**An American Uprising**

Who, really, is the agitator here?

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Protesters and law enforcement in New York City on the third day of demonstrations after the killing of George Floyd, by police, in Minneapolis.Photograph by Ashley Gilbertson / VII / Redux

“A riot is the language of the unheard.” This is how Martin Luther King, Jr., explained matters to Mike Wallace, of CBS News, in 1966.

That language is now being heard across the United States with an uprising that began in Minneapolis and has spread to dozens of American cities, where there have been hundreds of arrests, curfews declared, National Guard troops summoned. The proximate cause is the video images of yet another black man killed by an officer of the law, the death of George Perry Floyd outside Cup Foods, on Thirty-eighth Street and Chicago Avenue South. Floyd joins Breonna Taylor, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Sandra Bland, Laquan McDonald, Tamir Rice—a lineage that goes back decades in the American story.

But before he was a horrific video image, an entry in the history of injustice, George Floyd was born in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and came to Houston with his mother when he was very young. He was raised in the Cuney Homes, a housing project in the Third Ward, a historically black neighborhood. In 1981-82, a woman named Waynel Sexton was Floyd’s second-grade teacher, at Frederick Douglass Elementary School. After hearing of Floyd’s death, Sexton posted on Facebook a facsimile of her pupil’s composition for Black History Month: “When I grow up, I want to be a Supreme Court Judge,” Floyd wrote. “When people say, Your honor, he did rob the bank, I will say, Be seated. And if he doesn’t, I will tell the guard to take him out. Then I will beat my hammer on the desk. Then everybody will be quiet.”

Sexton told me that she was saddened and “appalled” when she saw the video of her former pupil’s death. “I went right upstairs and put my hands on that paper of his. I always keep some memento of my students. I remember I always told the children during Black History Month, ‘Well, we have studied all these famous people. What kind of famous person will you be in the future?’ I remember that he was so influenced by our lesson on Thurgood Marshall.” Under the image of Floyd’s composition, Sexton wrote, “How could his dream have turned into the nightmare of being murdered by a police officer? It just breaks my heart.”

At Jack Yates Senior High School (named for a clergyman and a former slave), Floyd grew to his full height, six feet seven, and was a fine basketball and football player. Some star athletes at Yates have ended up in the N.F.L. and the N.B.A. Floyd attended South Florida Community College, where he hoped to play basketball. But he gave up community college after a year, tried Texas A. & M. University, in Kingsville, and finally returned home to Houston, where he became active on the local hip-hop scene. In the mid-nineties, performing as Big Floyd, he recorded “Sittin’ on Top of the World” at the home studio of Robert Earl Davis, Jr., better known as DJ Screw, a master of the slowed-down, mellow “chopped and screwed” technique of remixing.

With time, Floyd “got into trouble,” his friend Meshah Hawkins told Michael Hall, a writer for [*Texas Monthly*](https://www.texasmonthly.com/news/houston-years-george-floyd-dj-screw/)*.* “He fell into the things a lot of the guys in the neighborhood were doing.” There were arrests for theft and drug possession. In 2009, Floyd pleaded guilty to aggravated robbery with a deadly weapon and was incarcerated for the next four years at the Diboll Unit, a private state prison in East Texas. After being paroled in 2013, he worked at a church called Resurrection Houston, assisting people in the housing project where he’d grown up. The next year, Floyd moved to Minneapolis and became a security guard at a club and restaurant called Conga Latin Bistro, where he was [known](https://www.startribune.com/boss-remembers-george-floyd-as-a-good-friend-person-and-a-good-tenant/570775702/) as friendly and hard-working. However, with the onset of the pandemic and the general shutdown of bars and restaurants, Floyd, like millions of other Americans, found himself out of work.

On May 25th, he was arrested**, accused of trying to pass a fake twenty-dollar bill** to a clerk at Cup Foods. Not long after encountering officers from the Minneapolis Police Department, he was face-down on the street; a white police officer named Derek Chauvin dug his knee into his neck and kept it there while three other officers stood guard. In videos taken by onlookers, Floyd begs for mercy. He calls out for his dead mother: “Mama, I’m through!” He tries to get the attention of bystanders, saying, “They’re killing me, man.” He says, “I can’t breathe!” This was the repeated plea, six years ago, of Eric Garner, a black man arrested for allegedly selling loose cigarettes on the street and put in a chokehold by police.

The videos are impossible to watch without revulsion and anger. First, there is the sheer heedlessness of the act. Chauvin, who has been charged with third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter, kept his knee and weight on Floyd’s neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds, nearly three minutes past the point when he became utterly unresponsive, according to the criminal complaint. “He’s a human being!” one of the bystanders says, but Chauvin does not relent. What also makes the video so devastating is its familiarity, the way it rhymes, in its stark cruelty, with countless acts of racist violence through the years and decades.

Now, in the wake of several days and nights of protest across the country, there are many voices calling for calm. One such call came from Courtney Ross, Floyd’s girlfriend, who told a reporter for WCCO, in Minneapolis, “You can’t fight fire with fire. Everything just burns, and I’ve seen it all day. People hate, they’re hating, they’re hating, they’re mad. And he would not want that.” Another came from John Lewis, the congressman from Georgia and King’s close comrade in the civil-rights movement. In a statement, Lewis, who is suffering from late-stage pancreatic cancer, said that watching the Minneapolis videos reminded him of the murder of Emmett Till, in 1955, and all that followed—“the recanted accusation, the sham trial, the dreaded verdict.” Then Lewis makes his plea: “To the rioters here in Atlanta and across the country: I see you, and I hear you. I know your pain, your rage, your sense of despair and hopelessness. Justice has, indeed, been denied for far too long. Rioting, looting, and burning is not the way. Organize. Demonstrate. Sit-in. Stand-up. Vote.”

John Lewis has repeatedly put his life on the line for justice and civil rights; it is impossible not to honor, even revere, him. But the human capacity for patience and endurance, in the face of blatant injustice, is not without limits. The ballot also has its limits. The mayor of Minneapolis, Jacob Frey, and Minnesota’s governor, Tim Walz, are liberal-minded members of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party; in the end, that did not protect the life of George Floyd.

Alicia Garza, one of the co-founders of Black Lives Matter Global Network, said that although she deeply respected Lewis, she differed with his emphasis. “**It’s a familiar pattern: to call for peace and calm but direct it in the wrong places**,” she told me. “Why are we having this conversation about protest and property when a man’s life was extinguished before our eyes?

“I’m not going to spend my time telling people to go home,” Garza continued. “All I can think about right now is, What’s happening with this investigation? Why are three of the four officers still at home with their families while George Floyd’s family is destroyed? Why is there no state of emergency around white nationalists trying to create chaos? We don’t have time to finger-wag at protesters about property. That can be rebuilt. Target will reopen. The stores will reopen. That’s assured. **What is not assured is our safety and real justice**.”

**Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez**, a Democratic member of Congress representing the Bronx and Queens, argued for a comprehensive view of the situation. “**If you’re calling for an end to unrest, but not calling out police brutality, not calling for health care as a human right, not calling for an end to housing discrimination, all you’re asking for is the continuation of quiet oppression**,” she said.

More than a few commentators have drawn sometimes shaky comparisons between the current moment and 1968, the year when, in April, Dr. King was gunned down on a motel balcony in Memphis. In June, Robert Kennedy was murdered at the Ambassador Hotel, in Los Angeles, after winning the California primary. In Vietnam, it was the year of the Tet offensive and the My Lai massacre. At the Democratic Convention that summer, in Chicago, Mayor Richard Daley cracked down brutally on antiwar protesters in Grant Park. Richard Nixon won the Presidency. And, as few remember, there was also a flu pandemic; the H3N2 virus killed at least a million people, including a hundred thousand Americans.

Perhaps the deepest frustration of thinking about 1968 and 2020 is the time elapsed, the **opportunities squandered, the lip service paid**. In the realm of criminal justice, the prison population began to skyrocket under Ronald Reagan and kept on accelerating for decades, until midway through the Obama Administration. Black Lives Matter began, in 2013, at least in part because even the Obama Presidency, for all its promise, proved unable to exert anything like a decisive influence on issues of racism and police abuse.

Now we have a President who is happy to invoke a loaded, racist threat by tweeting, “**When the looting starts, the shooting starts.**” And, while the answer to every political question cannot be Donald Trump, the fact is that the country is led by a demagogue whose political impulses are autocratic, whose rhetoric is deliberately divisive. No less infuriating is the fact that Trump, whose racist bona fides range from his 1989 campaign against the Central Park Five to his use of birtherism as a political launch pad, **was elected by tens of millions of Americans who either endorsed his bigotry or were willing to tolerate it.** That base of support has not contracted to any significant degree, and persists still. Trump’s defeat in November is hardly assured.

And so, yes, there is anger, there is a kind of spiritual fatigue. “To look around the United States today is enough to make prophets and angels weep,” James Baldwin wrote, in 1978, and the same could be said of our moment. The uprising following the killing of George Floyd comes at a moment of wrenching uncertainty. The pandemic is an event of the natural world, but the scale of its consequences in this country reflects the indifference and incompetence of our leadership, particularly toward African-Americans and the poor. Black Americans are dying at three times the rate of white Americans of *COVID*-19.

It is already evident that Trump, who can no longer run for reëlection trumpeting economic achievement, will likely pivot and campaign, like George Wallace and Richard Nixon, in 1968, on “law and order”: his own autocratic, self-serving version of law and order. He rises in fury against Colin Kaepernick taking a knee in silent protest on an N.F.L. sideline; he exploits an act of killing in which an officer of the law takes a knee on the neck of George Floyd. He encourages armed protesters in Michigan who stormed the statehouse because the governor had the temerity to shut down non-essential businesses and require people to wear masks in public. He hints, via Twitter, that his *MAGA* supporters should come out on the streets. Four years ago, Trump raised fear in the country by portraying a dystopian world of “American carnage,” even as crime had been declining for years. Division is his talent. Who, really, is the agitator here?

In September, 1967, with little more than seven months left to live, King delivered a speech in Washington, D.C., in which he addressed a society “poisoned to its soul by racism” and the question of how to confront and overcome that malignancy. This was in the wake of uprisings in Detroit and many other American cities.

King considered the question not in the spirit of endorsement but of comprehension. Urban riots, he said, using the language of the day, “**may be deplored, but . . . they are not insurrections. The rioters are not seeking to seize territory or to attain control of institutions. They are mainly intended to shock the white community. They are a distorted form of social protest**.” Even looting, he insisted, is an act of catharsis, a form of “shocking” the white community “by abusing property rights.” Then King quoted Victor Hugo to deepen his point: “If a soul is left in the darkness, sins will be committed. The guilty one is not he who commits the sin, but he who causes the darkness.”

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