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A protester kneels on June 1 to pay homage to George Floyd at the memorial where he died, outside Cup Foods in Minneapolis. JOHN MINCHILLO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

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# The Long Reach of Racism in the U.S.

Despite great progress across two centuries, exclusion and injustice remain the reality for too many black Americans

*By Orlando Patterson*

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One of the many ways, good and bad, in which America is truly exceptional is its experience of race—its tortured embrace of black Americans and the paradoxical extremes in how it treats them. Race is the fulcrum upon which

two radically different visions of America pivot. In the inhuman, banal killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis we see the reactivated weight of the country's darkest past. In the nationwide demonstration of young blacks and whites against it and other recent racist killings, we see the outraged, countervailing force of that other America which Martin Luther King Jr. imagined as the "beloved community."

The despair of so many Americans in this moment of naked exposure of racism's persistence in the U.S. should not lead us to deny the successes of the civil rights revolution. Black Americans are now included in the public domain of the nation. They form an integral part of its political life and an important component of its military, and they play an outsize role in its intellectual and cultural life. The black middle class is real, however tenuous its economic base and downwardly mobile its male children. The majority of white Americans have also undergone a radical transformation in their racial views, especially the young, who are arguably the most racially liberal group of whites anywhere in the world.



Martin Luther King Jr. addresses a Cleveland audience, noting that 98% of blacks in the city live in ghettos, July 1965.

PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

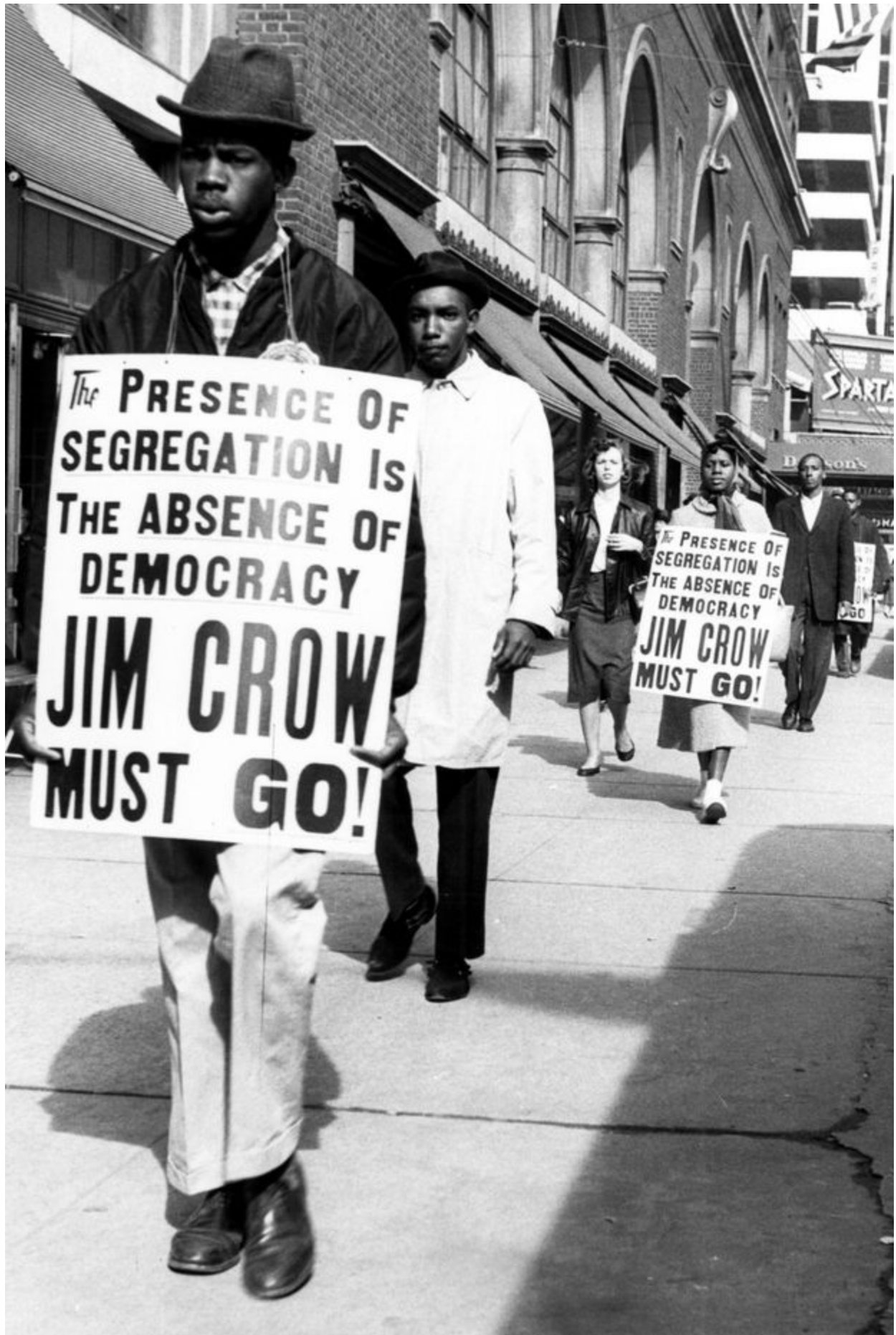
But the civil-rights movement failed to integrate black Americans into the private domain of American life. American communities and schools remain highly segregated. Measures of segregation at the metropolitan level have declined in some cities but remain high, and cities such as Detroit, Chicago and Milwaukee have become far more segregated. Moreover, as Daniel Lichter of Cornell University and his co-authors [show](#) in a 2015 paper in the *American Sociological Review*, once we move down to the level to the neighborhoods where people actually meet and interact, there has been little or no change in the degree of separation of black and white families, and segregation between cities and suburbs has gotten worse.

Between 1985 and 2000, a higher percentage of black children—about two-thirds—grew up in high-poverty segregated areas than in the period

between 1955 and 1970, according to a [2009 Pew Trust study](#) by the sociologist Patrick Sharkey of New York University. This not only influences the kind of schools they attend but all the other major factors accounting for their social mobility and life chances, such as health and life expectancy. Today the majority of black kids, including those from upper middle class families, experience downward mobility.

At 20.8%, the black poverty rate is 2.5 times the white rate. The wealth gap between blacks and whites has also worsened. In 2016 the net worth of white families, at \$171,000, was almost 10 times greater than that of the typical black household. The Economic Policy Institute reports that between 2000 and 2018 the gap between black and white incomes worsened at every level.

Still more important in explaining today's unrest is the persistence of a hard core of racist Americans who are still fervently committed to the country's white supremacist tradition—and who have found their voice again in the reckless populist politics of the moment. The killing of George Floyd placed in stark relief the institutional and sociocultural forces that made it possible, even normal, as well as the abiding power of this other, once dominant America. What are its origins?

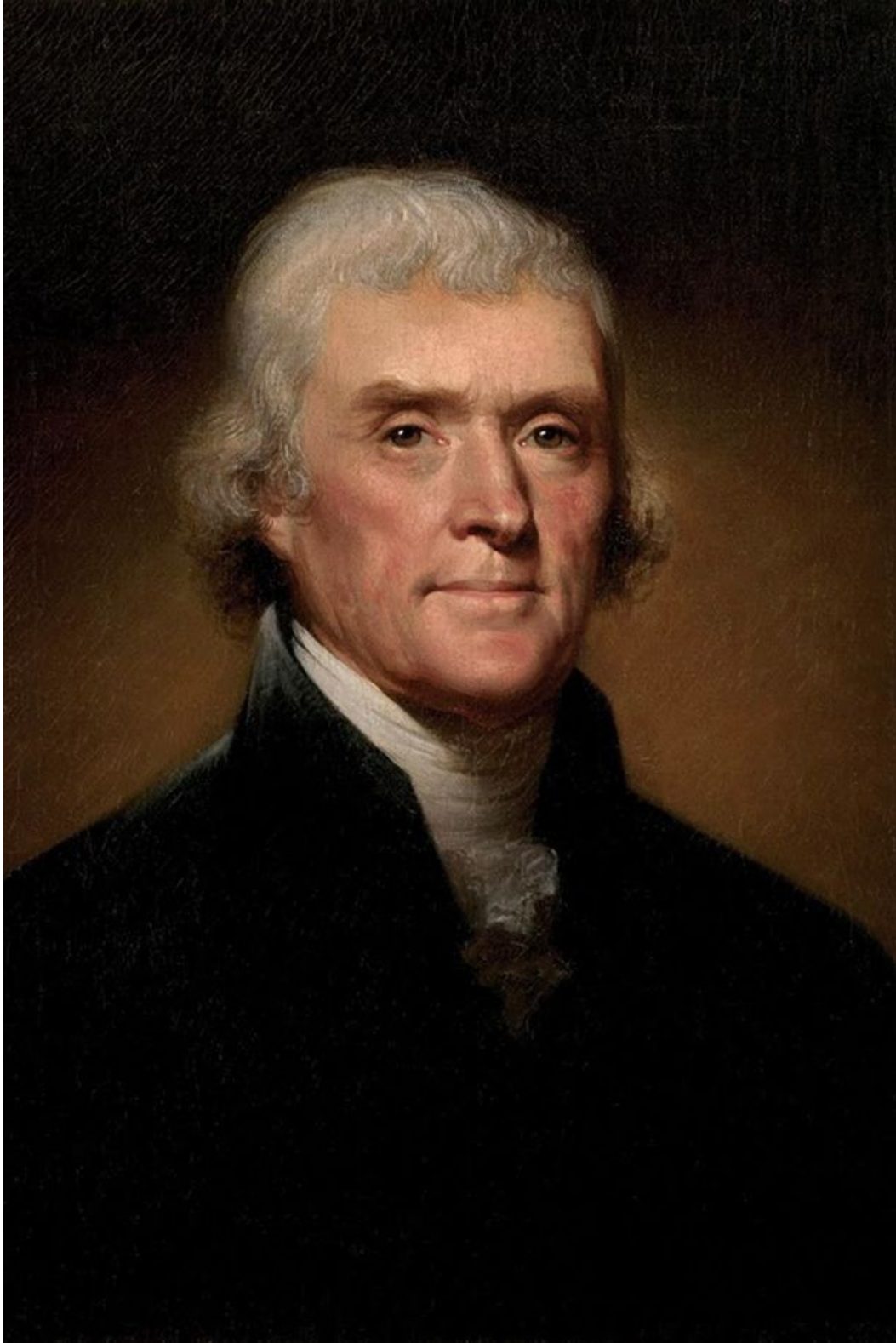


Marchers protest segregation at Davison's department store in Atlanta in 1961.  
PHOTO: ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION/ASSOCIATED PRESS

America is the only modern nation that had slavery in its midst from the very beginning. The institution and its neo-slavery successor, Jim Crow, played a formative role in the country's social, economic, ideological and cultural development, especially in how it came to define freedom and citizenship.

As the eminent Yale historian Edmund Morgan demonstrated, America's passion for freedom emerged in some substantial measure from the bosom of Virginian slavery. It is no accident that so many of the nation's revolutionary leaders and Founding Fathers were Virginians.

As in the slave system of ancient Athens, the American idea of freedom sprung from the cauldron of slavery in a seemingly contradictory way. It meant, on the one hand, liberation from tyranny, celebrated in the Declaration of Independence and the modern world's first Bill of Rights, which were drawn from the philosophy of John Locke and English constitutional tradition.



Thomas Jefferson as painted by Rembrandt Peale, circa 1805.

PHOTO: US NATIONAL ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

At the same time, however, freedom was defined by the power to dominate and degrade others. It was justified by seeing slaves as property, only partly human. In ancient Athens, slaves were considered two-footed beasts of burden; for Virginians and other Southerners, they were three-fifths human, a “compromise” enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. As Thomas Jefferson candidly acknowledged, slavery engendered among Virginians “the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other.”

Over time, with the expansion of political rights for poor whites, citizenship in the American South came to mean belonging to the “superior” race, which defined blacks as the group that could never belong but whose necessary presence, for essential labor, defined the minimum condition of inclusion. After the Civil War, the radical Reconstruction movement recognized the need to incorporate blacks into the body politic and initially succeeded in doing so, but once federal forces withdrew and power was restored to the local Southern elite, there was a vicious program of suppression of both black freedoms and their access to land.

One of the defining features of slavery—the exclusion of slaves from any recognition as legitimate members of the community—was restored in the Jim Crow laws and the use of terrorist tactics by organization such as the Ku Klux Klan. For many poor whites, as W.E.B. DuBois observed, white supremacy became a psychological wage that compensated for their penury. Ordinary whites also greatly feared wage competition from blacks and saw the suppression of their freedom as one way of preventing it. The often ceremonial lynch mobs were as much an assertion of white supremacy, citizenship and belonging as they were primitive mechanisms of control and symbolic exclusion of blacks from the body politic.





A “colored” drinking fountain in a streetcar terminal in Oklahoma City, 1939.  
PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

This identification of citizenship with white supremacy eventually permeated all of America. European immigrants of the late 19th and early 20th century, who were initially rejected for not being truly white, slowly became fully American in the course of their acceptance as whites, the Irish being the classic case as the historian Noel Ignatiev has shown. Once these immigrants had won acceptance, they fled to the suburbs or relentlessly excluded blacks from their own neighborhoods. In this respect, segregation, whatever its proximate causes, is one of the most potent legacies of slavery, racism and the Southern notion of citizenship.

The outsize influence of Southern politicians on Congress also nationalized their supremacist views at the federal level, even in left-leaning policies. Thus the condition for the passage of the Social Security Act and other New

Deal welfare programs was the exclusion from them of black farm laborers and domestic workers—the great majority of black workers at the time.

Even now, the Southern influence persists. As the economists Alberto Alesina, Edward Glaeser and Bruce Sacerdote conclude in [a 2001 paper](#) for the Brookings Institution, a major reason that the U.S. lacks a European-style welfare state is “America’s troubled race relations.” Opponents of redistribution, they argue, have historically used race-based rhetoric to oppose generous welfare policies and have succeeded in large part because the poor are disproportionately black.

As for politics writ large, Richard Nixon’s “Southern strategy” laid the foundation for today’s Republican Party, winning the allegiance of white Southerners who rejected the political successes of the civil-rights movement. The strategy led to one of the great realignments of modern American politics as Southern whites shifted from their traditional support of the Democratic Party to the once loathed party of Lincoln.

American police departments and prison systems were integral in the extension of the dehumanization and exclusion of blacks. American police departments have long seen their role as protectors of the dominant “good” people of their precincts against undesirable newcomers and outsiders. During the 19th century, the police were used by urban elites mainly to control the disorder of those considered “the dangerous classes.” They brutally harassed immigrant newcomers and were used as strikebreakers. This continued into the 20th century, when they violently controlled immigrant communities and even more savagely implemented prohibition laws.



A water cannon is used on young African-Americans in Birmingham, Ala. during a protest against segregation in May 1963.

PHOTO: FRANK ROCKSTROH/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

In the South, policing grew directly out of the slave patrol groups of the antebellum era. Their main initial roles were to control and discipline freed slaves and apply Jim Crow laws. Only slowly did more professional organizations grow out of this post-slavery system.

Elements of these early developments persist, especially in the attitudes of police toward minorities and immigrant communities. Those who are thought not to belong are too often viewed as an enemy to be controlled through show of force, a warrior mentality and an institutional culture that emphasizes internal solidarity and loyalty.

The higher rate of crime among a minority of urban blacks, herded into overcrowded ghettos with limited job opportunities and dysfunctional schools, offers easy justification for heavy-handed profiling and harassment. But we shouldn't look past the underlying causes. In [a 2019 study](#) in the Journal of the National Medical Association, researchers at Boston University looked at data from 69 of the largest cities in the U.S. and found that a higher rate of fatal police shootings was significantly associated with higher degrees of racial segregation.

Police violence has become increasingly difficult to control, a result of the Supreme Court's fateful 50-year-old doctrine of "qualified immunity" (protecting law-enforcement officials from being sued), the "blue wall of silence" among police and the strong reluctance of juries to convict even the most egregious of bad cops: 99% of killings by police between 2013 and 2019 did not result in the killers being charged with a crime, according to research by Mapping Police Violence. Closely related to the disproportionate killing of blacks by police is the rise of mass incarceration in America since the early 1970s and the disparate imprisonment of black Americans, who make up about 40% of the nation's 2.3 million prisoners (not to mention the incredible 3.6 million on probation).



A view of the Louisiana State Penitentiary, the largest maximum-security prison in the U.S. African-Americans make up about 40% of the U.S. prison population. PHOTO: WILLIAM WIDMER/REDUX PICTURES

How does a nation that celebrates freedom as the centerpiece of its civil religion end up as the most carceral state in the history of the world? As Rebecca Neusteter of the Vera Institute of Justice and her collaborators [have shown](#), the racially biased enforcement practices of police are a major proximate factor accounting for high incarceration rates. The chronic propensity of the police to lock up those encountered and arrested for often minor offenses helps to explain why the nation's prisons remain so crowded, even as their overall population has declined modestly in recent years.

Beyond factors such as electoral politics, the war on drugs and public opinion, a growing number of social scientists have come to see the growth

of the punitive modern carceral state as the continuation of a familiar post-emancipation pattern. As [sociologist Christopher Muller](#) of the University of California at Berkeley notes, “imprisonment has typically increased after periods when African-Americans made significant economic, social and political gains,” most notably after Reconstruction and the civil-rights movement.

Between the horrifying supremacist throttling of George Floyd and the noble rage of young Americans against such historic evil, then, we see the two contrasting visions that have defined America. The former is now terrifyingly assertive after long being dismissed socially and politically and condemned to the fringes of civilized life; the foundational institutions and norms of the latter, liberal-constitutional tradition currently face their gravest assault in the modern history of the nation. It is hard to believe that the better angels of America will not prevail. But, in these times, it is naive not to be deeply worried.

— *Mr. Patterson is the John Cowles Professor of Sociology at Harvard University. His many books include “Slavery and Social Death,” “Freedom in the Making of Western Culture” and “The Ordeal of Integration.”*