What happens to a dream deferred?
Maybe it just sags like a heavy load. Or does it explode?

That was the poet Langston Hughes, in 1951. In that year, more than half a century ago, the most basic dreams of African Americans were deferred. Segregation was mandatory in the old South. Discrimination was legal everywhere in America, whether in housing, education, or employment. Blacks were not just separated, but isolated, marginalized, restricted to the worst jobs and most dilapidated neighborhoods, the most dismal schools.

For many, the racism just sagged, like a heavy load. It destroyed hope that hard work would be rewarded. The deferred dreams of that era seldom produced explosions, because the state had a very efficient system of terror. Blacks who resisted were likely to be lynched, jailed, or otherwise destroyed.

It is a testament to sheer grit, tenacity and courage that large numbers of blacks managed to get educations, raise families, start businesses, enter professions and demand inclusion in civic life at all.

The next 20 years were almost miraculous. From the small beginnings of local bus boycotts and sit-ins came the transformation of civil rights laws, finally giving African American full civic and legal equality, a hundred years after Lincoln.

The progress of the 1960s reflected a combination of the courage of the civil rights movements, the alliance with decent whites, and the leadership of an accidental president. Lyndon Johnson was able to prick the conscience of just enough of white America, to cajole and pressure just enough legislators, and to make a startling alliance between the White House and the radicals in the streets.

If you have never read or watched Johnson's "We Shall Overcome" speech, you have missed a key moment in American history.
It helped that the economy was booming, so that economic progress for blacks did not equate to explicit sacrifices for whites (though whites did have to give up their role as a privileged caste). It helped that there were still liberal Republicans in that era, without whom none of the great civil rights laws could have passed.

So here we are, approaching Christmas 2014. Racism still taints the American dream. And unlike, say, in 1964 when there was a sense of a movement on the march with history on its side, it is hard to summon up optimism.

It is one thing when the government decrees that blacks can't vote, can't patronize restaurants, can't apply for good jobs. That sort of racism shames everyone.
But when cops brutalize young black men, and prosecutors wink, and grand juries refuse to indict, that sort of racism is deeper in the social fabric and much harder to explicitly root out. It is encouraging to see outraged citizens on the march again, heartening that the marches includes whites as well as blacks and other groups.

Yet what sort of movement, what sort of policies, what sort of majority support in the country can we imagine that will fix what is broken?

New York Mayor Bill DeBlasio, whose bi-racial son Dante sports a prominent Afro, has spoken of the need to "literally train him, as families have all over this city for decades, in how to take special care in any encounter he has with the police officers who are there to protect him." That comment provoked outrage from the police.

Sunday, speaking on the ABC News program *This Week*, DeBlasio threaded his way between outrage and support for law enforcement, declaring:

We have to retrain police forces in how to work with communities differently. We have to work on things like body cameras that would provide different level of transparency and accountability. This is something systemic. And we bluntly have to talk about the historic racial dynamics underlie this.

There have in fact been moments when thoroughly racist local police departments have been made over to discard their worst racist practices. The Los Angeles Police Department, after decades of strife and civic reform, is better than it once was. But it took a consent agreement with the Justice Department and five years of direct federal supervision. President Obama, who did manage to summon up some outrage in the Trayvon Martin murder ("If I had a son, he’d look like Trayvon"), has been relatively circumspect, appealing both for reform and for order. He is not close to calling for federal supervision of local police. Obama is no LBJ. And in fairness to Obama, in the absence of stronger public demands, the federal government is not well-positioned to remake local grand juries and police departments.

We have gone utterly backwards since the 1960s, a time when the Justice Department and the courts vigorously interceded to protect the right to vote. Now, the right to vote is being taken away and rightwing courts are tying the Justice Department's hands.

We need a broad movement once again, to force government's hand. As Dr. King appreciated in the last year of his life, it needs to be a movement for economic justice as well as civil rights, a multi-racial movement. Only when there is common appreciation that whites and blacks are common victims of an economic system that
delivers all the gains to the top do we have a prayer of mobilizing the whole nation to demand action.

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