

CHAPTER 35

"WE CAN'T BREATHE"

GEORGE FLOYD PROTESTS, 2020



The third police precinct in Minneapolis, Minnesota, was the site of protests and continued police violence for several days following George Floyd's murder. Floyd's killer, Derek Chauvin, worked at the Third Precinct.

Years of systemic racism and police brutality explode during a pandemic.

In the spring of 2020, the United States was reeling. It was a stressful election year, and the country roiled with political anger. Then the COVID-19 pandemic arrived, bringing a disease that had already infected millions and killed hundreds of thousands across the globe. Because there was no cure and no clear action from the federal government, the pandemic forced people to stay at home or risk getting sick. Businesses closed across the country, tens of millions of people lost their jobs, and the economy crashed. It was a crisis that rivaled the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929.

Adding to the tension, conservative groups began protesting in states that had taken preventive measures to stop the spread of the disease. Many protesters felt frustrated and powerless because of the pandemic's toll on the economy and their daily lives. They were scared of losing their businesses and jobs and felt their freedoms were being taken away when state and local governments issued mask requirements, social distancing rules, and enforced other public health precautions. At one protest in Michigan, heavily armed protesters stormed the state capitol building and threatened the governor.

On top of all this, police and others continued to kill Black people with few consequences. Two instances from early 2020 gripped national headlines. In March, police in Louisville, Kentucky, looking for drugs, used a battering ram to enter the apartment of Breonna Taylor, a Black emergency room technician. They shot the surprised woman eight times, killing her. It turned out Taylor had nothing to do with the drug-dealing business that the police were investigating. Then, in May, a video from Georgia surfaced, showing two white men, one of whom was a former police officer, confronting and shooting a Black jogger named Ahmaud Arbery for no apparent reason. Arbery had actually been murdered in February; police didn't investigate his death until after the video caused an uproar online. To many, the way that law enforcement, the court system, and local governments handled these incidents showed that racism and violence were ingrained in the US justice system itself.

Then another killing set off one of the biggest waves of protests the country had ever seen. On May 25 in Minneapolis, white police officer Derek Chauvin and three other officers handcuffed and pinned George Floyd, a forty-six-year-old Black man, to the ground. For almost nine minutes, Chauvin pressed his knee down on Floyd's neck as Floyd cried out for his mother and said, "I can't breathe." A crowd gathered, filming the scene on their cell phones and begging the police to let Floyd get up. Because of Chauvin's brutal use of force, Floyd suffered a heart attack and died, and city officials later ruled his death a homicide.

Videos of George Floyd's death immediately went viral, and protests against police violence and racist killings sprang up in cities throughout the country and even around the world. Protesters, many of whom had been confined to their homes by the pandemic, flooded the streets—most wearing masks and carrying sanitizer to protect themselves and others. They raged against the continued epidemic of violence against Black people and inequality in the United States and around the world.

People in cities both big and small staged marches, demonstrations, and public discussions that reckoned with a long history of injustice. An estimated fifteen million to twenty-six million people took to the streets in more than 550 places. They painted colorful murals on storefronts, walls, and sidewalks all over the country, commemorating those who had been killed by police. Young people led many of the demonstrations through organizations such as the Black Visions Collective in Minneapolis, Warriors in the Garden in New York City, and Black Youth for the People's Liberation in Oakland, California. In San Francisco, seventeen-year-old Simone Jacques organized a march that ten thousand people attended.



Thousands of high schoolers and other young people gathered for a Black Lives Matter protest on the lawn of Minnesota's state capitol building in Saint Paul in early June 2020. Because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, most protesters wore masks.

The protesters repeated many of the same chants from the Ferguson protests six years earlier, including “Black Lives Matter” and “we can’t breathe,” which referred not only to the last words of Floyd but also the final words of Eric Garner, whom police killed in 2014. Much of the reason that so many protests were launched so quickly was due to the extensive networking and organizing of the Black Lives Matter movement over several years.

THE ORIGINS OF THE POLICE FORCE

Early US residents were distrustful of having a militarylike presence in their communities to enforce “law and order.” Remembering life under British rule, former colonists feared that officials could abuse their power. A police department like the type we would recognize today, with its specific uniforms and training, wasn’t established until 1844 in New York City. Before that, there were loosely organized forerunners of the police force. Slave patrols of armed white men scoured southern landscapes to capture and return enslaved people who had escaped. Citizen watchmen were paid by wealthy business owners and landowners to protect private property and keep an eye on city streets. Sheriffs and “committees of vigilance,” hired with tax money from colonists as the country expanded westward, punished outlaws in the countryside.

What changed? In the early 1800s, large groups of Irish and German immigrants, mostly poor and uneducated, began arriving in large cities. As cities became more crowded and resources more scarce, rioting and crime increased. The people who already lived in these cities felt that the new arrivals threatened their way of life. This fear led to the establishment of city police departments to help bring order to the chaos—but which were mainly intended to protect the more established, “whiter” peoples’ property and freedom. Throughout US history, the police have used violence to ensure that poor workers would not rebel against their rich bosses, and to enforce racial and class segregation.

This tension between poor, immigrant, and nonwhite communities and the police continues. Police brutality, profiling, and arrests disproportionately affect Black people and other people of color compared to their white peers. For many, the police represent safety and order. But for others, they symbolize oppression and fear.

DOWN COME THE STATUES

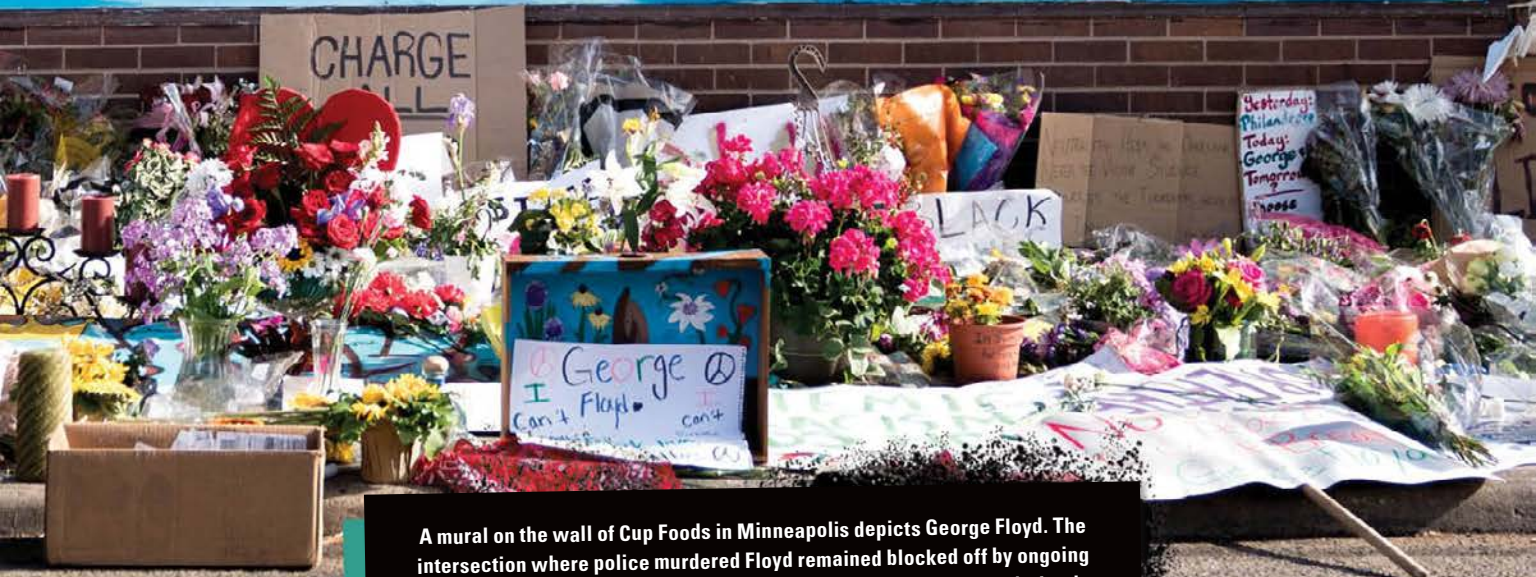
The Ferguson protests of 2014 sparked a nationwide reconsideration of public monuments. Why was the Confederate flag still being flown in many areas, more than 150 years after the Confederacy's defeat in the Civil War? Why were commemorative statues of enslavers and Confederate generals still displayed in public spaces? Many flags and statues were removed to museums, where their history could be taught in context, and others were destroyed or torn down by protesters, who saw them as shameful symbols of injustice.

This process of reckoning with the injustices that many monuments represent continued in 2020 during the George Floyd protests—and went deeper into the country's past. Protesters tore down statues of Christopher Columbus, whose voyages to America resulted in the plundering and enslavement of Indigenous people, and Father Junipero Serra, who established Catholic missions in California that advanced colonization and exploitation of Native peoples.

When protesters outside the White House tried to topple a statue of Andrew Jackson, whose presidency had brought terror to many Native American tribes, President Donald Trump sent in police to forcibly remove them. Still, many politicians and businesses joined in the reconsideration of these monuments. The Mississippi legislature voted to change the state's flag, part of which featured the Confederate flag, and NASCAR banned displays of the Confederate flag at its sporting events.

While some see tearing down statues as a form of shocking vandalism, the practice goes all the way back to the beginning of the United States. In 1776, after the Declaration of Independence was first read in New York City, a crowd tore down a statue of King George III, much of which was melted down to make bullets for the revolutionary forces.





A mural on the wall of Cup Foods in Minneapolis depicts George Floyd. The intersection where police murdered Floyd remained blocked off by ongoing community celebration, protest, and support for months after Floyd's death.

While a majority of the protests were peaceful, some participants' rage led them to attack property. Buildings in South Minneapolis, Saint Paul, and other cities were damaged or destroyed by instances of rioting, fires, and looting. In many cases, police overreaction to the protests sparked the destruction. Police often arrived at protests heavily armed with military equipment and used tear gas, flash grenades, rubber bullets, and other weapons that threatened the protesters' constitutional right to assembly. Rather than meet with protesters, Trump vowed to "dominate" the streets and characterized participants as "terrorists." Governors and mayors in twenty-four states called in more than sixty-two thousand National Guard troops to try to quell the uprising.

Nevertheless, the overwhelming popularity of the protests gave rise to the hope that change was finally coming. The protests lasted for months amidst a global pandemic and spread all over

the world. Unlike in earlier BLM protests, the phrases "Abolish the Police" and "Defund the Police" gained new levels of popularity as people recognized the need for a different system that would directly address underlying racism and violence and called for change. Even the Minneapolis City Council announced publicly in June that they would help defund the police. But until that new system is in place, the protesters' fight isn't over. The protests calling for justice for Breonna Taylor, Ahmed Arbery, George Floyd, and countless others have sparked an uprising that continues across the country and around the world.



The protests that erupted in response to yet another instance of police brutality against Black people were so massive and powerful that they swept across the globe. Protesters in many countries, such as Spain, stood in solidarity with those in the US.



On May 28, 2020, protesters successfully set fire to the Minneapolis Third Precinct police station and celebrated its burning as a symbolic victory.

WHY DO PROTESTS TURN DESTRUCTIVE?

Protests are almost always peaceful, positive expressions of our right to gather and speak out. In rare instances, however, protests become riots—leading to burning buildings, widespread looting, and violence. In rare instances, conflicts between police and protesters result in death. Why do riots happen?

Researchers have discovered two main reasons protests turn destructive. One is the reaction of the police to protesters—if police act calmly to protect and guide protesters, things often remain peaceful. Police with good relations to the local community make violent protests less likely. But if police confront or overreact to the protesters, things can quickly spiral out of control. “De-escalation” tactics used by protesters and police can help calm things down again.

The other main reason has to do with politics. Chain stores, police cars, and government buildings are all symbols of an economic and political system that many people consider unjust or even violent. Attacking these symbols can seem like a significant act against this system. Crowds can feel empowered to “burn the whole system down.” On some occasions, these attacks affect those who aren’t directly involved or responsible. But the majority of protesters and organizers are finding ways to change the system without causing such damage.