

Whither Faith?

To borrow from the late Art Linkletter, grownups say the darndest things. Especially liberal grownups during a riot. Or shall we say ... an "uprising?"

This week in Baltimore was certainly no exception. We witnessed a CNN anchor blame cops who are military veterans and thus "ready to do battle." There was also the attention-hungry columnist who described the smashing of police cars as a "legitimate political strategy."

But the single dumbest comment in recent days may have been spewed by Baltimore City Council member Carl Stokes. Coincidentally, the councilman becomes eligible for Medicare this very weekend, so there's no way to ascribe his astounding ignorance to the foolishness of youth.

Stokes was on TV the day after hordes of young men burned and looted stores and tried their best to injure Baltimore cops. Most clear-thinking Americans would describe those miscreants as "thugs."

But not Carl Stokes, who compared the word "thug" to the most vile racial epithet. If the councilman has his way, we'll all be dancing around the truth, maybe referring to the "T word."

This is not an attempt to pick on one politician who said something idiotic, but it's instructive. A "teachable moment," as liberals like to say. If you look up Carl Stokes' official bio, it includes this passage: "Councilman Stokes was a successful businessman, having managed and ultimately purchased a chain of retail clothing stores."

So what would the esteemed councilman call young men who smashed the windows of his clothing store and cleaned out the joint? Perhaps he would characterize them as "undocumented shoppers." Or he might reach way back to West Side Story and

those timeless lyrics by Stephen Sondheim: "Hey, I'm depraved on account I'm deprived."

In a sane world, politicians like Carl Stokes would not excuse the thugs and their thuggery. Rather, city leaders would rush to console business owners whose stores were destroyed. For example, the entrepreneur who watched on a security camera as looters, some of whom he recognized as customers, emptied his sneaker store. If politicians don't convince people like that to stay and rebuild, it will be portentous for the residents of Charm City.

The clear losers in the Baltimore situation are that city's poorest residents, most of them black. There will be fewer tourists visiting the beautiful Inner Harbor, thus less revenue and fewer jobs. Fewer suburbanites will head downtown to take in an Orioles game, leading to less income for the vendors who hawk peanuts and Cracker Jacks.

The classic song "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" includes an ironic line: "I don't care if I never get back." That sentiment may now apply to baseball fans who traditionally crowd into the stadium at Camden Yards 81 times every spring and summer. If too many of them "never get back," the ultimate price will be paid by ticket-takers and security guards and the vendors who will sell you a Natty Boh beer for \$8.75.

The riots in Baltimore were tragic, yes, but also criminal. The villains who robbed shoe stores and pharmacies also stole part of the city's future.

If you were a business person, would you build a new store in Baltimore today? Let's say, just hypothetically, you own a chain of retail clothing stores. Feel like it's a good idea to expand into West Baltimore? Didn't think so.

If there's any ray of hope, it may be that not all Baltimore politicians are as dense as Carl Stokes. Exhibit A is 31-year-old Brandon Scott, the youngest member of the City Council. He

grew up in Baltimore during the heyday of crack cocaine, earning pocket change by washing the luxury cars of drug dealers.

Councilman Scott obviously loves Baltimore dearly, and he minced no words when describing the criminals who rioted and looted. "Obviously they're thugs," he declared, "and we can't let them ruin our city." The young councilman, wise beyond his years, added this: "If you are an adult and you're out there participating in this, you're ruining the future for these young people."

He was not referring to fellow councilman Carl Stokes, but he could have been. Because even though Stokes didn't participate in the riots, he excused them as the understandable result of "marginalized" kids.

Who marginalized those kids, Mr. Stokes? Who turned them into thugs? That is exactly what they are, and no sugar-coating of words can change that.

The thugs have done immeasurable damage to Baltimore and its residents. It will take years for the city to recover. Years ... and a few more truth-telling leaders like Brandon Scott.