Press Champion Award, from the National Newspaper Publishers Association and Foundation. Clingman was named a History Maker in 2005, the list of which is now in the Library of Congress, the largest library in the world (with millions of books, recordings, photographs, maps and manuscripts in its collections) and oldest federal cultural institution in the U.S. that serves as the research arm of the U.S. Congress.

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