

It is not simply the death of a black man, but yet another moment of truth for America

In a country claiming to be the first in the world to be founded on equality, why have black lives been so cheap? Can black Americans ever be treated with equality and dignity, instead of being brutalised?

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Protestors demonstrate outside of a burning Minneapolis 3rd Police Precinct, Thursday, May 28, 2020, in Minneapolis. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

America is burning again: In part literally, as violence breaks out, cops and their vehicles are attacked, and shops and offices are set on fire; and in part figuratively, as massive non-violent protests sweep across dozens of cities. As of this writing, at least 75 cities have seen protests. Black Americans are leading the agitation, but the protests are unquestionably inter-racial, with huge participation of white youth. It has already become the most mammoth display of anger and frustration against the system since the 1960s, when a nonviolent civil rights movement, led by a [Mahatma Gandhi](#)-inspired Martin Luther King, convulsed the nation, leading to civil and voting rights for black Americans.

All of this is happening during a [COVID-19 pandemic](#). The US has suffered more than 1,00,000 deaths, the largest anywhere, with black people dying disproportionately. A [social distancing](#) advisory is still in place, but the sense of injustice and revulsion against the May 25 killing of George Floyd, a black man, by Derek Chauvin, a white police officer, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, is so great that thousands, taking the risk of perilous infections, have come out on the streets.

In videos recorded by bystanders on their cell phones, released on social media and watched by millions, Chauvin, in police uniform, is seen choking Floyd's neck with his knee for nearly nine minutes. Floyd is begging for mercy — "please, please... I can't breathe" — but Chauvin, supported by three other police officers, does not let go. An hour later, Floyd was pronounced dead.

So what is at stake? Why are so many protesting?

It is not simply the death of a black man, but yet another moment of truth for America's constitutional soul, a profoundly agonising plunge into the nation's founding principles and contradictions. A haunting question of

American history has returned. In a country claiming to be the first in the world to be founded on equality, why have black lives been so cheap? Can black Americans ever be treated with equality and dignity, instead of being brutalised?

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America was born with the promise of equality and freedom, a promise enshrined in its Constitution. But except for two periods, 1865-1877 and 1964-65 till now, black America has never been legally equal to white America. Rather, American politics and laws, for most of US history, have represented what the political scientist Rogers Smith calls "the ascriptive white superiority", manifested in "passionate beliefs that America... (is) a white nation".

Consider the historical evidence. According to the US Census Bureau, in 1790, a year after the birth of the US Constitution, 19.3 per cent of America was black. But neither free nor equal, black Americans were slaves. Owned by their white masters as property, they were bought and sold as commodities in the market, enjoying no citizenship rights.

After the Civil War, in which at least 6,00,000 Americans were killed, the 13th Constitutional Amendment ended slavery in 1865. And over the next five years, the 14th and 15th Constitutional Amendments also granted equal citizenship and voting rights to blacks. Between 1866 and 1876, black voter registration soared to 85-90 per cent, and many freed blacks held political office, not only in local governments but also in the US House of Representatives and US Senate.

This period of reform collapsed in 1877. Thereafter, the southern states took away the voting rights of most blacks. Black civil rights, including where

they could live, pray, eat and drink, how they commuted and traveled, were racially reformulated. And in *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896), the Supreme Court argued that blacks and whites, being racially dissimilar, had drastically different traits, which justified racial segregation.

Editorial | Death of George Floyd may or may not be a turning point for America. But protests show wound has cut deeper and wider

As if this was not enough, the lynching of black Americans — for crossing racially permissible boundaries of conduct — acquired deadly proportions. “Lynchings were more than executions,” writes the historian Richard White. “They were public spectacles that often took place before large crowds. White men tortured black men, dismembering, castrating, and burning them. Photographers memorialised the murders. The photographs, turned into postcards, sold widely.”

After decades of racial subordination, these inequities were legally removed between the mid-1950s to mid-1960s. But the legal reforms notwithstanding, economic gaps have remained awfully wide. Most of all, anti-black violence has not disappeared. Lynch mobs do not lynch with abandon any more, and old-style riots and pogroms have also disappeared, but police violence against African Americans has been endemic, and black incarceration has alarmingly increased. Blacks make up 12 per cent of America today, but constitute 38 per cent of the imprisoned population. Criminology is far too easily associated with blacks.

Racial violence by a largely white police force has also repeatedly gone unpunished. Police unions have been strong, and prosecutors and juries have often given the benefit of the doubt to police officers, accepting too readily their arguments about their last minute decision to pull the trigger.

In this interminable history of violence and suffering, the frightful killing of

George Floyd has become a tipping point. To quote Claudine Gay, a leading scholar of US race relations: "We have been here before, too many times, and that familiarity is part of the heartbreak and outrage of this moment. ... we are confronted again by old hatreds and the enduring legacies of anti-black racism and inequality."

Explained | [Why George Floyd's death has sparked violent protests across the US](#)

Just where is the country headed? Instead of calming anxiety, President Trump has intervened in a hugely partisan and provocative manner. When the right-wing militia, brandishing guns, entered Michigan's state legislature last month, he called them "good people". When some in the current agitation burned property, he called them "thugs", threatening violence against all protestors. He draws no distinction between the many peaceful protestors and the few violent users of the protest. After a recent speech in which he said he would use the military if state governments failed to "dominate the streets", he walked to a church next to the White House, holding the Bible in his hand. Instead of soothing the grieving black community, Trump in effect has launched his re-election campaign with the apparent calculation that racial polarisation, deepened by violence, and the support of evangelical Christians will facilitate his re-election. Guns and the Bible will define the election campaign.

The US seems to be headed for a tough and violent summer. And the pandemic, instead of waning, might also just rage on.

This article first appeared in the print edition on June 3, 2020 under the title 'Getting away with murder'. The writer is Sol Goldman Professor of International Studies and Professor of Political Science at Brown University, Providence, USA.

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