

Another Lethal Virus Ravages the United States

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In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we in the United States are facing an even more deadly virus that threatens all of us—the insidious and lethal virus of racism.

As of June 1, 2020, COVID-19 has already claimed 107,000 lives in the US, with over 1.8 million confirmed cases country-wide. Black, brown, and native American communities have been the hardest hit due to racial disparities in dangerous work environments, access to adequate housing, nutrition and healthcare. These disparities are not accidental but are the result of over 400 years of racism against these very same communities of color. The COVID-19 crisis brought to the consciousness of every American just how costly, in terms of human life, racism can be. It was during this devastating pandemic that violence in the United States erupted again in an all too familiar way.

On May 24, 2020, at a little after 8 PM, George Perry Floyd was arrested after being accused of using a counterfeit \$20 bill at a market in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Mr. Floyd, while handcuffed and face down on the cement pavement of the street, was murdered by Minneapolis police officers, one of whom pinned Mr. Floyd down with his knee against Floyd's neck while another officer held down his legs and another compressed his back. While Mr. Floyd pleaded for them to stop, saying "I can't breathe," witnesses standing nearby also yelled for the police to stop, saying, "You're going to kill this man!!" Still, Officer Derek Chauvin kept his knee on the right side of Floyd's neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, including 2 minutes and 53 seconds after Mr. Floyd became unresponsive. A young girl bystander had the courage to film the entire incident with her cell phone in order to document the injustice she was witnessing. This graphic and disturbing video has been shown over and over again on TV and social media, causing untold anguish and pain to all who see it—another black man murdered in broad daylight, before many witnesses by the police. Indeed, the officer at one point looks directly into the camera, his left hand in his pocket, seemingly without a care in the world, while his knee is killing a human being. And he has reason not to fear repercussions for his actions. There have been innumerable episodes of police brutality and extrajudicial police killings of unarmed black men and women in their custody, without convictions, and often without charges even being filed against the perpetrators. Even when video recordings have been used to document these crimes, convictions almost never happen! Not only killings of black men by police, but also by white civilians almost never result in convictions. The shooting of unarmed Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman on February 26, 2012, simply walking home from a store through a neighborhood where he was visiting relatives, resulted in a not guilty verdict after Zimmerman claimed "self-defense." More recently, three white men cornered and the shot a black man, Ahmaud Arbery on February 23, 2020, while he was out for a jog near his home. The men claimed they "mistook him" for a suspect in some recent neighborhood break-ins. These men were not even arrested until May and have not yet come to trial. The video of Floyd's death brings to mind a litany of innocent black lives taken with impunity by police or white civilians: Amadou Diallo, Manuel Loggins Jr, Ronald Madison, Endra James, Sean Bell, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Samuel DuBose, Freddie Gray, Natasha

McKenna, Walter Scott, Michael Brown, Laquan McDonald, Tamir Rice, Yvette Smith, Rekia Boyd, Kendra James, LaTanya Haggerty, Atatiana Koquice Jefferson It seems the list never ends.

When I saw the video of Floyd's death, my heart broke and my stomach lurched! This man, immobilized and helpless on the ground was having his life taken by police officers who are sworn to serve and protect. Civilian witnesses pleaded for them to stop—pleaded for his life—to no avail. George Floyd repeatedly said, "I can't breathe," reminiscent of Eric Garner's last words, to no avail. Most heart wrenching of all was George Floyd's calling out to his Mother, who died over 10 years ago. Why call on her at that moment—because a mother is the one who protects us when fear overwhelms us; a mother soothes and comforts us when we suffer; a mother loves us when hatred seems to engulf us. But in this case, I couldn't help but think that George called out to his mother because he knew he was dying. He called out to her to help him face his own death and to welcome him into her loving arms as he crossed the threshold between death and new life. Sadness, anger, and frustration washed over me as I saw human life and breath taken from a black man by the knee of a police officer on his neck. The scene, all too poignantly, has come to symbolize the yolk of racism that black Americans have borne for the last four centuries.

While I am somewhat heartened by the multiracial makeup of the peaceful protesters that have marched across the country demanding justice for George Floyd and an end to racism and the acceptance of white privilege that allows these tragedies to continue, I am also outraged that violence and looting have hijacked the righteous indignation of so many of us and turned the media's attention to reinforcing the stereotype of black people as lawless, threatening vandals (even though some of those destroying and looting were white). It is time for all of us to examine how we personally benefit from white privilege. Do we hesitate to call the police when we need help? Do we worry about the safety of our loved ones every time they leave home? When driving, do our stomachs knot with fear when being pulled over for a traffic violation? If an officer asks us for our driver's license, are we afraid to reach into our purse to retrieve it—for fear the officer will mistake our wallet for a gun? When walking or jogging, do we fear being stopped and questioned about a recent crime in the area? When looking to buy a home, do we consider our race before we decide where we might be able to purchase a home, or is our first concern the price and whether we can afford it? There are so many ways that white privilege benefits us in everyday life. Until we are ready to insist that black lives really do matter and that black men and women deserve to be treated as equals of white Americans, nothing will change. Until we come to love and accept the equal dignity of all human beings, nothing will change, and we will continue to experience the ugly power that racism continues to exert in our society. We need to reflect on our own lives and do the hard work necessary to change our hearts. Actions proceed from the values that we hold. The values that influence our everyday choices will only change with honest introspection. Structural societal change will only come when we are able to see injustice, speak out against it, and work to build "a more perfect union." We must be willing to stand together and shout from the highest rooftops: **BLACK LIVES MATTER!**

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