



# Now It's George Floyd: America's Enduring War on Black People

By Paul Tiyambe Zeleza



George Floyd was sadistically murdered by a policeman with the connivance of several of his colleagues. They were all oblivious to Floyd's anguished moaning, "I can't breathe", and the pleas of witnesses watching the tragic spectacle. The twin cities of Minneapolis-St. Paul erupted into several nights of fierce protests. Before long, demonstrations spread to more than twenty cities across the United States, from New York in the east to Los Angeles in the west, Detroit in the north, Houston in the south, Seattle in the northwest and Atlanta in the southeast.

Before George Floyd, there was Ahmaud Arbery, who was killed by two white men - a former police officer and his son - on 23rd February, 2020 when he jogging in Glynn County, Georgia. The killers were only arrested 74 days later after the video of the murder went viral. After that there was Breonna Taylor who was shot dead in her own apartment by two policemen in Louisville. Before these three there were many more African Americans shot dead by the police in America's grisly ritual of sacrificing black lives at the altar of racism.

According to *The Washington Post's* database on police killings that goes back to 2015, in 2015 the police killed 994 people, 962 people in 2016, 986 people in 2017, 992 people in 2018, and 1,004 people in 2019. Altogether, out of the 4,728 people killed by the police in the United States since January 1, 2015, 1,252, or 26.5%, were black. African Americans represent 13% of the country's

population. In short, African Americans are killed by the police at a rate that is twice as high as it is for whites.

The United States has one of the most violent and lethal police forces in the world. This should not be surprising because the origins of policing in the US go back to the ruthless slave patrols of plantation America. Thus, racial profiling and killing of African Americans by the police and white vigilantes betrays the enduring DNA of racism in American law enforcement agencies, society, and everyday life.

“This racial street theater against black peoples is an endemic, primal feature of the Republic,” wrote the *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow. It allows some ordinary white men and women to weaponise racial anxiety and racial hatred, as did the white woman who threatened a black man, a bird watcher, in New York’s Central Park that she was going to call the police and tell them that he was threatening her life.

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Six years before Mr. Floyd was killed, Eric Garner died from a police chokehold. He also pleaded, “I can’t breathe.” Floyd thus joins a long list of African Americans, men and women, boys and girls, whose lives were terminated by the bullets, chokeholds, boots, and ropes of the police and white vigilantes. Millions more engaged in the mundane activities of daily life suffer from racial assaults of various magnitude: driving while black, jogging while black, walking while black, shopping while black, going to school or college while black, partying or playing while black, buying or renting property while black, being a boss while black, bird watching while black, even praying while black... the list is endless. The physical, psychic, emotional, social, economic, and political taxes of being black in America have always been inordinately high.

The national uprising following Mr. Floyd’s capricious murder signals a country spiraling into dysfunction out of the combustible conjuncture of three forces: the original and enduring sin of slavery and racism, the devastations of the coronavirus pandemic, which has been ineptly managed, resulting in the US claiming the dubious distinction of having the world’s highest numbers of cases and deaths, and an economic meltdown that has left more than 40 million people unemployed, which is reminiscent of the darkest days of the Great Depression.

Overseeing the triple emergences fueling America’s crisis of governance and nationhood, which is emblematic of the country’s historic decline, is the incomparably disastrous presidency of President Donald Trump. He is arguably the worst president in US history: incompetent, clueless, racist, chauvinistic, bombastic, idiotic, narcissistic, and a pathological liar. He is a tragic embodiment of the famous aphorism from the Ancient Greek writer, Euripides, which can be applied to powerful individuals and nations facing eclipse: “Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad.”

The moment embodied by George Floyd’s murder represents a perfect storm in the enduring madness at the heart of America’s public life and political economy, which is often camouflaged by the country’s awesome military might and national wealth.

### **A death that shook the world**

George Floyd’s death has not only shaken the United States, it has shocked the world. African leaders and commentators have vehemently condemned the killing. The Chairperson of the African

Union Commission, Moussa Faki, issued a blistering critique. According to a statement from the AU, he “strongly condemns the murder of George Floyd that occurred in the United States of America at the hands of law enforcement officers, and wishes to extend his deepest condolences to his family and loved ones.”

The AU statement went on to say: “Recalling the historic Organization of Africa Unity (OAU) Resolution on Racial Discrimination in the United States of America made by African Heads of State and Government, at the OAU’s First Assembly Meeting held in Cairo, Egypt from 17 to 24 July 1964, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission firmly reaffirms and reiterates the African Union’s rejection of the continuing discriminatory practices against Black citizens of the United States of America.”

Faki’s deputy, Kwesi Quartey, added his voice by stating, “This is one too many. We may be black, but we are people too... Africa demands a full investigation into this killing.”

Stung by African condemnations and criticisms, American diplomats in various African capitals have tried to quell the storm. According to the Voice of America, “Mindful of America’s image on a continent where China’s influence has grown and where many have felt a distinct lack of interest from the Trump administration in Africa, some U.S. diplomats have tried to control the damage. The ambassador to Congo, Mike Hammer, highlighted a tweet from a local media entrepreneur who addressed him saying, ‘Dear ambassador, your country is shameful. Proud America, which went through everything from segregation to the election of Barack Obama, still hasn’t conquered the demons of racism. How many black people must be killed by white police officers before authorities react seriously?’ The ambassador’s response, in French: ‘I am profoundly troubled by the tragic death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. The Justice Department is conducting a full criminal investigation as a top priority. Security forces around the world should be held accountable. No one is above the law.’”

In the meantime, according to *Foreign Affairs* magazine, “In a highly unusual move that reflects the degree of distress in the countries they are posted in, the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Uganda also issued statements on Twitter, saying the embassies were ‘deeply troubled’ by the death of Floyd in police custody and that ‘[g]overnment officials should not operate with impunity in any country.’ Several U.S. diplomats said it is rare for U.S. embassies abroad to weigh in on domestic U.S. issues. But in this case, the embassies were compelled to respond after seeing how African leaders reacted to Floyd’s death with anger and dismay. ‘I think some of these posts had to say something because so many Africans are appalled by the footage,’ one U.S. official said. Long-standing racial injustices in the United States also pose a problem for Washington’s soft-power standing in Africa and its position as a vocal proponent of human rights across the continent.”

The United Nations Human Rights Commission joined the fray, tweeting that it “condemns George Floyd’s killing and urges serious action to stop police killings of unarmed African Americans. This is the latest in a long line.”

The UN Human Rights High Commissioner, Michelle Bachelet, a former president of Chile, issued a statement: “I am dismayed to have to add George Floyd’s name to that of Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner, Michael Brown and many other unarmed African Americans who have died over the years at the hands of the police — as well as people such as Ahmaud Arbery and Trayvon Martin who were killed by members of the public.”

Anger over George Floyd’s killing rippled around the world. According to *The Washington Post* of May 29, “Some leaders took the opportunity to express solidarity with marginalised communities in the United States. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau ended a coronavirus news conference

Friday morning by addressing the Canadians who are watching ‘the news out of the United States with shock and horror. Racism is real. It’s in the United States, but it’s also in Canada,’ he said. ‘We know people are facing systemic discrimination, unconscious bias and anti-black racism every day.’”

In Europe, “Norway’s Princess Martha Louise also took to social media to condemn Floyd’s death, sharing a photograph of a woman holding a sign that read ‘George Floyd’s life mattered.’ In the post, she called out the actions of the officers involved, deeming them ‘monsters’ and urging people to ‘wake up and stop the inhumanity.’” T

The leader of the British Labour Party, Keir Starmer, tweeted, “George Floyd must not become just another name. His shocking death should be the catalyst for change. To build a better society we must stand together against racism and injustice.”

America’s perennial critics also weighed in. “Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said a ‘racist and fascist’ approach led to Floyd’s killing and called for the perpetrators to be brought to justice. ‘We will be monitoring the issue,’ he tweeted.

On his English-language Twitter account, Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, retweeted a tweet that read, “If you’re dark-skinned walking in the US, you can’t be sure you’ll be alive in the next few minutes.”

Predictably, China seized on the uproar over Floyd’s death to score points and as payback for criticism from the US on China’s draconian responses to massive protests in Hong Kong, and China’s treatment of Africans. The editor of the *Global Times*, a state affiliated paper wrote sarcastically, “Hong Kong’s rioters and police should carefully watch how the ‘democratic U.S.’ deals with the chaos in Minnesota” and accused the US of “double standards”. On its part, the state-run *China Daily* newspaper tweeted footage from the US protests with the hashtags #GeorgeFloydWasMurdered and #BlackLivesMatter.

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Progressive Pan-African movements, activists, and governments must raise the costs of denigrating and destroying the lives and livelihoods of its peoples anywhere in the world, whether on the continent or in the Diaspora. The struggle against racism must be waged in Europe, the old imperial and colonial architects of the modern oppressive world capitalist system; in the Americas that sanctified racial capitalism; in China, the aspiring superpower of the 21st century, with its own superiority complexes and anti-African racism recently on display during the coronavirus pandemic in which Africans were targeted; and in the countries of the global South that seek to perpetuate in the 21st century the hierarchies and mythologies of what W.E.B. Dubois identified as “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line”

### **America’s racial degeneracy**

What I find so sad and tragic about George Floyd’s brutal murder is its predictable familiarity. Six years ago, I wrote about other killings of African Americans that caused an outpouring of rage, which is reproduced verbatim below. The script remains the same. The anguish remains the same. The rhetoric remains the same. The public and political polarisations remain the same. The despair and hopes for change remain the same.

The protests after each tragic death reflect accumulated anger, pain, tiredness, frustration, and sadness at the African American condition in the United States over four centuries of slavery, slave codes, black codes, lynching, racial segregation, the new Jim Crow of mass black incarceration, and a litany of micro aggressions seared into the collective memories of African Americans over generations. In short, being black in America is exhausting and often dangerous.

The names are added to the long hall of infamy with sickening, stultifying regularity. The latest include Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and all those black boys and men, girls and women sacrificed at the altar of America's racism, the country's enduring original sin. Each generation of Americans is confronted by the ugly face of this primordial transgression, its staying power, its infinite capacities to make a mockery of the country's vain self-congratulation as the land of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. Proclamations that fall on deaf ears to its minority citizens and the outside world that experience and see the hypocrisies, contradictions, and inconsistencies spawned by the destructive deformities of racism.

The degeneracy of American racism runs deep; it is rooted in more than two centuries of slavery, the foundational matrix of American society, economy, and politics. It was renewed and recast during a century of Jim Crow, the laws that enforced racial segregation in Southern United States between 1877 and 1965. It survived and mutated over the last half century of civil rights. It persisted in the Obama era, confounding misplaced expectations for a post-racial society that the election of the country's first black president was magically supposed to usher in.

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Each generation of African Americans faces eruptions of this racial degeneracy, most tragically captured in deadly assaults against unarmed black males by the police that predictably provoke widespread local and national protests. Each moment acquires its symbols and slogans. This year it is Ferguson and the battle cry "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" and New York and Eric Garner's plaintive cry for life, "I can't breathe." Both have become rallying anthems of protests across the nation following the grand jury decisions not to indict the police officers who killed the two men.

Outrage is often centered on the altercations between the law enforcement agencies and African American communities because of the racial disproportionalities in surveillance, profiling, arrests, and sentencing. Mountains of data show that African Americans are subject to forms of policing that are far more excessive, abusive, and disrespectful than European Americans. This has resulted in the creation of an American gulag of black imprisonment, a prison pipeline especially for black males from the schools, streets, and sidewalks of America.

### **Devaluing black lives, black bodies and black humanity**

The broken relations between African American communities and law enforcement agencies and the exponential growth of a black prison industrial complex in the era following the civil rights struggles represent the contemporary forms of America's age-old racial structures, hierarchies, and ideologies, the country's new Jim Crow regime of existential, economic and epistemic violence against black lives, black well-being, and black citizenship.

Police brutality and unaccountability for violence against African Americans is facilitated by and a

manifestation of the wider society's values, expectations, and interests. The challenge is not simply to provide the police with better training or technologies, although that would help. Lest we forget, Eric Garner's death was captured on video, and the grand jury still refused to indict the policeman. In a bygone era, public lynchings were spectacles of morbid public entertainment. The real issue is the value placed on black lives, black bodies, and black humanity by American society.

The discourse by the police and their supporters often taps into persistent racial codes: the bodies of the black victims are full of brawn, not brains, depicted as embodiments of some fearsome bestial power that threaten their police interlocutors, which can only be tamed by superior weapons and intelligence. The police officer who killed Michael Brown described the latter as an overpowering Hulk Hogan "demon" who "grunted" and charged at him like a mindless animal. A Republican Congressman blamed Eric Garner for his own death, saying "If he had not had asthma, and a heart condition, and was not so obese, he would not have died from this." And 12-year-old Tamir Rice was mistaken for a 20-year-old, a homage to the black man-child stereotype of racial discourse in white supremacist America and colonial Africa.

Each generation of Americans is forced to reckon with the journey it has travelled towards racial equality. It discovers that while progress has been made, the distance it has travelled from the past, from the original sin of slavery, is much shorter than the road ahead. Each generation of African Americans is given no choice but to renew the struggles of previous generations against America's racial degeneracy.

### **Cowardice and complicity**

America's racial backwardness is marked and sustained by cowardice, the complicity of the wider society in its perpetuation, the cognitive inability to take race and racism seriously, the political refusal to address it systematically, and the obliviousness of too many people to its destructiveness, not only for its victims but also for its perpetrators and beneficiaries. Racism diminishes the entire society, robbing it of its citizens' full human potential; it leaves in its trail horrendous wastage of human resources and lives.

America's failure to have a concerted conversation on race and racism is not surprising because too much is at stake for too many people, interests, and institutions. But racism will not disappear by ignoring it, dismissing it, or wishing it away through fanciful invocations of a post-racial society or misguided censure against political correctness. Failure to address it will continue to erode the moral, political, and constitutional fibre of the nation, and make it a global laughing stock for the glaring mismatch between what it preaches abroad and practises at home.

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At the height of the Cold War and decolonisation, the United States lost hearts and minds in Africa, Asia, and Latin America because of the racist treatment of its black citizens. In today's era of changing global hegemonies marked by the rise of the rest in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the ancestral homelands of America's minorities, images beamed from American cities of police violence against people of colour diminish the country's global soft power that it so badly needs as its hard power erodes. A serial domestic abuser cannot expect to be respected by its neighbours aware of such abuse, as is the case for America in today's world of hyper connectivity.

Insofar as we are all raced, race and racism is our collective problem. It is not a black problem. It is an American problem. We must find the courage and the honest language to address it with the

seriousness it deserves in all aspects of our lives at the individual, interpersonal, institutional, community, national, and global levels. Only then will the problem of the colour line of previous centuries cease to be a problem for future generations, and can we begin to fully realise the possibilities that lie in the indivisible and interconnected mutuality of our collective humanity to build truly democratic, inclusive, and humane societies.

This is what the lives, tragic deaths, and memories of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and countless others before and since mean to me: the imperative that, as we say in Southern Africa, the struggle for liberation continues, for our liberation as peoples of African descent from centuries of Euro-American racism, and for the humanisation and democratisation of our countries in the diaspora and the world at large.

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