

BLACK LIVES AND THE EXPERIMENT CALLED AMERICA

Society must reject the hypothesis that the adverse outcomes affecting people of colour are the result of their failings

In response to the protests and racial unrest that have spread across the United States and around the world in the wake of the May 25 video-recorded murder of George Floyd, a 46-year-old African-American father of five, by white Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin, who knelt on Floyd's neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds until he stopped breathing, the words of Dr. Martin Luther King have been cited frequently, as they often are in times of racial tension in America.

Words that resonate:

"Riots are the language of the unheard," are Dr. King's words that are incessantly invoked by pundits trying to illuminate why peaceful marches and protests by day, devolve into volatile scenes of vandalism, arson, and looting by night. There is another quote from Dr. King given in a speech to the American Psychological Association, at its annual meeting in Washington DC in 1967, seven months prior to his assassination, that is equally, if not more relevant for this current moment. In that speech Dr. King stated, "White America needs to understand that it is poisoned to its soul by racism and the understanding needs to be carefully documented and consequently more difficult to reject." And in a challenge to his audience he added, "...Negroes want the social scientist to address the white community and 'tell it like it is'. White America has an appalling lack of knowledge concerning the reality of Negro life."

With America just re-emerging from a nationwide three-month, COVID-19 imposed house arrest, with no sports and little on television to serve as a distraction, the nation was held, both captive audience and unwitting witnesses, to arguably the most egregious, depraved, and inhuman police use-of-deadly-force ever visually recorded in American policing history.

Additions to a brutal history:

This video, carefully documented by 17-year-old Darnella Frazier using her cellphone, of Floyd's murder exposed white America to the reality of, in essence, the state-sanctioned racial violence that blacks and people of colour in the United States have decried since its founding. Floyd's death is the third unarmed black citizen who has died at the hands of white police in a four-month period.

There was the case of 25-year-old Ahmaud Arbery, an African-American, who was chased and shot by a former law enforcement officer and his son and another white male, as Arbery jogged near his New Brunswick, Georgia neighbourhood. The other case was of Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old African-American emergency medical technician living in St. Louis, Missouri, shot eight times while lying in her bed by undercover narcotics detectives. They were attempting to execute a "no-knock search warrant" on a suspect who was already in police custody, and entered the wrong residence. These recent killings are but the latest in America's long brutal history of the taking and brutalisation of black bodies, from slavery, through Jim Crow, the Civil Rights/Black Power Movements, to the War on Drugs and the present era of mass incarceration.

The 349-year period, from 1619 when the first Africans were brought to American shores, to 1968, the year blacks in principle gained their full citizenship rights with passage of the Fair Housing Act which culminated in the enactment of the modern Civil Rights legislation (i.e., 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act). This represents 87% of Blacks' 401-year experience (from 1619 to 2020) in what is now the United States, which was defined by crushing racial oppression. Thus, it has only been in the last 56 years, within this writer's lifetime, that African-Americans have ostensibly been afforded the rights and freedoms that accrue from American citizenship. Yet, the brutal murder of blacks in America continues, unabated.

Then and now:

However, this moment feels conspicuously different than those that followed in the wake of the deaths of other unarmed blacks killed by white police or self-appointed vigilantes invoking spurious claims of self-defence under the increasingly permissive provisions of "Stand-Your-Ground-Laws", now

found in a majority of American States. It feels different because unlike all of the protests and riots that have ensued after the deaths of other unarmed blacks in the past, even those of the late 1960s, where all of the protesters were primarily black, this time was different. The protesters, including peaceful demonstrators, agitators, and looters, who took to the streets of Minneapolis, a city that is 64% white and 19% black, in the aftermath of George Floyd's death were a multiracial amalgam of people from all backgrounds.

The demonstrators this time reflect a diversity that more closely mirrors that of America. And as the protests and demonstrations spread to cities and towns, big and small across America, the images that emerged were the same. White protesters carrying "Black Lives Matter" signs in white middle class suburbs and small rural towns, as demonstrations continue across the country and now around the world, clearly indicate this time is different.

Striking a chord, globally:

And yet, the demands while at their core, are the same that they have been for generations of black folks, they too are different. At their core, the demands are for society to value a black life as much as that of a white life, or any other, in every regard. Thus, the simplicity and elegance of the phrase, "Black Lives Matter," which captures the true essence of the now 401-year, blood-stained, struggle for freedom and racial equality and justice in America. But these protests also differ in that, they have not only transcended racial lines but they also have traversed borders and oceans as protests have spread to Canada, the United Kingdom, South Africa, New Zealand, China, the Philippines and many others, in solidarity with the 'Black Lives Matter' Movement, demanding an end to police brutality and systemic racism both in America and abroad.

Why have white Americans reacted differently to this video of a defenceless black person brutalised and killed by the police, unlike those of 12-year-old Tamir Rice (2014), Eric Garner (2014), or Philando Castile (2016) and countless others before? Perhaps, as with the social scientists Dr. King challenged in his speech, who would employ the scientific method in their research, this video provided a sufficient sample size of evidence to convince a sceptical white mainstream that the hypothesis that the black subjects in this experiment in democracy called America, are in fact the victims of treatment by the police and the criminal justice system that is the polar opposite of their experiences with law enforcement and the criminal justice apparatus in this country.

On injustices:

Just as COVID-19 has exposed the glaring racial inequities that make blacks disproportionately vulnerable to the deadly disease, so has George Floyd's murder exposed to the world the centuries-old, state-sanctioned and extra-legal, racial violence and injustices that blacks have been subjected to in America. Yet, the deadly encounters that African-Americans have with the police — the most ubiquitous agent of the state and that in which the average citizen is most likely to have direct contact in their daily lives, at least for people of colour — is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

These interactions between blacks and the police are emblematic of the deep, structural, racial inequalities that permeate every aspect of American society. And while it affects black, brown, indigenous, and Asian people of various intersectional social identities, in America it is most evident in the marginalised status of the black male.

I submit that it is the historical, economic deprivation, incarceration, and social stigmatisation of the black male as the symbolic assailant in the American psyche that prevented a vast segment of white America from acknowledging the stark reality of black life in America. And now that not only white America but also the world has awoken to this reality, it is incumbent upon society to reject the null hypothesis that the cataclysmic criminal justice and socioeconomic outcomes affecting blacks, and by extent people of colour, is the result of their own personal failings. For if we do not, as is possible with any experiment, the one called America will ultimately fail.

Meanings of Difficult Words :

- ❖ **hypothesis** (noun) – reason, basis, thinking. ❖ **adverse** (adjective) – unfavourable, disadvantageous, bad.

- ❖ **people of colour** (noun) – it is primarily used in the United States to describe people who are not considered white.
- ❖ **unrest** (noun) – disruption, turmoil, chaos, agitation.
- ❖ **in the wake of** (phrase) – as a result of, in the aftermath of, as a consequence of.
- ❖ **resonate** (verb) – resound, reverberate; evoke some feelings/emotions.
- ❖ **unheard** (adjective) – unfamiliar, unknown.
- ❖ **incessantly** (adverb) – constantly, continually, all the time.
- ❖ **invoke** (verb) – cite, refer to; resort to, have recourse to.
- ❖ **pundit** (noun) – expert, specialist, consultant, adviser.
- ❖ **illuminate** (verb) – clarify, elucidate, explain, reveal, make clear.
- ❖ **volatile** (adjective) – unpredictable, changeable, variable, inconstant.
- ❖ **vandalism** (noun) – an intentional destruction of public or private property; a premeditated or deliberate damage to public or private property.
- ❖ **arson** (noun) – setting fire intentionally to damage/destroy public properties, particularly buildings.
- ❖ **assassination** (noun) – murder, killing.
- ❖ **racism** (noun) – the belief that a particular race is superior or inferior to another.
- ❖ **consequently** (adverb) – as a result, therefore, for this reason, because of that.
- ❖ **address** (verb) – tackle, deal with, attend to, try to sort out.
- ❖ **appalling** (adjective) – shocking, horrible, terrible, awful.
- ❖ **captive** (adjective) – confined, caged, locked up.
- ❖ **unwitting** (adjective) – unknowing, unintentional, unplanned, accidental.
- ❖ **arguably** (adverb) – possibly, conceivably, maybe, potentially.
- ❖ **egregious** (adjective) – shocking, horrible/terrible, very bad.
- ❖ **depraved** (adjective) – degraded, subverted, corrupted.
- ❖ **inhuman** (adjective) – vicious/cruel, brutal, barbaric.
- ❖ **expose** (verb) – uncover, reveal, unveil.
- ❖ **in essence** (phrase) – basically, fundamentally, primarily.
- ❖ **state-sanctioned** (adjective) – approved by a state (country/government).
- ❖ **at the hands of** (phrase) – (suffer, get hurt & be treated badly) as a consequence of someone's actions.
- ❖ **undercover** (adjective) – confidential, clandestine, secret.
- ❖ **narcotic** (noun) – illegal drugs.
- ❖ **no-knock warrant** (phrase) – a search warrant authorizing police officers to enter certain premises without first knocking and announcing their presence or purpose prior to entering the premises.
- ❖ **suspect** (noun) – suspected person, accused.
- ❖ **brutalisation** (noun) – the act of making brutal.
- ❖ **incarceration** (noun) – imprisonment, confinement, custody.
- ❖ **shores** (noun) – a country/geographical area (surrounded by a coast).
- ❖ **in principle** (phrase) – in general, in essence; on paper, in theory.
- ❖ **culminate** (verb) – lead up to; end with, terminate with.
- ❖ **legislation** (noun) – statute, act, bill, law.
- ❖ **crushing** (adjective) – making huge disappointment or embarrassment.
- ❖ **ostensibly** (adverb) – apparently, seemingly, allegedly, supposedly.
- ❖ **accrue** (verb) – arise, follow, ensue, result; be caused by, be brought about by.
- ❖ **unabated** (adjective) – non-stop, endless, uninterrupted, unceasing.
- ❖ **conspicuously** (adverb) – prominently, mainly, importantly (to attract attention).
- ❖ **vigilante** (noun) – a member of the self-appointed group which unofficially punishing crimes.
- ❖ **spurious** (adjective) – bogus, fake, not genuine.
- ❖ **permissive** (adjective) – unrestricted, non-restrictive, broad-minded, forbearing.
- ❖ **provision** (noun) – term, clause, requirement/ condition.
- ❖ **Stand-Your-Ground-Law** (noun) – Stand your ground laws generally state that a person to use deadly force in self-defense in public, even if that force can be safely avoided by retreating.
- ❖ **ensue** (verb) – happen, occur, take place.

- ❖ **take to the streets** (phrase) – (of a crowd) to come together in the streets to display communal harmony in either celebration or opposition.
- ❖ **in the aftermath of** (phrase) – as a consequence of, as a result of.
- ❖ **multiracial** (adjective) – global, worldwide, intercontinental.
- ❖ **amalgam** (noun) – combination, union, merger, mixture.
- ❖ **reflect** (verb) – indicate, show, reveal, exhibit.
- ❖ **mirror** (verb) – reflect, imitate, copy.
- ❖ **strike a chord** (phrase) – cause/arouse someone to feel emotion/sympathy.
- ❖ **in every regard** (phrase) – in connection with every point.
- ❖ **elegance** (noun) – neatness, simplicity, smoothness.
- ❖ **blood-stained** (adjective) – covered with blood; blood-soaked, gory.
- ❖ **transcend** (verb) – go beyond, rise above, cut across.
- ❖ **traverse** (verb) – go across, cut across, pass over, negotiate.
- ❖ **solidarity** (noun) – unity, unanimity, harmony, cooperation.
- ❖ **brutality** (noun) – cruelty, barbarity, inhumanity.
- ❖ **systemic** (adjective) – constructional, organizational, formational.
- ❖ **brutalise** (verb) – attack, assault, beat, thrash.
- ❖ **sceptical** (adjective) – doubtful, distrustful, disappointed.
- ❖ **mainstream** (noun) – something (certain beliefs/ideas/activities) which are accepted or recognized by most people as a normal or typical.
- ❖ **polar** (adjective) – directly opposite, diametrically opposed, extreme (opposite).
- ❖ **apparatus** (noun) – structure, system, framework, organization.
- ❖ **injustice** (noun) – unfairness, bias, prejudice, bigotry.
- ❖ **glaring** (adjective) – obvious, visible, apparent, flagrant, blatant.
- ❖ **inequity** (noun) – favouritism, bias, prejudice, discrimination.
- ❖ **disproportionately** (adverb) – excessively, unduly, unnecessarily.
- ❖ **vulnerable** (adjective) – unsafe, unprotected, at risk.
- ❖ **extra-legal** (adjective) – not regulated by the law.
- ❖ **be subject to** (verb) – put through, undergo, experience (something difficult or unpleasant).
- ❖ **ubiquitous** (adjective) – universal, omnipresent, present everywhere, very common.
- ❖ **the tip of the iceberg** (phrase) – if something is the tip of the iceberg, it is a small part of a much larger issue. This phrase is being used while talking about a problem.
- ❖ **proverbial** (adjective) – well known, (in)famous, traditional.
- ❖ **emblematic** (adjective) – symbolic, representative, demonstrative.
- ❖ **inequality** (noun) – Inequality is simply defined as “the state of not being equal, especially in status, rights and opportunities; imbalance, unevenness, disproportion, disparity.
- ❖ **permeate** (verb) – spread through, pervade, be disseminated through, pass through.
- ❖ **indigenous** (adjective) – native/local, original, domestic.
- ❖ **intersectional** (adjective) – criss-crossing.
- ❖ **marginalised** (adjective) – treated as insignificant, treated as unimportant, neglected.
- ❖ **submit** (verb) – suggest, assert, argue, state.
- ❖ **deprivation** (noun) – poverty, impoverishment, hardship, neediness.
- ❖ **stigmatisation** (noun) – accusation, cursing, denouncement, discredit/dishonor, disparagement.
- ❖ **assailant** (noun) – attacker.
- ❖ **psyche** (noun) – soul/spirit, essential nature/persona, individuality.
- ❖ **acknowledge** (verb) – admit, accept, recognize, realize.
- ❖ **stark** (adjective) – (unpleasantly) clear, distinct/ evident; harsh, grim.
- ❖ **incumbent upon** (adjective) – necessary, compulsory, required, obligatory.
- ❖ **cataclysmic** (adjective) – disastrous, catastrophic, devastating, destructive.
- ❖ **null** (adjective) – invalid, empty.