

Upholding Our Right to Protest Injustice

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In May of 2020, the unjust killing of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer prompted citizens to take to the streets of Minneapolis to protest his death, inspiring people in other states to follow suit. While his death was the catalyst for these protests, they were largely fueled by years of unjust treatment of black people from law enforcement. However, instead of their demands for justice being heard, protesters were subjected to harsh treatment from the very police officers they were protesting against. The many documented incidents of blatant human rights violations against people exercising their first amendment rights raises many issues. It served as an attempt to invalidate a movement that has valid concerns. Furthermore, the reaction from the government poses grave implications for the future of peaceful protests in America.

When these mass protests broke out across the United States, many steps were taken to try to deter the Black Lives Matter movement. Mass arrests were a common occurrence in every state, often with people claiming that they were arrested and not given a reason. Cities enforced curfews, often with limited notice, with the purpose of dispersing crowds and limiting the amount of time people had to gather. The internet became flooded with disturbing videos of police officers blatantly using force against protesters- many of whom did nothing to warrant such excessive force. Tear gas and other measures were used as a means of breaking up crowds. You could not scroll down social media sites without seeing images of huge crowds being handled with tear gas, rubber bullets, and riot shields. According to Ernest Coverson, Amnesty International USA's End Gun Violence Campaign Manager, "The research shows that people who were simply exercising their human right to peacefully protest were met with such violence that they lost eyesight, survived brutal beatings, and suffered seizures and severe wounds" (Amnesty, 2020).

There is irony in protests against police brutality being met with exactly that. While the majority of demonstrations were peaceful, they were still subjected to violence from police officers who used excessive force in an attempt to bring these protests to end. The treatment of Black Lives Matter protesters calls into question exactly why fighting against injustice is met with discouragement and intimidation from those in power. “Law enforcement repeatedly used physical force, chemical irritants such as tear gas and pepper spray, and kinetic impact projectiles as a first resort tactic against peaceful protestors rather than as a response to any sort of actual threat or violence.” (Amnesty, 2020). With large numbers of officers in full riot gear policing protests, you would think that the crowds were out of control, but it was mostly the opposite. These measures should not have been resorted to unless it was a very last resort. The actions of these officers show us what happens in this country when people of color come together to fight for a cause.

The problem is this: there was no justification for law enforcement to use force against protesters. These documented instances show an alarming pattern of excessive force that did nothing to make protests safer. Instead, they seemed to be deliberate acts meant to control crowds even if there was no indication that protests would even become violent. There is no excuse for this violation of our basic human right to protest. Instead of this response, police officers should have been attending protests to make sure that they were safe, and that social distancing and the use of masks were being enforced. Peace simply did not have to be met with violence, and it is concerning how quickly protesters were labeled as dangerous. This only serves as an example of how Black people have been seen as violent throughout history, and it is these stereotypes that have led to many instances of police brutality against black people in the first place.

This was an attempt to silence Black Lives Matter activists by ensuring that all of their efforts would be discouraged. Treating protesters like criminals furthers the fact that law enforcement wants people to remain silent when the wrongdoings of their own officers are brought to light. President Trump was a figure who openly detested protesters, calling for “crackdowns”, defending police officers, and encouraging a militarized response (Presnall, 2020). Furthermore, comments from the president also contributed to the narrative that protesters were dangerous criminals. Painting protesters in this light only takes public attention away from the issue they are fighting for. This matters because when those in power try to undermine a movement, it spreads fear and discourages people from exercising their right to protest.

The narrative surrounding Black Lives Matter activists also contributed to the effort to undermine the validity and goal of the cause. Words like “rioters” being used to describe the protesters only fueled opposition to the cause. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) used information from over seven thousand protests across the United States and found that about 93% of protests were peaceful (Presnall, 2020). There were instances where protests did become violent, which led to things like looting and property damage. However, these far fewer stories were pushed to the forefront in an attempt to overshadow peaceful protests that were happening that made up the majority of demonstrations. The few instances of looting that were recorded caused people and media outlets to try to use these examples to generalize the whole movement. Painting all protesters as dangerous criminals is simply not right, and it only serves to pit the public against activists.

There are many things that can be taken away from the Black Lives Matter protests this past summer. The most glaring is the issue of police brutality against Black Americans that has been largely fueled by systemic racism. The inability for government officials and law

enforcement to exercise empathy and hear protesters out suggests that they want people to remain silent and not question their methods of “justice”. However, this situation also highlights what dangers arise when protesting is met with harsh treatment and brutality from the law. It sends a message to those who are fighting against injustice that their concerns are not being considered. It tells people that they are wrong to stand up for what they believe in. There is great harm in sending this message. Protesting is an important human right, and it is one we must continue to uphold. Throughout our past, historical advancements on social issues could not have taken place without the organized efforts of those who were not afraid to stand for something. There is no doubt that protesting is a valuable tool for change, and if this is something that a government actively suppresses, then oppressed people have little hope of furthering their causes. When mass amounts of people show up to support a cause and the government does nothing to help enact change, people of color will continue to suffer. The unjust treatment of protesters may set a dangerous precedent for future demonstrations by Black people in this country. There is serious reform needed when it comes to how the United States views protesting, especially when it is done by people of color.

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