

Protest and insurrection: a prime example of racial disparity in America

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From an early age, American students learn about the Constitution. And even though a majority are not experts on the document, we are taught the framework of our country secures certain rights for all who live here.

The First Amendment is one section most know and tout with pride, thankful our country's framers safeguarded the individual's right to religion, the right to freedom of speech and the press, the right to peaceably assemble and the right to petition the government.

But as we have seen in the last year, simply giving Americans the right to peaceably assemble, or protest, is not enough.

A key step in achieving equality for all is addressing the contrasting ways we treat protestors.

Last summer's Black Lives Matter protests and January's Capitol insurrection committed by domestic terrorists brought this problem to the forefront.

In severe contrast to the way peaceful BLM protestors were treated, video and pictures suggest insurrectionists were practically welcomed in by some of the Capitol Police officers.

[One image](#) showed an officer posing for a selfie with an insurrectionist as the attack was in progress. Ohio congressman [Tim Ryan said](#) that officer and an officer who donned a MAGA hat were both suspended.

The [New York Times reported](#) that while people rampaged Congressional offices, one officer even said, "We've just got to let them do their thing now."

It is hard not to wonder, how would Black individuals be treated in the same situation? The racism is undeniable.

Additionally, the number of arrests made on the day of the insurrection prove officers react differently when white people are involved. Only [61 arrests](#) were made on January 6 and most of them were for curfew violations, not the attack of a federal building.

On June 1 alone, [326 people](#) were arrested in Washington, D.C. for actions related to the BLM protest.

While the protests following George Floyd's death in May and the insurrection in January are recent examples of this disparity, the pattern of treating protestors differently has roots that run deep in U.S. history.

To oversimplify the disgusting and central theme of Black protestors being treated unfairly, let us look at a film that recently reminded audiences of a horrific trial near the end of the Civil Rights Movement.

In September, Netflix released “The Trial of the Chicago 7.” The [biopic depicts the 1969 trial](#) in which a group of activists opposed to the Vietnam War were charged by the federal government for conspiring to start a riot outside the 1968 Democratic National Convention.

The trial defendants included seven white men and Black Panther Party co-founder Bobby Seale. Seale had not even been involved in the planning of the protest but was charged the same as the white men who were.

Obvious racism was demonstrated in the way Seale was treated during the trial. While the defendants were tried as a group, Seale was the only defendant denied his basic rights and abused within the courtroom.

When Seale’s lawyer could not appear at the trial, Seale repeatedly asked the judge to delay the proceedings. In response, the judge had Seale gagged and tied to a chair in front of the entire courtroom.

One scene in the movie depicts a conversation between Seale, fellow defendant Tom Hayden and defense lawyer William Kunstler. Seale perfectly articulates the reality Black Americans have historically faced in advocating for equal rights.

In handcuffs and a prison uniform, Seale points out to Hayden that he and the other white defendants are at least partially drawn to activism by a desire to rebel against their parents and society.

Looking down, Hayden considers the observation.

“Maybe.”

Seale calmly responds, “And you can see how that’s different from a rope on a tree?”

The consequences are different for Black Americans than for white Americans. They were different then and they are still different now. The reactions to protest and insurrection may just be one of the most blatantly obvious examples.

Of course, “consequences” is a loose term here, given that often times the punishment for Black people comes even in the absence of wrongdoing.

In PBS NewsHour’s “Race Matters: America in Crisis,” Vanessa Young of Minnesota, who identified herself as coming from a multiracial family, spoke of the way this is a reality even now.

“It’s not fair that I can’t make mistakes like other people make mistakes. Because I will be judged differently. I will experience consequences differently,” [Young said](#).

As the insurrection demonstrated, too many white Americans think they can storm a federal building, threaten a longstanding democratic practice, and attack police officers.

And they think they can do it because, [historically, there have not been a lot of consequences](#). There have been for Black protestors, but not for them.

Until peaceful BIPOC protestors can safely demonstrate and be shown respect, we have no hope for an America that protects the rights of all. We have no hope of achieving the progress so many deserve.