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Op-Ed: The beloved Capitol, a beacon across the river from my Alexandria childhood

By Judy Belk, January 17, 2021

I grew up six miles from the U.S. Capitol, so I took the Trump-incited insurrection personally. Yes, it was an attack on the seat of America's democracy, but for me, it felt like an invasion on what I considered my extended 'hood. Home.

Although I live in California, I am a native of Alexandria, Va., where on a clear day, just across the Potomac River, you can see the Capitol in the distance perched majestically on its own hill holding court over the entire District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia landscape (affectionally known these days as the DMV).

My favorite spot is standing at the base of its wide broad steps looking out over the National Mall, the Washington Monument, the Reflecting Pool and the Lincoln Memorial. It's a breathtaking sight to take in, day or night.

Still, after years of obligatory school-sponsored field trips to the Capitol, at some point I started taking its beauty for granted. As I got older and started hanging out in the district, the Capitol simply became my beacon to get home. My high school driver's ed instructor gave us students a tip: "If you ever get lost in D.C., look for the Capitol to get your bearings."

There were times when I was young, returning from a Sunday visit to our relatives in the district, squeezed in the backseat of the family car, that I would catch a glimpse of the Capitol and seriously wondered why anyone would want to go back to Virginia if they didn't have to. During the time, I had a love/hate relationship with the district and the Capitol. Both serving as reminders of two

Americas and the basic liberties that were out of reach for my Black family for no other reason than the color of our skin and that we lived on the other side of the river.

Being Black anywhere in America during the 1950s and '60s was a struggle, but the racial disparities seemed particularly stark between these two interconnected places of my childhood. My mother joked that she was willing to risk having her last two children on the 14th Street Bridge to make it to the historically Black Howard University's Freedmen's Hospital in the district rather than face the racist indignities she experienced giving birth to my three siblings and me in the segregated wards of Alexandria Hospital.

I often wondered why my father's family, which was part of the Great Migration, chose to settle in Jim Crow Virginia when they could literally see the Capitol in the distance. Why stop? Just before he died, I asked my Uncle Milton, who accompanied my Grandfather Otis on the northward trek.

He shrugged and said, "Work. Your granddaddy knew somebody who was hiring colored folks in Virginia. He was anxious to make enough money to send for Mama and the rest of the family. And you have to remember, we were from the country. D.C. was too big a city."

Now I know that in the '40s, the district was still a segregated town. But during my childhood, with advancements in the district, I grew up sensing that I was born on the wrong side of the river. My life was shaped by my hometown, proudly flying its Confederate Flag over City Hall, with Jefferson Davis Highway, honoring the president of the Confederacy, running through the city center. Juxtaposed to that was the U.S Capitol in the distance, with Independence Avenue at its doorstep. It was a daily reminder of America's racial history charting parallel paths of injustice and justice; white supremacy and Black resilience; inequality and democracy.

Over the years, the Capitol has kept a watchful eye over hundreds of protests and mass demonstrations while enjoying a "hands off" status respected by most American protesters. My history is intertwined with two of them.

In the first, the 1968 Poor People's March, I didn't even make it across the river. Through my church, I had been volunteering for months to prepare food and lodging for the demonstrators, with the payoff being allowed to be a teen

helper at Resurrection City, a temporary encampment on the National Mall, spotlighting economic and racial injustice. When Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in April, just a few weeks before the march, I was sidelined to kitchen duty over concerns of possible violence. The march went off peacefully, although six weeks later there were altercations between the police and demonstrators, and law enforcement stepped in to dismantle the encampments.

Fast-forward to 2018 when I joined hundreds of thousands of peaceful demonstrators in the “March for Our Lives,” a nationwide movement calling for gun legislation after yet another mass school shooting, this time in Florida. I remember the crowd on Pennsylvania Avenue so thick, movement was impossible. At one point, I became disoriented. Claustrophobic. Losing all sense of direction until I was able to lock my eyes on the Capitol — looking that day like America, better than ever.

So, it is personal. The recent violence and vandalism of the Capitol by a large mob of primarily white domestic terrorists — many carrying Confederate flags while others wore racist, extremist symbols including a “Camp Auschwitz” hoodie — unnerved me as a person of color, an American and a home girl.

The Capitol will survive. Cleanup and repairs are underway. But it is America I worry about. Can we find our way back? If so, each of us must be willing to give up something big and small for the common good — whether that’s supporting tax policies that will help reduce growing inequality, recognizing and dismantling the legacy of white privilege, or holding ourselves and our leaders accountable for preserving American values.

In the end, the Capitol, as glorious as it is, is a mere symbol. It’s we, the people, who must do the heavy lifting of preserving a democracy.

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