



August 12, 2020

Reflecting on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Response to Looting

After the last round of looting last weekend in Chicago, I believe even more that Black people are hurting, and that we need our mayor, governor and president to lead to address the heart of the matter. And, it is instructive to remember the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. after the 1967 riots in Detroit, when he said:

“A million words will be written and spoken to dissect the ghetto outbreaks, but for a perceptive and vivid expression of culpability I would submit two sentences written a century ago by Victor Hugo:

‘If the soul is left in darkness, sins will be committed. The guilty one is not he who commits the sin, but he who causes the darkness.’

“The policy makers of the white society have caused the darkness; they created discrimination; they created slums; they perpetuate unemployment, ignorance and poverty. It is incontestable and deplorable that Negroes have committed crimes; but they are derivative crimes. They are born of the greater crimes of the white society. When we ask Negroes to abide by the law, let us also declare that the white man does not abide by law in the ghettos. Day in and day out he violates welfare laws to deprive the poor of their meager allotments; he flagrantly violates building codes and regulations; his police make a mockery of law; he violates laws on equal employment and education and the provisions for civic services. The slums are the handiwork of a vicious system of the white society; Negroes live in them but do not make them any more than a prisoner makes a prison.”

It is sobering that we only need to update the words “Negroes” with “Blacks”, and “ghettos and slums” with “poor areas of Chicago”, to see that we must continue Dr. King’s work and fight.

At a press conference with the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus on June 2, 2020, I called for Governor Pritzker to sign an Executive Order that will free up spending to help rebuild African-American communities around the state in the wake of both the COVID-19 pandemic and looting that occurred in our communities.

There has not been a response to this request.

In addition, the mayor must do more than Invest South West – I don’t think the current plan will bring real meaningful change and growth on the West and South Sides, especially if we compare it to the impending development in Lincoln Yards.

Something is better than nothing, but we need bigger plans. To promote growth and minimize gentrification that could drive out current homeowners and businesses, smaller local businesses need to be a part of the development plan to develop and expand their own businesses and their own neighborhoods. We need to

help small hardware stores to grow. We need to help small convenience stores become larger grocery stores so people can wake up and walk out of the door and go shopping in their own neighborhoods. With the recent unrest, we need to realize that we are 'One Chicago', facing challenges and needing to rebuild. Our city cannot leave our struggling communities behind when this rebuilding occurs.

We also have to deal with the long-standing trauma that Black people are dealing with – the murders, drug overdoses, lack of housing and jobs, trying to figure out virtual home schooling when you are trying to get to work – there is so much more that needs to be addressed.

It is clear that Dr. King would be against the looting because it is wrong. I appreciate when people say why they are doing things, even if I don't agree with them. We must continue the work and the fight to create a system and a society that works for all.

The unrest and damage we have witnessed is like a natural disaster. We need Governor Pritzker to use as much of his executive power as he can to redirect state and federal funds to African-American communities hardest hit by looting and the COVID-19 pandemic. Building on the legacy of Dr. King, we need to spend and invest in areas that need the help the most, and those areas are African American communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'LSK', with a stylized flourish at the end.

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District