

America, This Is Your Chance

We must get it right this time or risk losing our democracy forever.



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Our democracy hangs in the balance. This is not an overstatement.

As protests, riots, and police violence roiled the nation last week, the president vowed to send the military to quell persistent rebellions and looting, whether governors wanted a military occupation or not. John Allen, a retired four-star Marine general, wrote that we may be witnessing the “beginning of the end of the American experiment” because of President Trump’s catastrophic failures.

Trump’s leadership has been disastrous. But it would be a mistake to place the blame on him alone. In part, we find ourselves here for the same reasons a civil war tore our nation apart more than 100 years ago: Too many citizens prefer to cling to brutal and unjust systems than to give up political power, the perceived benefits of white supremacy and an exploitative economic system. If we do not learn the lessons of history and choose a radically different path forward, we may lose our last chance at creating a truly inclusive, egalitarian democracy.

The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky famously said that “the degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.” Today, the same can be said of our criminal injustice system, which is a mirror reflecting back to us who we really are, as opposed to what we tell ourselves.

Millions of us watched a black man in Minnesota lie on the ground for nearly nine minutes, begging for his life and calling out to his dead mother, while a white police officer pressed his knee into his neck, killing him, with his hand casually resting in his pocket — all in broad daylight in front of people screaming for the officer to stop.



The memorial at the site of the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis on Sunday. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Everyone knows that the police officers who killed George Floyd never would have been fired or arrested if a courageous black girl had not filmed the incident on her phone and posted it to social media. Deep down, we already knew this kind of thing happens to black people. All of us knew it when we watched Amy Cooper call the police on a black man who calmly asked her to put a leash on her dog. We knew it when we watched two white men in a pickup truck ambush Ahmaud Arbery and shoot him to death while he was jogging in a neighborhood outside Brunswick, Ga. And we knew it before George Zimmerman stalked and murdered a black teenager named Trayvon Martin.

We know these truths about black experiences, but we often pretend we don’t. As Stanley Cohen wrote in “States of Denial,” many people “know” and “not-know” the truth about oppression and suffering. He explains: “Denial may be neither a matter of telling the truth nor intentionally telling a lie. There seem to be states of mind, or even whole cultures, in which we know and don’t know at the same time.”

In 1963, images of racist white police officers spraying fire hoses and siccing police dogs on young black protesters in Birmingham shocked the world and propelled many white Americans to join civil rights activists in challenging racial segregation. A similar dynamic has occurred with the images of George Floyd’s death. Our nation suddenly caught a glimpse of itself in the mirror and people of all races poured into the streets to say “no more.” Now the president seems to be itching for another civil war.

I will not pretend to have a road map that will lead us to higher ground. But for those who are serious about rising to the challenge, I will share a few of the key steps that I believe are necessary if we are to learn from our history and not merely repeat it.

We must face our racial history and our racial present. We cannot solve a problem we do not understand. Donald Trump would not be the president and George Floyd would not be dead if, after the Civil War, our nation had committed itself to reparations, reconciliation and atonement for the land and people that colonizers stole, sold and plundered. Instead, white people who enslaved blacks were granted reparations for the loss of their “property” while formerly enslaved blacks were given nothing — not even the 40 acres and a mule they were promised. Ever since, our nation has been trapped in a cycle of intermittent racial progress followed by fierce backlash and the emergence of new and “improved” systems of racial and social control. These cycles have been punctuated by various movements, uprisings and riots, but one thing has remained constant: A majority of whites persistently deny the scale and severity of racial injustice that people of color endure.

It's not enough to learn the broad outlines of this history. Only by pausing long enough to study the cycles of oppression and resistance does it become clear that simply being a good person or not wishing black people any harm is not sufficient. Nor is voting for Democrats or diversifying police forces. In fact, those efforts have not made much of a dent in ending abusive policing or mass incarceration.

There are many excellent books, articles and films that can help to put our racial moment in context. A good place to start if you are new to racial justice history and advocacy is Ibram X. Kendi's trio of books, "How to Be an Antiracist" "Stamped From the Beginning" and "Stamped," his young adult book co-authored with Jason Reynolds. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's book "From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation" and Ava DuVernay's film "13th" are especially relevant now. And Andrea Ritchie's book "Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color" is essential reading, given the comparatively little attention that police killings of black women typically receive. Paul Butler's book "Chokehold" is an excellent exploration of police violence against black men — past and present. The documentary "Whose Streets?," depicting the aftermath of Michael Brown's murder and the uprisings in Ferguson, Mo., will open your eyes to the tragedies and triumphs of that period, as well as "blatant racism and hypocrisy on display from the powers that be," in the words of a writer in Rolling Stone magazine.

No matter your race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, sexual orientation or background, you have much to gain by deepening your understanding of how we got to this place. I recommend reading classics like James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time," Angela Davis's "Women, Race and Class" and the autobiography of Frederick Douglass, as well as books like "The Radical King," which feature writings and speeches of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that the mainstream media is inclined to ignore.

Read and organize study groups or book clubs. Begin the process of racial reckoning in your city, neighborhood, school, workplace and family. Demand that your school district adopt a racial justice curriculum. Join grass-roots organizers working for racial justice or donate to them. Insist that your social justice organization or faith community follow the lead of grass-roots groups like the Dream Defenders and commit to the political education of its members and the community they serve. Raise your voice and march with your feet.

We must reimagine justice. The days of pretending that tinkering with our criminal injustice system will "fix it" are over. The system is not broken; it is functioning according to its design. As Mariame Kaba, Alex Vitale and many others have persuasively argued, reform efforts typically prove futile, pouring money into police departments without removing their capacity to engage in systemic violence. A recent Op-Ed article in The Times, "No More Money for the Police," underscored the point:

"More training or diversity among police officers won't end police brutality, nor will firing and charging individual officers. Look at the Minneapolis Police Department, which is held up as a model of progressive police reform. The department offers procedural justice as well as trainings for implicit bias, mindfulness and de-escalation. It embraces community policing and officer diversity, bans "warrior style" policing, uses body cameras, implemented an early intervention system to identify problematic officers, receives training around mental health crisis intervention, and practices "reconciliation" efforts in communities of color.

George Floyd was still murdered. The focus on training, diversity and technology like body cameras shifts focus away from the root cause of police violence and instead gives the police more power and resources. The problem is that the entire criminal justice system gives police officers the power and opportunity to systematically harass and kill with impunity."

After decades of reform, countless commissions and task forces and millions of dollars poured into "smart on crime" approaches, the police behave with about as much brutality today as they did in 1966 when a group of young black men, so fed up with the abuse inflicted upon the black community, created an organization called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.

Given this history, it should come as no surprise that growing numbers of people are working to defund the police and reimagine justice. Our nation has the highest rate of incarceration in the world. More than 95 percent of arrests every year are for nonviolent offenses like loitering, fare evasion and theft. Some are arrested for selling loose cigarettes (which resulted in Eric Garner's being choked to death by the police) or minor forgery (which resulted in George Floyd's being suffocated to death by the police).

People are right to wonder — is this justice? Can't we design alternative approaches to poverty, drug abuse, mental illness, trauma and violence that would do less harm than police, prisons, jails and lifelong criminal records? Fortunately, the extraordinary protests sweeping the nation and the globe are beginning to have an impact. The Minneapolis school board unanimously approved a resolution on Tuesday to stop using police officers to provide school security, citing the department's culture of violence and racism. And on Wednesday, the mayor of Los Angeles announced that city officials may cut up to \$150 million from the city's police budget "so we can invest in jobs, in health, in education and in healing." By Friday, the Minneapolis City Council president announced that the council was preparing to "dismantle the Minneapolis Police Department and replace it with a transformative new model of public safety." These developments reflect a long-overdue paradigm shift in our approach to race and criminal justice.

We must fight for economic justice. We cannot achieve racial justice and create a secure and thriving democracy without also transforming our economic systems. James Baldwin knew this back in 1972 when he wrote:

"The necessity for a form of socialism is based on the observation that the world's present economic arrangements doom most of the world to misery; that the way of life dictated by these arrangements is both sterile and immoral; and finally that there is no hope for peace in the world so long as these arrangements obtain."

Dr. King understood this reality even earlier, noting in a letter to his wife in 1952 that "capitalism has outlived its usefulness" and later urging his staff to move beyond civil rights to human rights and democratic socialism. W.E.B. Du Bois, a founder of the N.A.A.C.P., became a socialist and gave a speech sponsored by the Wisconsin Socialist Club in 1960 noting: "Many of us believe and hope that socialism will and must come to this land. We see no other way." Before that, a host of other prominent people we revere embraced democratic socialism too, like Albert Einstein, Helen Keller and Paul Robeson. Einstein published an essay in 1949 titled "Why Socialism?" in which he states: "I am convinced there is only one way to eliminate these grave evils [of capitalism], namely through the establishment of a socialist economy, accompanied by an educational system which would be oriented toward social goals." We celebrate these people as heroes today, yet we've been encouraged to forget that they all believed we must move toward some form of socialism.

No matter what you think about Bernie Sanders as a man or as a candidate — and I wish he was much better at addressing racial issues like reparations — we all owe him and countless organizers a debt of gratitude for pushing universal health care, paid family leave, free college education, a \$15 minimum wage and many other economic rights into the mainstream. As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has explained, the coronavirus crisis proved that Mr. Sanders was right all along — that health care and other economic rights should be considered part of our social contract, not special benefits for those who are lucky enough to be employed by companies that grant discretionary benefits. Nobody would have benefited more from Mr. Sanders's political revolution than black people, and yet the generational divide among black voters affected his campaign.

Younger black people seem to understand that the neoliberal Democratic politics of the past will not take us where we need to go, and they supported Mr. Sanders by significant margins in polls. We must work to create an economic system that benefits us all, not just the wealthy. If our nation was not so deeply divided along racial lines — and if so many white people were not revolted by the idea of their tax dollars helping poor people of color obtain education, housing and social benefits — we would most likely have a social democracy like Norway or Canada. Achieving economic justice requires we work for racial justice, and vice versa. There is no way around it.

If we fail to take these obvious steps, our democracy will remain in peril even if Mr. Trump is defeated in November. Police killings, uprisings and riots will remain a recurring feature of American life. The black-white economic divide is as wide today as it was more than 50 years ago. And the same divide-and-conquer tactics that were used to prevent multiracial alliances for economic justice in the 1800s and 1900s were employed yet again in 2016 with spectacular results, as white Americans fearful of losing political power because of profound demographic changes elected a former reality show billionaire to the presidency, a man who unleashed racist tirades against immigrants on the campaign trail and vowed to “make America great again” by taking us back to a time we supposedly left behind — perhaps the time of civil war. Unless we choose a radically different path now, our persistent racial divisions and oppressive political and economic systems may unravel our democracy sooner rather than later.

Frankly, I find it difficult to call our nation a “democracy” in light of the rampant voter suppression, the denial of voting rights to millions of people with felony records and our pay-to-play political system that allows billionaires and corporations to more or less buy politicians and elections. But if you’re tempted to believe that voting Mr. Trump out of office isn’t urgently necessary in November because the system is already rigged, please read Astra Taylor’s book, “Democracy May Not Exist but We’ll Sure Miss It When It’s Gone.”

Our only hope for our collective liberation is a politics of deep solidarity rooted in love. In recent days, we’ve seen what it looks like when people of all races, ethnicities, genders and backgrounds rise up together, standing in solidarity for justice, protesting, marching and singing together, even as SWAT teams and tanks roll in. We’ve seen our faces in another American mirror — a reflection of the best of who we are and what we can become. These images may not have dominated the media coverage, but I’ve glimpsed in a foggy mirror scenes of a beautiful, courageous nation struggling to be born.

Michelle Alexander is a civil rights lawyer and advocate, legal scholar and the author of “The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness.”

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Correction: June 8, 2020

An earlier version of this article misstated the timing of the Civil War. It was over 100 years ago, not over 200 years ago.