

US protests not about race but disadvantage

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Demonstrators gather at the Martin Luther King memorial to protest the death of George Floyd



Buildings burn in Washington in 1968 after the assassination of Martin Luther King

The liberal media has got it all wrong on America.

If God wills that it (the civil war) continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman's 250 years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said 3000 years ago, so still it must be said: the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

Abraham Lincoln, 1865

God gave Noah the rainbow sign / No more water but fire next time.

Mary Don't You Weep, a Negro spiritual

Across the US this week, 29 cities called out the National Guard to help control protests, riots and looting that broke out in response to the gruesome police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

The nation seemed set to burn. This time water, fire next time.

Is it fire this time? Probably not. By week's end, the protests seemed to be moderating, at least in their violence. But the words of Reverend Al Sharpton, at a memorial for Floyd, were ominous nonetheless, "Floyd was blameless in the encounter that took his life, and his death was appallingly gruesome, cruel and needless". It understandably aroused great passion and anger.

Sharpton saw it as the essence of America, "The police knee in our neck", he said, "is what America has been doing to us for 400 years."

Liberal media voices rang out: "America has never atoned for the original sin of slavery". Former president Barack Obama and Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden both said the murder of Floyd was "systemic racism".

But was it really? What do the facts and the long trajectory of US history really show?

Racism in the form of slavery is indeed the country's original sin. Yet, the repudiation of racism, and the positive liberal embrace of humanity which transcends race, is America's genius.

The Declaration of Independence begins with a magnificent declaration, biblical in its majesty: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights."

Yet, the author of these words, Thomas Jefferson, owned slaves. Hypocrisy plain and simple. Jefferson couldn't see African-Americans as human beings deserving of human rights.

But the US is a creedal nation, a nation built, uniquely, on a creed. As the Christian gospels will shame a believer into better behaviour, so the Declaration of Independence shamed America into justice on race. The power of Jefferson's words overcame the slave-owning example he set. For as slaves and their supporters, abolitionists of every race, campaigned against slavery, they did so by holding up to the US its own immortal creed.

The US, like most nations in the 18th century, was once institutionally racist. Is it now?

The answer is no, it is not. It has at times struggled bitterly not to be so. It fought a terrible civil war, by far the bloodiest conflict it has known, at first to ensure slavery could not expand into new territories, and then explicitly to end slavery altogether.

There was immense civil-rights work to do after that. Two of the first institutions to integrate were conservative: the military, and professional sports. The churches, though many had led the abolitionist campaign, had a mixed record. Billy Graham insisted from the start of his ministry in the 1950s that his congregations be integrated.

The progress has been spectacular. In 2008, the US elected its first black president. And even before that, back in 1996, the Republican who Democratic candidate Bill Clinton feared the most as a presidential opponent was General Colin Powell.

If European liberals sneer at the US, they might want to remind us of the names of all the black French presidents or black British prime ministers.

Since the great wave of civil-rights reforms in the US in the 1960s, black life expectancy has increased by nearly 12 years, more than white life expectancy has increased, although blacks still die 3½ years earlier than whites. According to a Brookings Institution study in 1964, 18 per cent of whites said they had a black friend. Now it's nearly 90 per cent. In 1958, 44 per cent of whites said they would move house if a black family moved next door. By the time of the Brookings Study it was 1 per cent.

In 1968, only 50 per cent of African-American adults had graduated high school. Now it's more than 90 per cent. In 1968, 10 per cent of blacks had college degrees. Now it's just one quarter.

The positive embrace of humanity is America's genius.

More than half of African-Americans are middle class. At the same time, there is still striking inequality. In 2018, the median income of a black family was \$US 41,000, while for a white family it was \$US 71,000. Even that does not necessarily indicate active systemic racism operating today. Asian-Americans, many of whom are immigrants, have a substantially higher median income than whites. Asian-Americans have not suffered the tragic, historic disadvantages of African-Americans, nor have they been locked out by a racist US society.

The one measure where African-Americans have gone backwards since 1968 is the proportion of the black population in jail. This has risen from 604 per 100,000 in 1968 to 1703 per 100,000 in 2018.

Here we come upon a thorny knot of the most difficult problems. As President Donald Trump and his administration assert, the figures do not support the idea that US police forces are systemically racist, despite the shocking murder of Floyd. On the other hand, US society has organised itself in a way that is distinctly but unintentionally disadvantageous to blacks and that makes it difficult for blacks to escape these disadvantages.

I don't believe this is racism at work. I have lived in the US on four separate occasions, as this paper's Washington correspondent in 1986 and 1987, and for periods of several months each in three different attachments to US think tanks. Every time, I have lived in a racially diverse apartment building. I've had friends of every ethnic background. I have spent probably thousands of hours in the company of conservative Republicans and conservative Christians. I have never heard a single one ever make a racially derogatory remark.

That experience is surely subjective, but it's worth something.

What do the figures tell us? Last year, police killed 10 unarmed African-Americans. This is in a nation of 330 million people. It's difficult for people to remember just how big a number 330 million is. It will always throw up tragic and terrible cases and some abuses. A few terrible incidents, in this media and internet dominated age, can look like a national pattern when they are nothing of the kind.

In any year of the past half dozen, the 800,000 police across the US's 18,000 separate police forces will kill about 1000 people. One reason that figure is so high is because of America's gun culture. Every person a US cop pulls over or talks to could likely be carrying a gun. In the four years from 2000, 250 police were killed in the line of duty. Blue lives matter too.

Generally, about twice as many whites are killed as blacks, and blacks make up about a quarter of those killed. Given that blacks are 13 per cent of the US population, that establishes that they die in disproportionately large numbers. But given that African-Americans commit more than half the homicides in the US and an even higher proportion of the robberies, they come into difficult contact with the police much more often than whites do.

If the police retreat into passive policing, it will be law-abiding African-Americans in high-crime neighbourhoods who suffer most.

That's not to say there is no racism. Obviously, white racism survives in the US. Racism, I suspect, is an inherent human evil. It must always be opposed but can never be totally eradicated. There is no part of US law or respectable US opinion that sanctions racism. The national convulsion the Floyd killing has provoked indicates that very few in the US think it's OK. When violence against blacks was more routine, as in pre-civil rights parts of the old Confederacy, it did not cause a national outrage.

New York's Chief of Police Terence Monahan gave a powerful TV interview this week in which he pointed out that his police force is a "majority minority", that is, white officers are less than half his force. He denied absolutely that he or his officers were racist. He condemned the killing of Floyd and pointed out, pretty convincingly, that his officers didn't do it. Not only that, they have often died in defence of minority community members. Yet, 170 of his officers have been injured, some seriously and often with intent, by rioters acting violently over the past week.

Sometimes Trump talks about race in a way that is unhelpful or stupid or gauche. When he tells congresswomen of African heritage that "they should go back where they came from", that is offensive. And when he told protesters that if they breached the White House fence they would be met by "vicious dogs and ominous weapons", that was needlessly bombastic.

But Trump is assuredly not a systematic racist. And as with many populists, much that he says is common sense. It was foolish of him to suggest this week that he would override states and use the Insurrection Act to deploy regular troops to US cities to quell riots. The military, though generally pro-Republican, absolutely hates the way Trump sometimes tries to politicise them.

Yet, the demonisation of Trump is unreasonable and wildly exaggerated, and it makes its own contribution to every problem the US faces. Susan Rice, Obama's national security adviser, tweeted that Trump "openly incites the murder of his fellow Americans". That is deeply misleading, grossly irresponsible and can only contribute to a dangerous over-reaction from protesters, which will in turn produce its own counter-reaction. This is the tenor of much of the comment on CNN and in much of the mainstream American media. It is at least as bad as anything Trump says or does and contributes to the prevailing sense of crisis, drama and mutual and inexplicable hatreds.

Some commentators talk of the return of the "riot ideology" of the 1960s. In 1967, liberal magazine *The New Republic* ran an editorial that said: "Terrifying as the looting, the shooting, the arson are, they could mean a gain for the nation if, as a result, white America were shocked into looking at itself."

This is liberal foolishness at its most extreme. And it made a big comeback this week.

There is no doubt African-Americans are seriously disadvantaged, and that this disadvantage arises from the brutal history their forebears suffered. If the liberal Left tell them there is no hope because of systemic racism, that their only recourse is defiance and civil disobedience, that personal agency in work and education mean nothing whereas identity politics is everything, then this will have tragic consequences. Similarly, if the message of liberal ideology is that all white people are complicit in racism and enjoy white privilege, that may work OK as a meaningless affectation for affluent whites living in rich neighbourhoods where they never meet street crime, but it will cause suppurating retaliatory resentment among working-class, unemployed and otherwise disadvantaged whites. It's a recipe for needless racial polarisation.

Many African-Americans, like many poor people in the US generally, are caught in the intersection of several US policy mistakes. The US ties health insurance to jobs. If you don't have a job, or don't have a well-paid job, you cannot afford health insurance. That means you don't go to the doctor when you're sick. This is one reason African-Americans have suffered so badly from COVID-19.

Globalisation has contributed to the loss of blue-collar jobs, which are great entry-level jobs. Truck driving is one of the last big employers of non-college graduates that pays a living wage. This dynamic hurts blacks the most.

African-Americans are concentrated in impoverished inner cities. The public schools are wretched and the power of the teachers' unions makes their reform all but impossible. In wealthier districts, the schools are better.

The legal system, while not formally racial in orientation, punishes minor crimes that blacks typically commit much more heavily than minor crimes that whites typically commit. Which white American will tell you they didn't smoke pot at college? But this never leads to jail.

And here is the final tragic irony, bitter than any other. Before COVID-19 struck, Trump was actually delivering for African-Americans. Their unemployment rate, at just over 5 per cent, was the lowest in history.

Black poverty had declined substantially under the Trump administration. Black incarceration also declined under Trump. People with jobs don't go to jail so much.

Despite his reactionary reputation, Trump sponsored and signed the ***First Step Act***, which got thousands of non-violent black offenders out of prison.

The US is not systemically racist. Despite its history, it is systemically anti-racist. If the liberal elites, who more or less hate the US on principle, push the systemic racism line long enough and hysterically enough, they may create the reality they claim to oppose.