

Summer Vacation, Societal Heat, & Prescribed Fire

by Erik Olson Fernández

“I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical...It is a medicine necessary for the sound health of government.”

Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, Paris, January 30, 1787

As my home state California rages with wildfires, my thoughts this summer have been focused on how this country needs a “prescribed fire” or what Thomas Jefferson might have called a “little rebellion.” I would argue that the last rebellion we had in the U.S. was the 1960s Freedom Struggle led by young African-Americans. If we accept Thomas Jefferson’s timeline and my argument about the 1960s, we are long overdue for a little rebellion - a socially prescribed fire.

This summer, like many other families, we went on a trip to the national parks. Our family trip included visits to Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks, both of which are in the majestic Sierra Nevada mountains of California. While on a tour of Yosemite, the National Park Ranger first mentioned the concept of “prescribed fire” and described how for decades the National Park Service misunderstood forest fires and tried to extinguish them. He then described that the National Park Service now understands that these fires are essential for the health of the forests and must take place periodically. So, today, the National Park Service and its rangers, so well-known for their mascot Smokey the Bear and his famous phrase “Remember...Only YOU Can Prevent Forest Fires,” purposely start forest fires on a regular basis. Imagine that? This practice of starting fires strategically under the right conditions in the right locations is called setting “prescribed fires.” I was intrigued and wanted to learn more as I had long viewed nonviolent civil resistance (participatory democracy not merely reliant on the vote) as a social “medicine necessary for the sound health of government” but it was interesting to see its parallel in nature.

Later, while at Sequoia National Park, the home of the giant sequoia trees and the world’s largest tree by volume, I came across an article in their Visitors Guide: Summer 2015. The title of the article was *Fire: A Natural Change*. It states:

“Years ago, we tried to banish fire from the landscape, believing it was destructive. In sequoia groves, that meant putting out lightning-caused fires that naturally start as often as every 5 to 15 years. As time passed, we saw unanticipated consequences from this practice. Fire suppression blocked important natural processes, which led to big problems:

First, sequoias were not reproducing. We learned that fires create the conditions that sequoias need to regenerate. Fires leave behind a seedbed fertilized with ash, and they open the forest canopy, allowing sunlight to reach the seedlings.

Second, the amount of dead wood and dense growth of small white-fir trees increased tremendously. In the past, frequent natural fires burned these away. Now, after fire’s long

absence, these serve as fuel, feeding bigger, hotter blazes that are more dangerous for people, plants, and wildlife.

For over 40 years at these parks, we have studied fire and its effects on the land. To protect human safety and benefit giant sequoia trees, we now work with fire to restore the benefits it brings.

We still put out fires that threaten life and property but when and where it's appropriate, we ignite prescribed fires or allow lightning fires to spread naturally, reducing fuels and improving resource conditions. Strong evidence shows we are succeeding.

Why is this important? The national parks exist to conserve resources 'unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.' We once thought that aggressive fire suppression met this goal. A more complete understanding of fire tells us that excluding this important natural agent of change only hurts what we are trying to protect."

During the same time period the National Park Service was studying fire (during the last 40 plus years), the country's health has been deteriorating and our temperature, literally and socially, has been rising dangerously. California, for example, experienced its hottest year ever in 2014. On May 16, 2015, Jay Michaelson of The Daily Beast reported that "2015 is the Hottest Year On Record" for the U.S. However, the social heat of the country is also rising to warn us of coming dangers caused by the accumulation of dead wood and the growth of deadly, combustible energy caused by our failure to learn and strategically respond to natural events.

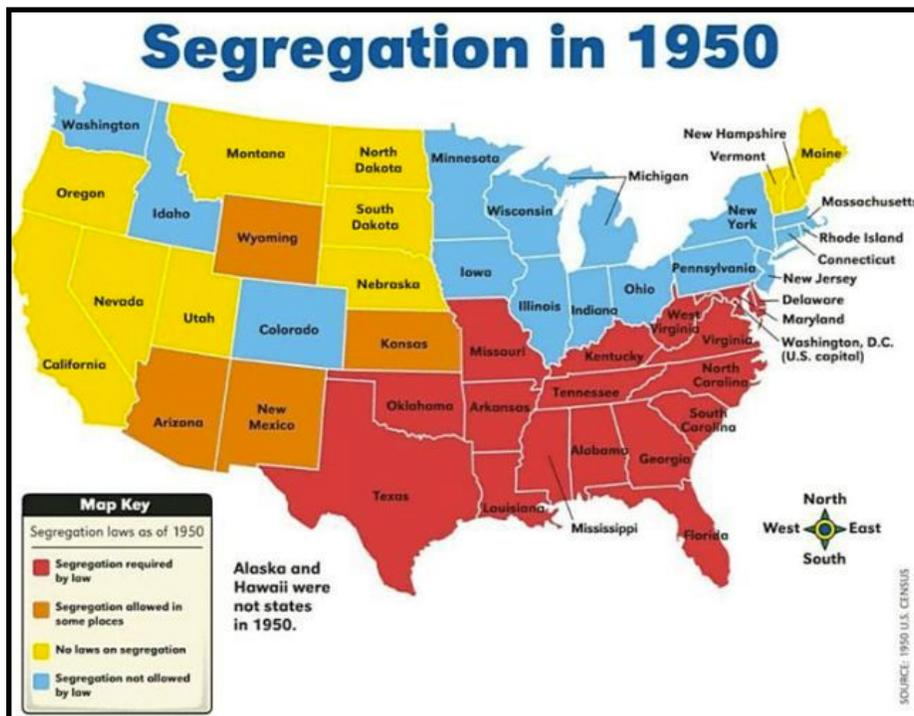
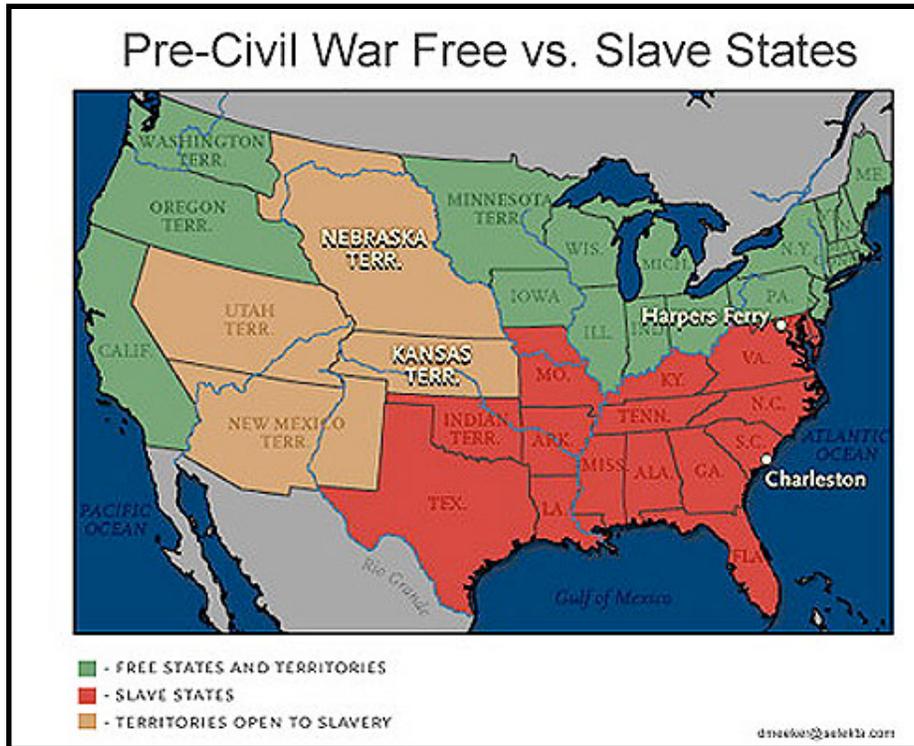
Economic inequality, racial disparities, environmental degradation, and militarism are tearing at our delicate social fabric as a society. No where is this more seen than in the public education, democracy's live blood. According to Bob Moses of the 1960s Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, education was always the "subtext" of the last great movement in the country. Moses says, "We got Jim Crow out of public accommodations; we got it out of the right to vote and the national Democratic Party. We didn't get it out of education. So, I think of it as unfinished business."

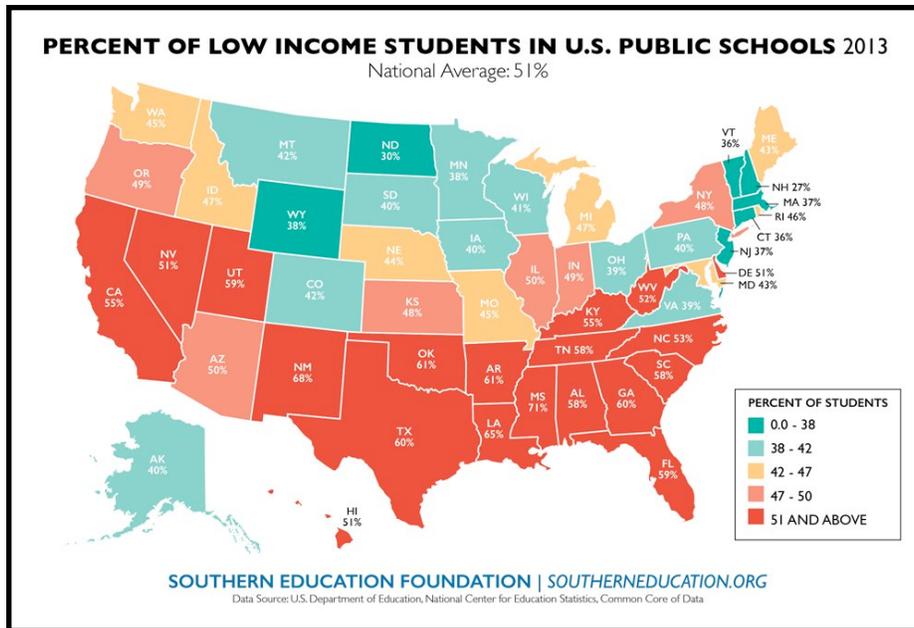
Let us consider California as a case study for the country. In the 1960s, John F. Kennedy had the following to say about California's education system when he spoke at what would become San Diego State University on June 6, 1963:

"One of the most impressive, if not the most impressive, accomplishment of this great Golden State has been the recognition by the citizens of this State of the importance of education as the basis for the maintenance of an effective, free society[...] I do not believe that any State in the Union has given more attention in recent years to educating its citizens to the highest level, doctoral level, in the State colleges, the junior colleges, the high schools, the grade schools. You recognize that a free society places special burdens upon any free citizen. To govern is to choose and the ability to make those choices wise and responsible and prudent requires the best of all of us. No country can possibly move ahead, no free society can possibly be sustained, unless it has an educated citizenry whose qualities of mind and heart permit it to take part in the complicated and increasingly sophisticated decisions that pour not only upon the President and upon the Congress, but upon all the citizens who exercise the ultimate power[...] In this fortunate State of California the average current expenditure for a boy and girl in the public schools is \$515, but in the State of Mississippi it is \$230. The average salary for classroom teachers in California is \$7,000, while in Mississippi it is \$3,600[...] Such facts, and one could prolong the recital

indefinitely, make it clear that American children today do not yet enjoy equal educational opportunities for two primary reasons: one is economic and the other is racial."

Today, California's schools are sadly competing with Mississippi and the other southern states in per-pupil spending and other terrifying statistics on education, inequality and justice. Take a look at these three chronological maps showing the Southernization of the country and California starting with before the Civil War until today. Keep you eye on the red states.





There is absolutely no reason why California should not be ranked in the top five states in per-pupil spending given that California's state constitution requires a free common public education; International human rights law also requires a quality free public education; California is the largest economy in the country and one of the top ten in the world. According to a February 4, 2015 article from *Capital & Main* entitled The California Chasm by Manuel Pastor and Dan Braun:

"California...is the home to more super rich than anywhere else in the country-and it also exhibits the highest poverty rate in the nation, when cost of living is taken into account. Income disparities in the state of California are among the highest in the nation, outpacing such places as Georgia and Mississippi in terms of GINI coefficient, a standard measure of inequality."

What is the difference from 1963 when JFK gave his speech in San Diego to today? In 1963, California's public schools were full of white students. Today, they are full of Latinos, blacks and other students of color. Thus, the public schools are now criminally underfunded in accordance with the country's historical value of "non-constitutional people."

Consider that California's student population is so large that it has one out of 8 students in the country. We should also be conscious of the fact that California looks like what the rest of America will look like in the near future. It is what America will become. Bluntly, if we do not address these critical issues of educational and social inequality in California the whole country is doomed. There simply cannot be a democratic America without great and equal public schools.

Luckily, California's diverse young people have naturally shown a proclivity toward action in the last decade (2006 immigrant marches, college student tuition protests, Dreamers fighting for immigrant student rights, the Occupy actions, Black Lives Matter movement) and if they are given the right Ella-Baker-like nurturing, training,

and guidance they can help us move forward as a state/nation. However, thus far, their actions have been mostly reactionary, responding to events, rather than strategically taking the offensive with a planned, long term struggle that would require that the nation's corporate reactionary forces respond to them. What we need is a prescribed fire - a strategic, planned nonviolent resistance movement, around making free quality public education truly a right for all - starting in California. As goes California, so goes the nation. By changing public education, we can change the deeply rooted culture in the society and move us forward as a nation. The beauty of organizing around the human right to education is that you cannot address it alone without addressing the other fundamental issues of our day, especially those concerning economic inequality. In order to transform public education, we must change all the other issues that are inherently connected to it like the unjust tax structure, the criminal justice system, student loan debt, child care, preschool, child poverty, health care, dignified wages, affordable housing, military budget/recruitment, and overall inequality.

Can we learn from the past 40 plus years like the National Park Service? Can we learn to set a "prescribed fire" among our youth starting in California where the conditions and demographics are ripe? If not, like James Baldwin in his famous book *The Fire Next Time*, we will all be forced to ask, "Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house [society]?"