



Imagine if the shoe were on the other foot. Imagine if an all-black jury acquitted a black policeman, several black police officers, who had beaten a white person to a pulp -- fifty-six times in eighty-one seconds on videotape. Imagine what would be said then, and you could imagine a little bit, I believe, how African Americans feel today.

Now no justice can come from injustice. Racism breeds racism. Violence begets violence. So the image of white police officers beating a black man lying prone on the ground dissolves into the image of a black crowd dragging a white driver from a vehicle and kicking him to death. That violence only further exacerbates the tragedy of thousands of lives of those who live in an area wracked by drugs and gang violence and poverty and despair.

A state of emergency has been declared in South Central Los Angeles. All violence must be condemned. But the emergency is national. I've said before on this floor that slavery was our original sin and race remains our unresolved dilemma. That dilemma becomes a state of emergency when our carefully constructed system--governmental, judicial, social--break down in the face of the racial reality of our society. And the reality is, sad to say, it was easier for an all-white jury to put themselves in the shoes of a white police officer than to put themselves in the position of Rodney King. After all, the jury didn't live in the city. The jury has not been the target of ugly racial epithets or discrimination. The jury has never been pulled over by a policeman simply because they were black.

Once again, we're forced to confront the division in our society. In 1820, Thomas Jefferson described the emotions raging around the slavery issue as "a warning bell in the night." Our nation ignored that warning, and it cost us a civil war, which took the most American lives of any war we've ever had. In the 1960s, James Baldwin, in the midst of great racial advances in civil rights, said, "Beware The Fire Next Time."

In the last twenty-four hours, another warning bell has rung and other fires have burned. If we as a nation continue to ignore the racial reality of our times, tip-toe around it, demagogue it, or flee from it, we're going to pay an enormous price. What we need now, at this exact time, is hope and accountability. Accountability for the conduct of the police officers, and hope that the system of justice can work.

With that in mind, I call on the Attorney General to file criminal civil rights charges against the police officers. If a crime is done and the system doesn't work, that's what the civil rights laws are for.

Next, I call on President Bush to go to Los Angeles and to the community and meet with the residents to show his concern, if the residents believe it will be helpful.

Finally, all of us--all of us--have to fight for a political system that will guarantee that the voiceless will have a voice more powerful than violence.

Emment Till, an African American, young man, was killed in Mississippi one summer while visiting relatives because he said, "Bye, baby" to a white woman in a store. After she lost her son, Emmet Till's mother said, "When something happened to Negroes in the south, I said that's their business, not mine. Now I know how wrong I was. The murder of my son has shown me that what happens to any of us, anywhere in the world, had better be the business of all of us."

What happened in the courtroom in Simi Valley last night is the business of all of us. And we better start speaking candidly, and we'd better do something about the physical conditions in our cities and the absence of meaning in increasingly larger number of lives of citizens in our cities and the violence. Or the fire the next time is going to engulf all of us