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EDITORIAL *On the Killing of George Floyd*

Four critical steps toward justice

The horrific killing of George Floyd that was witnessed by the world will now be scrutinized in a court of law. On Wednesday, Minnesota prosecutors elevated the charge to second-degree murder against the police officer who pressed his knee against the neck of Floyd for nearly nine excruciating minutes. Equally significant, the three other Minneapolis officers on the scene were charged with aiding and abetting the murder.

Each could face up to 40 years in prison if convicted. The upgraded murder charge against Derek Chauvin, 44, and the arrest of his fellow officers — Thomas Lane, 37, J. Alexander Kueng, 26, and Tou Thao, 34 — was a relief to the many Americans who were questioning if justice would be fully served for the killing captured on videotape. Their immediate firing last week was necessary, but less than satisfying.

Those firings did not stop the protests that erupted across the nation and beyond in the past week. Those demonstrations were precipitated by the sickening images of a handcuffed Floyd losing his life — repeatedly gasping “I can’t breathe” and pleading for his late mother — as Chauvin had him pinned to the ground. The revulsion over Floyd’s killing was amplified by the frustration about myriad other times when unarmed African American men died at the hands of police without criminal reper-

cussions. It also arrived with the overlay of the disproportionate effects of a historic pandemic and Depression-level unemployment on people of color.

One of the rallying cries at those protests was a demand to prosecute each of the former officers on the scene whose intervention could have saved Floyd’s life. None did. Instead, the video showed, and the aiding-and-abetting charges reflect, that they were not merely passive observers.

Minnesota Attorney General Keith

Ellison acknowledged that “winning a conviction will be hard.” History has shown that police officers accused of any misconduct, and especially a homicide, arrive in court with a well-funded defense team and juries inclined to give law enforcement the benefit of the doubt.

There are reasons to hope this case might be different. Ellison noted not only the cooperation and determination of agencies within his state, but also the commitment of the U.S. Department of Justice at the highest levels to pursue federal case based on deprivation of Floyd’s law under “color of law.”

The citizenry was jolted to the core as rarely seen in modern times. There were protests in all 50 states. In some, police officers joined peaceful demonstrators in expressing their outrage by speaking out, taking a knee or even marching among them.

Former President Barack Obama, in a video-streamed talk Wednesday that rang with a seriousness and tone worthy of the office he once held, struck a theme

of hope. He was encouraged by the voices of young people calling for change, the diversity of the crowds on the streets at the fact that the majority of Americans support the cause of the protests despite the regrettable acts of mayhem by a few. This was much different, he said, than the 1960s.

“There is a change of mind-set taking place ... that we can do better,” Obama said.

On Tuesday, former President George W. Bush and former first lady Laura Bush issued a poignant statement of their own for America to “examine our tragic failures” and to find “our redeeming strengths” on race and justice.

Each reminded Americans of when we had a president who saw that his role was to lead instead of inflame and divide the nation at a time of crisis.

The quest for justice for George Floyd will not be realized unless and until the officers who killed him are convicted. But at least for one spring day, there was progress.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR *Submit your letter at SFChronicle.com/letters*

Peaceful protests are needed in these times

As an elderly person, I am certainly mindful of the COVID-19 risks. So, of course, I do not want to add to the already staggering numbers of those who are infected and dying. Otherwise, I would be out supporting the peaceful protests against racial intolerance. When I left the South in my youth, I naively thought racial bias was primarily limited to the Southern states. I soon discovered, however, that instead it permeates much of our society. Now, I am fortunate to live in one of the most tolerant places on Earth, even though the Bay Area also suffers its share of racial tension.

Therefore, I simply want to go on record to let the peaceful protesters know that I fully support you and wish you success in your endeavors to make this a better world.

Jacquelyn Gentry, Foster City

Empower the people

I think so many aspects of the underbelly of the U.S. are being recognized by so many right now. It would be so great if people could feel more and more empowered and less and less desperate.

I hope that the current Black Lives Matter protests will bring House Speaker Nancy Pelosi thoughts of action that will allow for more funding and improvement abilities for public education and schools and good salaries for inspiring teachers.

And the ability for families to be able to live beyond paycheck-to-paycheck, constantly in a state of stress and struggle. Folks given the means to learn, feel, think and decide in a calm but exciting, caring but motivational environment

will be so beautifully powerful and helpful to this country.

Carolyn Chamberlayne, San Francisco

Call it a lynching

I have seen no one call George Floyd’s death what it really was — a lynching. And for what? Why? We have had the opportunity to witness this atrocity unfold in all its ugliness and horror before our eyes. No wonder that grief, shock, and trauma have hit so hard.

Johanna Abate, San Francisco

Use of military force

Regarding President Trump’s wish to use troops in the U.S.: We have always distinguished between military action that takes place abroad and at home. The forces commanded by the Joint Chiefs of Staff are to wage battle against foreign foes whereas the police and sometimes the National Guard serve to protect us at home.

The difference was enshrined in the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878 that prevented the military from engaging in domestic police activity such as controlling protests or making arrests. Many have wondered if our president understands his role as commander in chief is subject to this act.

Does he understand what he can and cannot do? What is the responsibility of the Joint Chiefs of Staff if they receive an illegal order from their commander?

Are we approaching a time when the Joint Chiefs will have to demonstrate their experience, independence and leadership by refusing such an order? I



Tom Meyer / meyer cartoons.com

sincerely hope so. Our country cannot afford such a devastating blow to such basic democratic principles as the rule of law.

Bill Nichols, San Francisco

What U.S. stands for

We are Americans. We all want the same things: A chance for success. A decent life. A safe environment. We all need the same things: To be healthy, to be loved and to give love. We all deserve the same things: To be respected, to be heard and to be treated fairly.

No one wants to harm. No one needs to hate. No one deserves injustice. If we agree on these principles, we can move forward into a better tomorrow for everyone, recognizing our commonali-

ties and accepting our smaller differences. America is an experiment challenging the history of civilization. Positing the simple truth that all people are created equal, and that governments should be of, by and for those people. America is an ideal: the first and only nation built on the principle that leaders serve the people, not the other way around. We owe it to those who have given their lives for that cause.

This includes those courageous peaceful protesters who went out there, knowing the danger, not just today, but many times in the past. We owe it to the future to hold onto this glorious dream and together make it work. We are made of stronger stuff than hatred.

Judith McCarthy, El Cerrito

There was no gun.

There was no gun.
 No sudden movement of a black hand
 or shifting shoulder
 that would cause a policeman
 out of fear
 to react with a gun.
 There was no gun.
 There were four policemen.
 And one black man,
 but there was no gun
 threatening him.
 There was a black man,
 tall and strong
 Lying on the ground

on his stomach.
 Submissive.
 And a policeman,
 cool-headed, calm faced,
 with his knee
 pressing down
 on the black man's neck.
 There was no gun.
 Instead,
 there was time.
 Minute after minute,
 plenty of time for the other
 policemen
 to tell the one
 with his knee pressed against the
 black man's neck to let up even a

little, as the black man cried, "I can't breathe."
 There was no gun.
 Only the weight of
 hatred
 in his knee,
 and distance in his mind,
 False duty that anyone could see.
 There was calm determination in the
 policeman's face.
 Justification in his blue shirt,
 his hand in his pocket, ready to shoot
 mace at anyone who tried to stop
 him, The institution pressing down
 on a black man.
 There was no gun.
 As the air left the black man's body
 we heard the cries
 "Mama! Mama!"

and the officer kept pressing,
 staring down at the black man,
 who had stopped moving.
 No gun drawn,
 or trigger cocked.
 Just more time
 to let blind hatred
 and
 corrupt power linger,
 thick,
 in the air.
 To let
 Evil
 and Anger
 spread everywhere
 like the blood that would have drained
 from his body,
 If there had been a gun.

Alison Brantley, Kensington

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