

USING THE MOMENTUM OF THE MARCH

By Michael R. Wenger

Last Saturday, the day after this year's 'Get Off Our Necks' Commitment March on Washington, the front-page headline in the Washington Post declared "We are sick and tired." It was a quote from a woman who had traveled 200 miles to attend the March, which was held on the 57th anniversary of the original March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. And it was 56 years after civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, speaking at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, described a vicious beating she had endured in a Mississippi jailhouse and declared: "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired."

More than half a century later, we continue to have good reason to be "sick and tired"—and both scared and hopeful. On the days before and after the March, three articles screamed warnings that should scare all of us. At the same time, the March reminds us that when we act collectively, we have transformative power.

The day prior to this year's March, a headline in The Guardian read "White Supremacists and Militias Have Infiltrated Police Across US." A report by former FBI special agent Michael German warned that U.S. law enforcement officials have been tied to racist militant activities in more than a dozen states since 2000 and that hundreds of police officers have been caught posting racist and bigoted social media content. The states include "blue" states like California and Connecticut, "red" states like Alabama and Oklahoma, and "purple" states like Florida and Virginia.

On the day of the March, a headline in Yahoo News told us that "Trump Is Ignoring Right-Wing Extremists Who 'Want to Start a Race War,' former DHS Official Says." The former Department of Homeland Security official, Elizabeth Neumann, a Trump political appointee who recently stepped down as DHS assistant secretary for threat prevention and security policy, asserted that the portrayal of lawless Democratic cities by speakers at the Republican National Convention purposely ignored extreme right-wing domestic terrorists and white supremacists. She declared in an interview on a Yahoo News podcast, that the Convention was "completely a sideshow to distract from the real threat and it's extremely dangerous."

The third article, appearing two days after the March on CNN's website, was headlined "Vigilante Group Activity on the Rise, Worrying Law Enforcement and Watchdog Groups." A founder of one of the militia groups, a former Kenosha, WI public official, told an interviewer that he wanted to "start a spark that let people know there are others out here that want to defend ourselves, our lives, our neighborhoods." This comment came in the wake of the killing of two Kenosha marchers protesting racist police behavior and the wounding of a third by a 17-year-old white youth with a long gun who was then ignored by the police and able to return home. He later gave himself up voluntarily. The 17-year-old was lauded as a hero by prominent right-wing commentators like Tucker Carlson and Anne Coulter.

And, of course, there was Trump's acceptance speech the night before the March in which he excoriated leaders of "Democrat-run Cities" for not containing the protests, while never mentioning the motivations for the protests—the lethal police knee that murdered George Floyd in Minneapolis, the bedroom killing by police of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, and the shooting of Jacob Blake in the back, seven times, by a Kenosha, WI police officer.

Things were not far different at the time of the 1963 March. Civil rights leader James Farmer was in jail on trumped-up charges in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, at the time one of the most racist jurisdictions in the country. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was under constant surveillance by the FBI. The closing of public schools in Prince Edward County, VA to avoid desegregating them was entering its 5th year. Less than three weeks after the March, a church in Birmingham was bombed, killing four teen-age

black girls who had been attending Sunday school. Police departments in the South often were synonymous with the KKK, and police killings of black people, especially in the South, were routine occurrences and almost never prosecuted.

But the peaceful gathering of 250,000 Americans of every racial and ethnic background from every corner of the country galvanized public support for racial justice, and the ensuing years saw the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Despite major setbacks since then, these three legislative accomplishments have resulted in significant progress over the past 50 years.

We need to utilize the momentum created by this year's march to respond to today's racist behavior. Many organizations, both nationally and in virtually all of our communities, are attempting to do this. As individuals, we must be a part of the struggle if we want to get beyond being "sick and tired"—and scared. Here are at least four things you can do today—in fact, just as soon as you finish reading this article—to help make a difference (and you probably can think of many more):

1. Join, support, and/or contribute financially to an organization, nationally or locally, seeking systemic and transformative change to achieve racial healing and racial equity.
2. Help to raise public awareness of the dangers of this moment by sharing the articles I've referenced above (you can google them), with your networks and/or on your Facebook page.
3. Find ways (letter to the editor, posting on social media or ...?) to a) support the athletes who are speaking out and b) pressure local franchise owners to make their stadiums and arenas, and even their personnel, available to facilitate fair and unencumbered voting in November.
4. Seek a mail-in ballot so you can be sure to vote safely in November, not only for President and Vice President, but for Senate and House candidates, as well as local officials, who will seek to bring an end to this madness and promote racial healing and racial equity.

In 1996 eminent journalist Carl Rowan's book, *The Coming Race War in America*, was dismissed by many as needlessly alarmist. Today, his warning nearly a quarter century ago that we were approaching bloody racial strife as a result of the rise of angry white males and right-wing militias seems prescient. We can—and we must—prove Rowan wrong. And there is not a minute to waste.