

SNG-Chicago not a real melting pot-12-14-15

Chicago: The pot that never really melted

By Jim Nowlan

Most folks in my rural confines have always had wary, quizzical attitudes about Chicago, the big city on the lake with both its gleaming central city and seeming heart-of-darkness ghettos not much more than a stone's throw away to the south and west.

The city is going through an especially rough patch at the moment, buffeted by violence and charges of cop killings of blacks. A little history might provide useful context.

For a graduate in paper in history I wrote years ago about Illinois history, I came across a diary of a man from my hometown of Toulon who in 1870 went to Springfield on political business.

He wrote that while in the Capitol he sat in the House gallery and was regaled by debate on the floor over whether to cede Chicago to Wisconsin or Indiana.

The city was heavily Irish and German at the time. During World War I, however, blacks streamed into the city, often on the City of New Orleans, which came up the state through Carbondale, Champaign and Kankakee, to take factory jobs.

In the summer of 1919, a black boy swimming in the water off the Lake Michigan beach on the South Side of the city strayed across an invisible line that strictly separated whites and blacks.

A fight ensued and soon the city was engulfed in riots, primarily whites rampaging through the black neighborhood of Bronzeville. A week later, when the dust settled, 35 people, mostly blacks, were dead.

A commission was created to investigate, and the group's report, surprise, criticized police, prosecutors and courts for discriminating against blacks.

Irish Chicago mayor and political boss Richard J. Daley (1955-1977) never understood blacks and kept them hemmed into ghetto housing projects by expressways and other barriers.

In the 1960s, sociologist (later U.S. senator) Daniel Patrick Moynihan issued his still controversial report on *The Negro Family*, in which he wrote of “a tangle of pathologies” and the “crumbling” of the African-American family, with its ever higher rates of single-parent families.

Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs, also enacted in the mid-1960s, can probably be credited with helping move many blacks out of poverty and into the middle class.

But perversely, one might say, many upward bound blacks took advantage of their improved incomes and reduced housing segregation to move out of the ghettos.

So the remaining black enclaves in Chicago are today largely bereft of the positive role models, leadership skills and financial resources that the middle-class black business, governmental and professional elite took with them.

This leaves an incendiary mix of jobless, often alienated young black males who face a white-dominated Chicago Police Department that looks down on the often wild, violent, gang-prone, gun-toting young blacks who shoot up one another—and at the cops as well.

This witches brew bubbles up conflict that appears to include unnecessary use of force by the cops, even murder.

Clearly, rogue cops need to be ousted and prosecuted, and longstanding white Chicago cop antipathy toward young black punks must be diminished.

Savvy high school students in the Chicago Mikva Challenge, an inner-city leadership training program (I used to be on the board), say there is a severe lack of positive, sustained

interaction between police and youth. This has led to mistrust and a breakdown in communication between the two groups.

The students suggest, among several ideas, creating spaces for youth-police conversations, and that police should attend block parties, local school council meetings, ward nights and open houses/report card pick up at schools.

But the problems are more fundamental.

We must reduce births by clueless poor mothers, and reduce incarceration of young blacks, instead investing in community mental health programs.

We also need a huge national infrastructure program (read: good jobs) on the order of several Hoover dams combined with the building of the interstates.

We must also increase the minimum wage. Many young people make the rather rational calculation that a little income (generally from government programs) and no work are preferable to just a bit more income (from minimum wage jobs) and hard work.

We really need a revised social contract between the rich, who will have to pay largely for the infrastructure, mental health and education investments, and the poor, who will have to sign up for “tough love” public policies such as requiring long-acting birth control for many young mothers dependent on government programs.

More on a proposed new “social contract” in a subsequent column.