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Cory Booker's Angry Letter to Esquire

Newark Mayor Cory Booker read Scott Raab's feature from July 2008, ["The Battle of Newark"](#), and did not like what he read. Read his reaction here.

By: Cory Booker



June 11, 2008

Mark Warren
Executive Editor
300 West 57th Street
21st Floor
New York, NY 10019

Dear Mr. Warren,

ENOUGH! Esquire Magazine's July article "The Battle of Newark" by Scott Raab offers another narrow, clichéd, and grossly insulting misrepresentation of Newark -- its people, neighborhoods, successes and progress. It painfully ignores the true Newark and instead casts our home as a destitute, depraved city. It is one thing to tolerate such ignorant criticism from painful pundits who have not even visited our city (such as ESPN's Barry Melrose who after a short visit quickly changed from panning Newark to praising Newark), but the writer spent months in Newark, witnessing firsthand the diverse greatness of our city and our people, as well as our challenges and how we are uniting to meet them.

Instead of writing a nuanced descriptive (and balanced) view of what is Newark, he chose instead to focus solely on persistent challenges as if nothing else existed in our city and then dressed up those challenges in the most insulting of ways. His distorted exaggeration of Newark's ills casts our entire city in a perverse (and hackneyed) state of distress while leaving readers with the impression that all of Newark is awash in toxic trials and ravished by an unending apocalyptic war.

Was the writer blind to the undeniable facts of our city? Did he miss what countless other writers have begun to see? Or did he simply choose to ignore what is being written about Newark in media outlets such as the *Washington Post* which, in a January 2007 article, described Newark as a city clearly making a comeback in its article entitled "Newark's Revival Is No Joke" to *The New York Times* which has covered everything from our booming restaurants to our growing arts community most notably in their May 2007 article, ["Not Hot Just Yet, But Newark is Starting to Percolate."](#)

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In an insulting fashion, the writer, on more than one occasion, testifies to his gratitude that he doesn't live in Newark. He, however, chose not to write about the thousands, who, unbound by unfounded or exaggerated fears, have made the choice to move to Newark and make it their home. The facts, which the writer ignores

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Dear Mr. Warren,

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and does not share with Esquire readers, speak for themselves:

In the last two years alone:

- Census data documents that, by percentage, Newark is the fastest growing city in the Northeast, with thousands of new residents moving to our city every year.
- Two universities have constructed new dormitories in Newark that are filled to capacity, with a long waiting list. A third university is to soon begin construction on another. Additionally, Berkeley College opened up a new campus in Newark.
- New businesses and corporations—law firms, banks, technology and biotechnology companies, distribution centers, union headquarters—have all chose to move and build in Newark, bringing thousands of jobs, increased investment and a growing tax base. The writer's assertion that there is no "big box retail" in Newark is absurd—he patently ignores the Home Depot on Springfield Avenue.
- Since its opening on October 27, 2007, the Prudential Center has attracted over 1.2 million people to Newark and the reviews have been overwhelmingly positive. Hundreds of thousands of others are flocking to our city every month to visit the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, new and flourishing art galleries, successful restaurants, crowded bars, the renowned Newark Museum, Newark Public Library and Newark Symphony Hall, countless ethnic festivals, lectures and other events at our six colleges and universities, and our two Frederick-Law-Olmstead-designed parks (one with the largest collection of cherry blossom trees in the world), not to mention our thriving houses of worship that attract parishioners from all over the state and region.

Does this sound like a city "racked by decades of ruin, a town known only for murder, blight and feckless negritude"? I believe not.

The writer talks about rampant poverty in our city but fails to mention that only one town in New Jersey had a higher increase in median income than Newark in the last five years.

The writer talks about crime in our city but fails to mention that, in 2007, Newark was singled out by the National Police Executive Research Forum as the number one city in America for violent crime reduction.

The writer talks about joblessness in our city but fails to mention any of the progress that has been made in recent years to address the issue.

- Since July 1, 2006, over 4,000 new jobs for Newarkers have been created in partnership with Newark's largest corporations.
- Countless new businesses have moved to Newark and have brought thousands of jobs to Newarkers.
- Business incubator and small business loan programs in Newark helping to launch new businesses in our city.
- The new neighborhood revitalization program fueling opportunities for local Newark developers and producing market rate and affordable housing throughout our city.
- More than 50 companies are working with the city and are hiring ex-offenders in Newark and helping them become productive members of our community.

Is this the city he says is at war with " . . . all-encompassing despair and early death. The zombies are everywhere you look?" I believe not.

In every category of Newark life, the article paints with a painfully broad and distorted brush, covering over not only our progress but the truth—the undeniable facts that Newark is already setting standards for excellence in America.

In public education, Newark, like many urban centers, has a challenging road ahead. While there are challenges, there are also beacons of excellence within Newark Public Schools that have received national awards ad recognition, have commanded countless articles and are now being modeled by education activists all over the country and the world. For example, both the Harriet Tubman Elementary School and

the Ann Street School are national Blue Ribbon schools. Amongst our charter schools, Newark has numerous schools that out perform even the wealthiest suburban schools in our state.

The writer describes our housing as everything from “lousy” to “two family cages” and patently ignores the housing he saw all over the city that reflects the best of American architecture, the best examples of New Urbanism, and even new low-income housing that is a marked and exceptional break from the crass stereotypes that are promulgated by the author. The reality that the writer saw and chose not to write about betrays the awful images he painted for readers when he wrote, **“you just need to imagine Newark as a small Third World Nation . . .”** that is desperate for investment.

But perhaps **the most insulting part of the article** was the constant insinuation that there was only one good person in Newark, one hero, only one person who was looking to make positive change to confront Newark’s challenges (and perhaps one omniscient observer in Dr. Clement Price).

There could be nothing further from truth.

Newark, New Jersey, is home to MANY heroes. Everyday heroes who give of themselves every day—for the well-being of their families and for the future of their city. These heroes may not attract the spotlight but, often behind the scenes, they are making Newark a place of promise and progress.

Moreover, all signs clearly show that, thanks to heroic residents in every sector of our city, Newark began to turn a corner BEFORE my election as mayor. One thing the article did accurately portray is that I am fraught with faults, from worn and torn suits to a propensity to talk a little too much. But in Newark, there is a collective perfection that has enabled our city to not only endure the challenges shared by other urban centers, but also that is helping Newark distinguish itself as a place of innovation and excellence. Nowhere is this collective perfection more evident than in our ability to prevail against our trials and preserve the centuries-old values and character that has made Newark so consistently great since its founding over 300 years ago.

Newark is full of history makers—starting in Newark City Hall, where there are other elected officials whose commitment and character I struggle to match everyday. On the Newark Municipal Council, you will find the youngest elected official in our city’s history, the first Latino and Portuguese councilmen and our city’s first ever woman council president. Any observer of a single hour of any of their daily routine would witness incredible work and dedication and realize that Newark government is not a one man show. The writer had access to many of them but obviously missed this fact, too (it is also important to note that my election was not solely as an individual candidate but together with a tremendous slate of councilpeople—we are part of a team).

Newark has block readers and tenant leaders who work full time jobs and then spend nights and weekends in service of their neighborhoods. They empower their communities, keep a watchful eye in order to prevent crime, and address unsatisfactory conditions without waiting for City Hall to act.

Newark has some of the greatest corporate citizens—companies like Prudential, Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield, Verizon (which is adding 300 employees in Newark), and many others. They did not, as the article indicated, flee town with everyone else who could. They remain one of the backbones of our great community.

We have longstanding non-profit leaders who have accomplished true miracles in their service to our city. And we have countless new non-profits that are driving reform, progress and change at the grassroots level in incredibly dynamic ways.

There are men and women starting businesses all over our city. Just a brief conversation with them demonstrates that they want to do well but also do good. They are not only trying to be successful for themselves but also beam with pride that they are employing their fellow residents and helping to empower our local economy.

There are City Hall employees—some of whom have served under multiple administrations—who take such ownership of our city. While they have had perhaps more lucrative opportunities elsewhere, they stay in their jobs because of love, loyalty and the longing that one day Newark will get the respect it deserves.

And there are people struggling. There is addiction, joblessness, and yes, drug dealers—but these people

are not *I Am Legend* zombies. I believe, in fact, that it is this dismissal, this rush to cast them into categories or deny them their humanity (zombies!) that continues to feed the cancer that is eating away at our great nation. People with such dangerous attitudes relish in articles such as his one; they see the world in convenient simplicities—good vs. bad; suburban vs. urban; us vs. them. Such people want to see a savior come in and rescue them from those ills “down there.” But in fact, such people fail to see that they are a larger part of the problem than any addict or unemployed individual.

ENOUGH! There has not been an article written since I have been mayor that has made me and my fellow Newarkers more angry than this one. It is altogether a tired song that has been sung by people who don't know our city. This music has played for decades, and the people of Newark have endured enough disrespect, disregard, and contempt. Enough!

At the end of his article, the author claims that “. . . there are nearly 275,000 people in Newark—and all of them are victims, too.” I haven't met one person living in Newark who would ever define themselves or our city this way. Sadly, the victims I am concerned about today are those people who will read this article and do not know enough about Newark to counter its effect. I worry that such readers will be further blinded by stereotype, convenient clichés, and Hollywood hype. Perhaps this is the “Battle” that Esquire should be most concerned with in future articles.

Sincerely,

CORY A. BOOKER

Mayor

Find this article at: <http://www.esquire.com/the-side/feature/booker-letter>



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