

We Must Heal Our Nation's Poisoned Soul

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I would like to offer the following thoughts¹ on the current moment in our country's history.

From Whence It Came

What we know of as “the modern world” was made through the strategic colonization of Black and Indigenous peoples over several centuries. The systematic exploitation of these peoples' societies, cultures, and natural resources—primarily, though not exclusively—in the Global South have powered the engines of globalizing mercantile and then industrial capitalism that have been firing since the 1500s. During subsequent centuries, Western and Northern European empires fueled their colonial economies through the enslavement or eradication of millions of Black and Indigenous peoples.

In this sense, chattel slavery and indigenous genocide *were essential* for the creation of political regimes, socio-cultural infrastructure, and economic wealth of these colonizer countries. During this time, the proselytizing activities of many Christian missionaries and much pseudo-scientific tripe of the emerging fields of anthropology, anatomy, physiology, anthropology, and *even sociology* far too often provided the ideological rationale for a brutalizing racism. They gave colonizers moral or scientific “legitimacy” that Black and Indigenous peoples were deserving of dehumanization.

The USA's Original Sin

While the original 13 British Colonies were nominal “colonies,” their political, economic, social, and cultural structures were established by White European colonizers. Thus, even while those landowning White men of means did indeed remove our yoke of British tyranny, they nevertheless created institutions, structures, and legal frameworks that merely perpetuated the ongoing oppression, exploitation, and decimation of Black and Indigenous peoples that drove their wealth accumulation and power consolidation. Any educated person who has read our nation's Constitution must realize that it a charter for White Supremacy. Our nation was founded on the twin poisons of chattel slavery and indigenous genocide. This was not coincidental. It is our country's *original sin*.

Americans collectively—but especially White Americans who have enjoyed generations of unearned privilege and unfair advantage—have not performed a fraction of the penitence necessary to heal our nation's poisoned soul. Yet, our only hope at saving our fledging democratic republic is for us—especially White Americans—to *systematically recreate and/or reform our nation's institutions, structures, and legal frameworks in ways that recognize and support the humanity and advance the well-being of Black and Indigenous peoples who have so long endured oppression, exploitation, and brutality*. Anything short of this revolutionary transformation of our society will leave our nation's poisoned soul unredeemed—and perhaps unredeemable.

¹ A few caveats. I have not yet been blessed with the gift of brevity. I have abstained from including an array of data or scholarly citations. I firmly believe that we are not able to fully understand the depth and breadth of our problems without knowing the historical contexts and structural and institutional processes through which they have been embedded in our society. As such, I begin with some words on our deeper history, which I believe is essential to fully understanding the significance of our current moment. Then I describe the wider view of systemic, institutional racism in the US, before turning more specifically to pervasive police brutality and extra-judicial killings (i.e., murders) of Blacks by police.

Bearing Witness

One of our first steps of this revolutionary transformation should be to *bear witness to the structural and institutional discrimination* that generations of Black and Indigenous peoples experienced throughout our country's history. I make no attempt to be comprehensive here, but the following are perhaps some of the most obvious and clear manifestations of systemic racism:

- the entire institution of slavery, which was endemic throughout the South but which also helped drive major economic sectors throughout the North. (I don't think enough Americans know of the many corporations² and institutions of higher education³ whose capital, wealth, and/or endowments at least partially depended upon the institution of slavery.)
- the entire infrastructure of Black Codes during the Reconstruction Era and then Jim Crow laws after Reconstruction from the 1880s into the 1960s, including, but not limited to, anti-miscegenation laws, poll taxes, "separate but equal," literacy tests, sundown towns, grandfather clauses, racial gerrymandering, etc.
- the continuous physical, economic, social, and political violence of an array of White Supremacist organizations (such as the Ku Klux Klan and White Citizens Councils): night rides, lynchings, church bombings, cross burnings, etc.
- the residential segregation that pervades throughout the country, facilitated by mechanisms such as racial restrictive covenants, mortgage/insurance redlining, and complicit participation of realtor agencies, neighborhood associations, zoning boards, and city councils; and
- the fundamentally racist design and implementation of an entire range of federal and state policies and practices, which have denied opportunities to Blacks that were extended freely to Whites: such as property rights legislation, the Homestead Acts, Federal Housing Administration lending/insuring practices, the G.I. Bill, etc.

All of the above and more (including a range of problems with policing, which I discuss in the next section) have produced an enduring and durable racial inequality in our country. *Decades of social science research have clearly documented racist outcomes* in, among many others, educational opportunities; family income; family wealth; occupational opportunities; voting rights; political representation; community support services; life expectancy; disease rates; health care access; access to environmental goods; exposure to environmental bads; crime victimization; etc.

Policing as Systemic Racism

Now let's turn to American police. Let's not get tripped up by thinking about individual officers. We are talking about the institution of policing, the occupational history of police, and the organizational cultures and practices of entire departments, precincts, and jurisdictions.

Perhaps more so than protecting and serving community residents, our nation's police forces are fundamentally oriented to protect economic functioning and maintain social order. They are agents of social control and an essential instrument of our White Supremacist social order. We need only look to the origins of policing in the USA. Night watch groups in the North (which would help cities control Native Americans and hunt fugitive slaves) and slave patrols in the South (which would hunt, capture, and punish escaped slaves) became many jurisdictions' first police departments. On the western frontier, White posses and vigilante groups often worked hand-in-hand with designated marshals and sheriffs.

After the Civil War, most police departments across the South and some in the North were crucial to implementing Black Codes and then Jim Crow laws, which the White power structure used to subjugated Black populations. Many police departments were doubly oppressive toward Black people. Not only

² These include, among others: Aetna; a predecessor of AIG; three predecessors of Bank of America; Brooks Brothers; Brown Brothers Harriman; CSX railroad; a predecessor of FleetBoston Financial; JP Morgan Chase; New York Life; Lehman Brothers; the Norfolk Southern railroad; Tiffany & Co.; two parent companies of USA Today; and two predecessors of Wachovia.

³ These include, among others: Columbia; Dartmouth; Delaware; Georgetown; Harvard; Pennsylvania; Princeton, Rutgers; Virginia; and Yale.

would they regularly brutalize Blacks but they also would refuse to intervene when White mobs terrorized Black communities. Even casual observers of American history must acknowledge that racist White mob violence has happened with an obscene frequency in US cities and counties over the last 200 years.⁴

In more recent decades, the patterns are rather clear. Police across the USA disproportionately stop, detain, and arrest Black people when driving, while walking, in businesses, and on their own property. Such biased intervention is not accidental. It is merely a continuation of many of the institutional forces, structures, and policies mentioned above. Further, the systemic racism within American policing is strengthened and emboldened even more by decades of racial profiling, “stop and frisk,” “three strikes,” “broken windows,” no-knock warrants, and the War on Drugs, among others. We also have seen the militarization of our municipal police departments and county sheriffs departments so that police officers take a more adversarial approach to their work and community residents see the police more as an occupying force. Indeed, SWAT and anti-gang units across the US—as well as specialized forces, such as the LAPD’s CRASH unit—all too often are plagued by corruption as they operate as shock troops of racist social control.

All of this culminates in the utterly detestable but entirely predictable fact that Black people disproportionately suffer from continued brutality and extrajudicial killing (i.e., murder) at the hands of police officers—and often while other cops participate, cover up, or otherwise fail to act. To add insult to proverbial and actual injury, many of these same police officers hide behind the “blue wall of silence” and lie in official reports to evade criminal charges and administrative discipline. And this has been happening for many decades: James Earl Chaney and Marquette Frye in the mid-1960s; Randolph Evans in the mid-1970s; Michael Stewart, Eleanor Bumpurs, and Edmund Perry in the early to mid-1980s; and Amadou Diallo in the last year of the 20th Century.

Yet, now that more and more of us are armed with smart phones and can easily post videos to social media, Americans—or, more accurately, White Americans—are learning just how often these senseless and brutal killings happen to Black people. The following men and women are but 30 of the most well-known African Americans who have been killed by police violence and/or in police custody in the last decade. Behind each one are dozens of others who simply happened to not get similar news coverage.

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| Anthony Lamar Smith (2011) | Freddie Gray (2015) | Stephon Clark (2018) |
| Jordan Davis (2012) | Sandra Bland (2015) | Botham Jean (2018) |
| Eric Garner (2014) | William Chapman (2015) | EJ Bradford (2018) |
| Michael Brown (2014) | Samuel DeBose (2015) | Willie McCoy (2019) |
| Tamir Rice (2014) | Redel Jones (2015) | Sean Reed (2020) |
| Ezell Ford (2014) | Kenney Watkins (2015) | Dion Johnson (2020) |
| Laquan McDonald (2014) | Michelle Shirley (2016) | Ahmaud Arbery (2020) |
| Tony Robinson (2015) | Jamar Clark (2016) | Breonna Taylor (2020) |
| Eric Harris (2015) | Alton Sterling (2016) | Tony McDade (2020) |
| Walter Scott (2015) | Philando Castile (2016) | George Floyd (2020) |

Every one of these folks—who are our family members, neighbors, and friends—died senselessly because of the structural racism inherent in our policing institution. Structural and institutional problems demand structural and institutional solutions. To be sure, we have little precedent for Americans producing such solutions. But, *anything short of fundamental transformation of our racist institutions is insufficient for redeeming our nation’s poisoned soul.*

⁴ Here are just *some* locations and years where/when White mobs committed mass murder and property destruction in Black communities/neighborhoods up to 1967: Cincinnati (1829); Washington, DC (1835); Cincinnati (1836); Cincinnati (1841); New Orleans (1866); Memphis (1866); Pulaski (1868); Colfax (1873); Thibodaux (1887); Wilmington (1898); Atlanta (1906); Slocum (1910); East St. Louis (1917); “Red Summer” in Elaine, Washington, DC, Jenkins County, Macon, Chicago, Baltimore, Omaha, Charleston, Longview, and Knoxville (1919); Tulsa (1921); Rosewood (1923); Little Rock (1927); Harlem (1935); Detroit (1943); Cleveland (1966); Newark (1967).