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Obama has no solution for Baltimore

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President Barack Obama responded to the Baltimore riots with a heartfelt bout of self-righteous hectoring.

Supposedly, we all know what's wrong with Baltimore and how to fix it, but don't care enough. The president seems to believe that if only we all had the wisdom and the compassion of Barack Obama, Baltimore would already be on the mend. Not only is this attitude high-handed and insulting, it rests on a flagrantly erroneous premise.

Obama doesn't have the slightest idea how to fix Baltimore. While parts of his diagnosis are sound — communities like West Baltimore obviously lack for fathers and business investment — his solutions fall back on liberal bromides going back 50 years.

Obama said, cuttingly, that this Congress won't approve "massive investments in urban communities." Dating back to the Kerner Commission in the aftermath of the riots of the 1960s, the left's go-to solution to urban problems has been more social programs. Since then, we've gotten more social programs — and just as many urban problems.

Exhibit A is Baltimore itself. The city hasn't been "neglected." It has been misgoverned into the ground. It is a Great Society city that bought into the big-government vision of the 1960s more than most, and the bitter fruit has been corruption, violence and despair.

All you need to know about the confused ineffectuality of the city's leadership was evident in the purposefully inadequate initial response to the mayhem, apparently on the theory that a little rioting is OK.

And why not? The left has a soft spot for rioters. As soon as the windows start breaking, it rolls out its intellectually rancid excuse-making for the destruction of property.

As police cars burned and businesses were ransacked, progressives declared nonviolence "a ruse" (Ta-Nehisi Coates); hailed looting as "a legitimate political strategy" (Salon); and called the senseless rampage part of a series of, sententiously all-caps, "UPRISINGS" (Marc Lamont Hill).

The lesson is that when the revolution comes, you best not own or operate a small business, or especially a CVS (drugstores, apparently, are notorious enemies of the people).

To its credit, Baltimore called in the National Guard (i.e., “militarized” its police) and stopped the looting. This is better than the alternative. The deeper problem is that much of Baltimore is a disaster even when no one is rioting.

The city has been shedding jobs and people for decades, including in the 1990s when the rest of the country was booming.

We don’t know all the facts surrounding Freddie Gray’s tragic, and highly suspicious, death. But as a general matter, it is easy to believe that the Baltimore police are corrupt, dysfunctional and unaccountable — because most of the Baltimore government is that way. Mayors and police commissioners get convicted of crimes.

This is a failure exclusively of Democrats, unless the root causes of Baltimore’s troubles are to be traced to its last Republican mayor, Theodore Roosevelt McKeldin, who left office in 1967. And it is an indictment of a failed model of government.

Baltimore is a hostile business environment and high-tax city, with malice aforethought. “Officials raised property taxes 21 times between 1950 and 1985,” Steve Hanke and Stephen Walters of Johns Hopkins University write in *The Wall Street Journal*, “channeling the proceeds to favored voting blocs and causing many homeowners and entrepreneurs — disproportionately Republicans — to flee. It was brilliant politics, as Democrats now enjoy an eight-to-one voter registration advantage.”

To counterbalance the taxes, they note, developers need to be lured to the city with subsidies, and the developers, in turn, contribute to politicians to stay in their good graces. This makes for fertile ground for the city’s traditional corruption.

Baltimore’s preferred driver of growth has been government. Urban experts Fred Siegel and Van Smith write in *City Journal* that Baltimore has “emphasized a state-sponsored capitalism that relies almost entirely on federal and state subsidies, rather than market investments.” The model makes for some high-profile development projects, but trickle-down crony capitalism hasn’t worked for everyone else.

For those left behind, Maryland has one of the most generous welfare systems in the country, according to Michael Tanner of the Cato Institute.

Baltimore has been good at sucking up federal and state subsidies, and at taxing and at spending. The other functions of government? Not so much.

Mayor Kurt Schmoke, in office for three terms beginning in the late 1980s, was notoriously soft on crime. Siegel and Smith write, “During the nineties, tolerant Baltimore’s crime rate, much of it drug-fueled, rocketed upward (75 percent of the city’s murders were drug-related); tough-on-crime New York’s plummeted.”

Under Mayor Martin O'Malley's subsequent, more strenuous policing (something he got heckled for in the streets of Baltimore the other day), the crime rate dropped. But it is still a violent city. Murders went up in 2013, and Baltimore had the fifth-highest murder rate among cities with a population of 100,000 or more.

The schools, predictably, are a disaster, run by and for the teachers unions. (If the left's vigilantes for justice really wanted to strike a blow against The Man, they would have besieged the headquarters of the Baltimore city schools.)

On top of all this, two-thirds of births in the city are out-of-wedlock. Toya Graham is being rightly celebrated for smacking her 16-year-old son and getting him out of the streets during the rioting. You can admire her pluck and still be daunted by the challenges she faces as a single mother of six.

What is Obama offering in response to this deep, decades-long decline? Among other things, more pre-K education and job training, even though these programs have a long history of ineffectiveness.

The imperative in Baltimore should be to think and act anew. But the left's take-away will be that there's an urgent need for more of the same, as Baltimore and places like it continue to rot.