

# #BLACKLIVESMATTER

Slavery to Staten Island: Racism and Police Brutality in America

*By Charles Williams II*

In 2008, the United States electorate chose the first African American president since the inception of the Republic more than two centuries earlier. Barack Obama, the Democratic Party candidate, received 69.5 million votes out of the total 131.4 million total votes cast—the highest number in presidential election history. The more than 60 percent turnout of eligible voters was put at the highest in nearly fifty years. More than fifteen million ballots were cast by first-time voters who heavily favored Obama—comprising nearly 15.2 percent of all votes cast for him, compared to 7.5 percent of all votes cast for Republican John McCain.

Many Americans were dazzled by the energy created in a campaign of hope and change. Understandably, many hoped and perhaps even assumed that the change would further improve race relations in America. Anti-establishment youth had embraced a man who aspired to lead the American establishment, with hip-hop artists such as Nas and Young Jeezy producing tracks like “Black President” and “My President.” This newfound political energy was promoted through political paraphernalia that carried pictures of candidate Obama in a red, white, and blue filter. The music, the bumper stickers, the mood, and the candidate did not represent blackness or whiteness; they represented humanity, patriotism, and coming change. They evoked the spirit of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech of 1963, and even of Obama’s 2004 Democratic National Convention speech in Boston, when he intoned, “There’s not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America—there’s the United States of America.”

▷ Demonstrator protesting the police killing of teenager Michael Brown, Ferguson, Aug. 18, 2014.  
*Charlie Riedel/Associated Press*

The election of an African American man as president of the Republic led many to conclude that the nation had reached a historic turning point. The high turnout for Obama, including among white voters, seemed to demonstrate that

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change had truly come. Some dared to believe that the United States was becoming a “colorblind society.” After the 2008 election, college classrooms across the country were bursting in conversations debating “are we now a post-racial society?” Statistics showing greater numbers of black doctors, lawyers, and CEOs helped quantify the argument.

Here comes the paradox, however: the political and economic gains of African Americans have fueled the politics of race and fear in America. This is why we are witnessing, in spite of the hope for better race relations engendered by Obama’s election in 2008 and re-election in 2012, continued spasms of police brutality toward African Americans.

### **Stain of Slavery**

Police brutality for the purpose of instilling fear and intimidating blacks has a long history dating back to the era of slavery in America. Some slaves like Harriet Tubman found paths to freedom, and others like Nat Turner revolted against a system so cruel that the law ordained and validated the heinous treatment of human beings who had dark skin. Patrolmen conducted manhunts for runaway slaves. Some police officers were law enforcers by day and members of the Ku Klux Klan by night. The injustice didn’t end with the beating or killing of victims. The American judicial system averted its gaze when racist groups burned crosses and lynched blacks in the south.

One of the great stains of injustice on the American Republic is the Dred Scott Decision of 1857. Dred Scott, a black slave, sued for his rights and those of his family to be free. He marched from courtroom to courtroom until the case was ultimately heard in the U.S. Supreme Court. The highest court of the land ruled 7-2 that persons of African ancestry could not claim U.S. citizenship. In his majority opinion, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney delivered words that some blacks feel ring true to this day: slaves and their descendants were “so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”

The U.S. Constitution ratified in 1788 empowered men to hunt for slaves; they were a loose band of bounty patrolmen, but many African Americans know them as police officers. Article IV, Section 2, Clause 3 known as the Fugitive Slave Clause (superseded by the Thirteenth Amendment that abolished slavery in 1865) required the return of escaped slaves:

No Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in Consequence of any Law or Regulation therein, be discharged from such Service or Labour, but shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such Service or Labour may be due.

To further appease slaveholders, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 to create a legal mechanism for the recovery of escaped slaves. The constitutional provision and the legislation emboldened slave owners and local towns to create patrol officers to enforce and hunt slaves with legal powers. In “A Brief History of Slavery and the Origins of American Policing,” Victor E. Kappeler of the School of Justice Studies at Eastern Kentucky University, wrote: “The institution of slavery and the control of minorities... were two of the more formidable historic features of American society shaping early policing. Slave patrols and Night Watches, which later became modern police departments, were both designed to control the behaviors of minorities.”

Many may find it a stretch to discuss the history of slavery in the conversation about present-day police brutality. However, this is critical to understanding the deep-rooted social and psychological issues that blacks and whites alike must grapple with today. It helps us to see why some whites can turn black teenagers into demons, and why African Americans must cry that #blacklivesmatter.

### **We Shall Overcome**

In the twentieth century, nearly a century after the abolition of slavery, an American civil rights movement arose with growing demands to end racial segregation and discrimination on the basis of color. By the 1960s, the movement had achieved notable successes in the passage of legislation banning racial discrimination in employment and housing and protecting voting rights.

Yet the civil rights movement created another dynamic that often led to more distrust and anxiety in the relationship between blacks and the police. Local officials like Commissioner of Public Safety Theophilus Eugene “Bull” Connor turned dogs, water hoses and clubs on peaceful protesters when they marched through the streets of Birmingham. On “Bloody Sunday” fifty years ago, Sheriff Jim Clark sent his officers to attack marchers on the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma; Alabama state trooper James Bonard Fowler killed unarmed Jimmie Lee Jackson during the peaceful protest.

The brutality of these policemen indirectly contributed to the success of the civil rights movement as their harsh actions were recorded and broadcast across the nation and the world to widespread revulsion. Indeed, the marchers sought to dramatize the brutality of the local police. The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.’s strategy of non-violent civil disobedience using direct action tactics was designed to draw out police brutality for the attention of the media. King instructed his followers:

If you can accept it, you will leave those state troopers bloodied with their own barbarities. If you can accept it, you will do something that will transform conditions here in Alabama.

In September 1955, a young mother made a decision that sent a spark through the black community and far beyond. Emmett Till was a black teenager killed by white men who heard that he had whistled at a white woman in the Mississippi delta. His mother, Mamie Till, allowed for an open casket for the world to see the face of her brutalized 14-year-old son. It was not the police who performed this act of brutality, but the blind eye of the justice system let the killers go free with a not-guilty verdict. Mamie permitted the gruesome photos of her dead son to be published on the cover of *Jet*, a popular black magazine, an act that aroused the conscience of many people across the country. Rosa Parks tells of her anger and her disgust over what happened to Emmett Till, and how it strengthened her determination on the day she made civil rights history by defying a driver's demand that she vacate her seat on a segregated public bus in Montgomery.

The brutality showed very painfully the depth of disregard for black life. But the pain of inequity was far worse than the pain of the brutality. The beatings and killings speak to the pain of the inequities of education, unemployment, discrimination, and Jim Crow. The goal of the civil rights movement was to transform conditions in Alabama, the south and America—not merely to secure voting rights or civil rights and access to healthcare, education, bank loans, and the lunch counter.

### **Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud!**

The Black Power Movement grew out of the brutality blacks experienced during the civil rights struggle. In contrast with the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.'s approach, Black Power reflected the militant, highly confrontational style of a fed-up generation that was not ready to lie down and get beaten by police and chewed by police dogs. Not surprisingly, police at every level of government would view the Black Power Movement as a threat.

The movement's organizers belonged to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which grew out of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. These young people coined phrases like "black power" and started a Black Nationalist group carrying on a tradition of black separatism initiated by the Jamaican pan-Africanist thinker and activist Marcus Garvey. They began to bear arms publicly for protection purposes against the police, and labeled the police "pigs."

The Black Panther party, founded by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, college students well read in the law, began in the ghettos of Oakland where blacks felt that the police were intimidating black community members. The party quickly spread across America, with thousands of members and dozens of branches. Members of the Panthers wore all-black regalia and militaristic-style clothing, and bore arms openly in states where it was legal to do so. Such was the party's profile that FBI Director

J. Edgar Hoover termed it “the greatest threat to the internal security of the country.” The police killing of party deputy national chairman Fred Hampton, legal cases against Newton, and organizational infighting eventually led to the dissolution of the party in 1982.

### **“I Can’t Breathe!”**

Michael Brown. Eric Garner. Amadou Diallo. Sean Bell. Trayvon Martin. In the era of America’s first African American president, black lives continue to be lost at the hands of police, or disregarded by the American justice system. These killings from Ferguson, Missouri, to Staten Island, New York, have spurred national protests and hold the attention of the nation.

Michael Brown was an 18-year-old black man shot and killed by Darren Wilson, a white police officer in Ferguson. The killing in August 2014 set off demonstrations in Ferguson and around the country, and propelled the Twitter hashtag #blacklives-matter as a powerful instrument of awareness and protest. Federal investigations eventually cleared Wilson of wrongdoing, but found Ferguson police guilty of racism, racial profiling, and routine violations of the constitutional rights of the city’s African American residents. A Justice Department report found that black drivers were more than twice as likely to be searched during routine traffic stops and were more likely to face excessive force from police. “Ferguson law enforcement practices are directly shaped and perpetuated by racial bias,” the report said. The report discovered racist jokes among officials in the city email system; one of them compared President Obama to a monkey.

Another case that attracted national attention in 2014 was the police chokehold death of Eric Garner, a 43-year-old former New York City employee. Garner died while being arrested in July for allegedly selling unlicensed cigarettes on a street in Staten Island. In an act caught on video, a police officer put Garner in a headlock while restraining him, leading Garner to repeat, “I can’t breathe” eleven times; he was pronounced dead on arrival at a hospital an hour later. A local grand jury declined to indict the police officer, Daniel Pantaleo, but the U.S. Justice Department is still investigating Garner’s death.

What is happening in America stems from a psychosis that can be traced back hundreds of years. In his grand jury testimony in the case of Michael Brown, Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson described what he felt was the menacing face of the young man. “He looked up at me and had the most intense aggressive face,” Wilson said. “The only way I can describe it, it looks like a demon, that’s how angry he looked.”

What would make an 18-year-old boy look like that? Fear. Why would you be afraid of an 18-year-old boy? A history that says blacks are three-fifth human relegates

blacks to the status of animals. The fear will always be there. Whether it is a police officer pulling over a black man at a routine traffic stop, or a white woman clenching her purse when a black man passes by, or store security eyeing a black customer, it is an instinctive feeling: they are demons, animals.

### **Stony the Road We Trod**

On election night in 2012, as President Obama was winning re-election against Republican challenger Mitt Romney, the Fox television commentator Bill O'Reilly declared: "The white establishment is now the minority."

To some, those words ring true. The sentiment of fear is so strong that conservative politicians in the United States have purposely decided to stonewall the executive branch headed by a black man. In the six years of President Obama's terms of office we have observed the do-nothing Congress. Many have come to believe that with the increasingly multicultural demographics of the country, white males who have traditionally dominated politics will find it difficult to win elections without some type of voter suppression. Hence, conservative politicians have pushed for voter ID laws, which could effectively disenfranchise many black and Latino citizens, and blocked immigration reform that would enable undocumented Latinos to become citizens with voting rights. These conservative politicians also use race as an easy opportunity to create fear—enabling them to rally their supporters, manipulate the electorate on economic issues, and hold on to political power. Take the ultraconservative Tea Party movement: it advocates reduced government spending and opposes government programs such as Obamacare, but it mobilizes its forces with racist rhetoric and fearmongering.

The Tea Party feeds a middle-class struggle that breeds racism and ignorance, and creates a climate for acts of violence and police brutality toward African Americans. In a struggling economy, the argument that blacks are the reason that whites may not get jobs or the help they need strikes a chord with middle-class whites. Their fear of losing preference or privilege leads to tactics of intimidation, to disdain for African Americans, and to police brutality.

"Black Lives Matter" is now our cause. We use die-ins, marches, and civil disobedience with hopes of progressive policies like police accountability, body cameras, demilitarization of police forces, and federal oversight of police departments. But most important and central to this cause is changing a heart, changing a moral consciousness, changing minds, and changing the generations to come to undo the years of damage that the past and even present forces of division have promoted. So we protest not just for policy, not just for attention, but in this generation we protest to educate and to dispel a long history that has discounted the humanism of black life

from slavery to present. In the words of “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” a poem put to song by the principal of a segregated school in 1900 on the occasion of a visit by Booker T. Washington for Abraham Lincoln’s birthday:

Stony the road we trod,  
Bitter the chastening rod,  
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;  
Yet with a steady beat,  
Have not our weary feet  
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?  
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,  
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,  
Out from the gloomy past,  
Till now we stand at last  
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.