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Blue Reforms and Black Lives

In Los Angeles, young protestors are at odds with the black community's old guard.

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In Los Angeles, where recent, high-profile police killings have prompted renewed scrutiny of the LAPD, a public power struggle is playing out among black reformers. On one side are longstanding leaders with religious affiliations whose community organizing is often focused around their congregations. On the other side are younger, more progressive and secular activists affiliated with Black Lives Matter.

Both groups are trying to lobby the city's mayor, Eric Garcetti, on a broad range of municipal policies. And they are united in a belief that the LAPD kills too many people each year.

While they have incentives to work together on various shared goals, however, the groups are also in competition for relative influence in municipal politics. And they disagree sharply about tactics, as became clear last week after Garcetti participated in a community event held at Holman United Methodist Church.

When Is It Constitutional to Purge Black Jurors?

Hundreds of black Los Angeles residents showed up for the community forum, which Black Lives Matter disrupted. "Protesters stood and turned their backs to the mayor as he spoke," the Los Angeles Times reported. "As the meeting ended, the mayor was surrounded by a crowd of chanting activists as he tried to reach his car."

According to Pastor Kelvin Sauls, the Black Lives Matter protestors deprived the vast majority of black people in attendance from observing or participating in the forum. "There were about 800 people here, and 750 of those individuals were silenced because of the disrespect that they have brought to the sanctuary as well as to us as a congregation, misusing our hospitality," he told the newspaper, adding that Black Lives Matter activists would no longer be welcome at the church.

Najee Ali, the former gang member, longtime civic activist, LAPD critic, and director of the civil-rights group Project Islamic Hope, told a local TV station, "I saw with my own eyes Pastor

Sauls was physically threatened with violence in his own church. That's unacceptable for Black Lives Matter." On Garcetti's visit, he said, "We want to and need to hear from him, but unfortunately, Black Lives Matter ruined that opportunity." Accurate or not, those aren't statements that one prominent, black policing-reform activist makes about other such activists lightly.

A public power struggle is afoot.

Black Lives Matter told a different but not entirely inconsistent story. Here's the L.A. Times again:

Days after a tense confrontation with Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, members of the local chapter of Black Lives Matter accused the mayor of breaking a promise to work with them to hold a forum to find solutions to problems that plague residents in South L.A. The group's members spoke Friday in response to criticism over their disruption of a forum that the mayor held earlier this week at Holman United Methodist Church.

Patrisse Cullors, the co-founder of Black Lives Matter, said Garcetti never told members of her group about Monday's event despite previously agreeing to work with them to host a two-hour discussion. She said the mayor met with members of the group and made the promise in July. "What happened afterward is that Mayor Garcetti had a meeting without consulting us," Cullors said at a news conference at a memorial site near the spot where LAPD officers last year fatally shot Ezell Ford, a mentally ill black man. Cullors and others said that members of Black Lives Matter learned about Garcetti's first South L.A. forum only days before the event.

The Black Lives Matter rationale appears to be that their tactics were justified by the fact that Garcetti has been evasive and dishonest in his relations with the group, even if their response meant collateral damage to attendees at a church forum. In that sense, the controversy is reminiscent of when other Black Lives Matter activists disrupted a Seattle rally where Bernie Sanders was speaking to a crowd that gathered in support of Social Security and his campaign's economic agenda.

Their defenders insisted that the urgency of saving black lives justified civil disobedience since without it Democratic candidates would not pay them any attention.

In Los Angeles, the context is different.

Younger black progressives effectively asserted that their activism ought to trump the approach of other black people who are also actively working for police reform.

The subtext comes across most clearly in the L.A. Times reporting on one prominent Black Lives Matter activist:

Pete White, of Los Angeles Community Action Network, said at Friday's Black Lives Matter news conference that Garcetti has divided black residents and aligned himself with people who won't criticize him for failing to follow through on promises.

"We are going to be loud about that and we are going to engage in tactics that are meant to save our lives," he said.

He's implying, in other words, that the old guard of black community organizers and LAPD protestors has been coopted by deals it has cut with the city's political leaders. From the older guard's perspective, however, their approach is meant to save lives.

The conflict reminds me of the ongoing intra-Republican struggle over means and ends. In the GOP, a new generation of House populists is challenging older Washington hands for cutting deals with a corrupt establishment rather than more aggressively seeking reform. Like the House Freedom Caucus, Black Lives Matters is a fractious movement that brings new eyes and energy to reform efforts with its protests. But as of yet, it isn't very good at distinguishing between useful breaks with the established order and counterproductive attacks on essential civic norms.

From the older guard's perspective, it also ignores problems that don't neatly fit its ideology.

Many who share the ends of Black Lives Matter and like many of their reform ideas are left shaking their heads at what looks, to outsiders, like righteousness overwhelming the pragmatism required to effect change in a pluralistic democracy. (What gives them such expansive faith in the efficacy of left-wing protest tactics?) Yet unapologetic righteousness helps explain the group's success at awareness-raising, an achievement that the older guard could not have managed on its own.

There are no neat answers here. And the tension between these factions is unlikely to fade away.

In an interview Monday on "The John and Ken Show," a popular Los Angeles talk radio program known for the unapologetic political incorrectness of its right-leaning populist hosts, Pete White of Black Lives Matter declared, "The practice of opening up our houses of worship for political purposes is something that needs to stop. Once you open up a house of worship for political purpose, it is no longer a sanctuary. It is a statehouse."

How could that rationale not alienate black congregations, especially given the vital role that they've played in past civic advances and the attacks they endured as a result?

The abstract question of when it's okay to disrupt political speech is thorny.

It's perhaps impossible to draw one bright line separating justified civil disobedience from situations where rules or order should prevail. But without condemning Black Lives Matter or its reform proposals, twice preventing a black congregation from holding a forum with their mayor surely falls on the wrong side of the line. And practically speaking, Black Lives Matter tactics that alienate people at historically black L.A. churches aren't going to win converts among the broader public.

In statements, Garcetti is trying to stay above the fray.

"As mayor, that's part of the job. Sometimes people scream. Sometimes people shout," he said. "Any person who talks about their frustrations ... you know, those are real problems with jobs, with housing, with policing. But I just keep doing the work." That beats the bad press he was getting for evading Black Lives Matter activists at events.

Politically, the fact that different factions of black activists are fighting against one another undercuts the potential for a united black front against his leadership and makes it less likely that

he will have to cave to “Black Lives Matter Los Angeles” pressure to fire current LAPD Chief Charlie Beck. Yet that very demand puts the progressive activist group at odds with black civil-rights attorney Connie Rice, arguably the most effective police reformer in the city’s history. “As someone who sued the LAPD for 15 years and then worked closely with it on police reform under Bratton, I know the leadership of LAPD well,” she declared last year in an op-ed. “Beck is a singularly good leader who believes wholeheartedly in humane, constitutional, public-trust policing. He needs more time to lock in the changes he has instituted and to move the department into the new policing. We are lucky to have him and should reconfirm his appointment as chief of LAPD.”

Such disagreements are arguably healthy, even if they’re better adjudicated through debate that helps majorities to gradually arrive at superior positions than leftist-style protests and social shaming. Better for black Angelenos to engage in multiple, parallel policing reform efforts, their tenors and tactics as diverse as black people themselves, this theory goes, than to just accede to whatever accommodations the old guard of community leaders once reached with city officials. While certain strains of progressivism focus on the identity of speakers in the policing debate, as though there is one coherent “black perspective,” the truth is that black individuals possess both shared interests and wildly diverse views.

Pressure to conform to an identity-group line may be understandable, insofar as voting as a block can magnify a minority group’s power. But it can also backfire, allowing politicians to take group support for granted and robbing blacks of individuality.

Black Lives Matter activists in Los Angeles would do well to note that the old guard’s approach has so far accomplished more reforms than has theirs, and that there is wisdom in conducting one’s political activism in a way that does not transgress against the rights of others to participate civically as they see fit. Whereas the old guard should remember that the accommodations it has reached with city officials and power brokers ought to be regularly probed and challenged by upstart reformers, lest inertia and myopia cause stagnation in the struggle to advance justice.

Both sides can disagree and even compete for power without rancor, knowing that power struggles like the one they’re engaged in need not derail the larger cause.

The 1960s civil-rights movement managed to succeed with competing factions of black activists (as well as white reformers) pursuing overlapping goals with wildly different tactics. I suspect that the push for policing reform would be strongest if Black Lives Matter progressives appeared to own the agenda no more and no less than black conservatives, Cato Institute libertarians, ACLU liberals, Clintonian opportunists, and humanist evangelicals. People with very different theories of politics, race in America, and responsible activism can and should look past their disagreements while cooperating to spread best-practices to law enforcement agencies nationwide.

Speaking as a longtime advocate of policing reform, I don’t care if you think that Black Lives Matter or All Lives Matter or All Black Lives Matter or Wrongful Death Lawsuits Are Too Expensive, or that Garcetti is to be shouted at or communed with, so long as you’re behind the push for body cameras, demilitarization, transparency in police departments, independent prosecutors to evaluate police killings, an end to “policing-for-profit” and other overdue reforms.

The reforms matter more than any power struggle among activists.