## Speech by Senator Bill Bradley on the Rodney King Verdict

Thursday, April 30, 1992

Mr. President, what we have seen in the Simi Valley is a travesty of justice. The story is familiar. March 3, 1991 Rodney King speeding, driving while intoxicated, clearly wrong - was stopped by several police officers. He was kicked and hit with batons fifty-six times in eighty-one seconds. When one of the officers arrived at the hospital he bragged that he had "hit a homer." We were not just told this. We were not told about Rodney King being hit fifty-six times in eighty-one seconds; it was on video.

Just as we saw the missiles over Baghdad, or the murders in Tiananmen Square, so we saw the four police officers beating Rodney King. It was clear cut. Fifty-six times in eighty-one seconds. Fifty-six times in eighty-one seconds.

That's what the American people saw on video tape. Fifty-six times in eighty-one seconds and what did the defense do? The defense, on a thinly veiled attempt to play on racial stereotypes and racial fears, called King a bear, a bull and a gorilla. The worst, the worst of the dehumanizing descriptions of black Americans that have fueled hatred, fear and discrimination throughout our history.

The defense strategy was to deny what we all saw with our own eyes. In the words of today's Washington Post, "the defense lawyers portrayed their clients as a part of the thin blue line that stands between law abiding citizens and the jungle of Los Angeles."

Mr. President, jurors were asked to yield to this fear. Jurors were asked to deny Rodney King's humanity to deny they saw what they saw. It was the ultimate attempt at delusion. Delusion born in a society that doesn't talk honestly about race. The ultimate attempt at delusion born in a society that fails to see that its salvation lies in overcoming racism and not yielding to racism.

The verdict - not guilty. During the last twelve hours, I don't know about everyone else in this body, but I've had a few things happen to me. Let me share just a couple.

A young black male walked up to me today and said, "I hope you are going to say something. It could be me next time. It wasn't like they didn't have any evidence."

A non-black female says: "I guess I've become immune to such injustices, and that really saddens me. I have become so used to seeing the side I consider to be 'right' lose that events like this no longer seem to surprise me."

A young man interviewed on TV last night sayys: "If I went to a grocery store and stole a twinkie and I was on videotape, I'd be in jail for six months. But if I were beaten up on the street by four white cops, they'd get off. Where's the justice?"

A female black lawyer saids "People should not be afraid of the people who are supposed to protect them. But they are."

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 systom--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, Emment 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