

Commentary: Black Lives Matter

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AS A VETERAN, EDUCATOR, AND CITIZEN, it is with great sadness and grave concern that I write these words, for not only do African Americans continue to be threatened by bullies in law enforcement positions, our head of state endangers those peacefully exercising their First Amendment rights in support of the victims of police brutality. Like many of you, I am dismayed and outraged. Although it is normally not apropos for faculty in higher education to express viewpoints beyond private conversations concerning political leaders, the current crisis in leadership, and my expertise in leadership scholarship, as well as my leadership experience and geographical research, necessitates this statement. I would be remiss if I did not do so.

It is past time to recognize the oppression that African Americans have endured, and working together to ameliorate this injustice is an imperative. I know many of you carry these same beliefs. A recent University of Michigan study reported that whereas about 39 in 100,000 white men and boys can expect to die at the hands of police officers, approximately 100 in 100,000 black men and boys are killed by police. In essence, black males are about 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police during their lifetimes than white males.

A measurable increase in the level of violence levied toward African Americans has occurred over the past four years. Before the 2016 election, many “Black Lives Matter” protesters faced physical and verbal abuse delivered by Trump supporters, and during the last quarter of 2016, the FBI reported a 25 percent increase in hate crimes. In December of that year, Ku Klux Klan groups planned Trump victory parades. In a recent report, the Southern Poverty Law Center showed that between 2017 and 2019, a 55 percent increase in white nationalist hate groups took place. For sure, white hate-mongers have found license during the current presidential administration to threaten, inflict harm on, and kill people of color. This could have been predicted, given events surrounding the 2016 campaign.

Among many disturbing incidents, one that took place in March 2016 stands out. At a rally for the leading Republican presidential contender, Virginia State University student Sierra Thomas shouted “Black lives matter!” As Donald Trump yelled into his microphone, “Get out!” Ms. Thomas became

one of the many protesters who faced the wrath of his supporters. She recounted her experience for the *Washington Post*. Please be aware that her account spares no harsh words levied against her.

Look them in the eyes. Show no fear. Remember why you're here. Oh - that must be the police touching me.

I turned around, all the while yelling, "BLACK LIVES MATTER!" I couldn't stop saying it.

Trump looked my way and yelled into the mic: "Get out!" The people I'd been sitting and talking with cheered with the rest of the crowd as police came over.

Three officers grabbed me, and I heard cheering from all around. Maybe in other circumstances, I might have been afraid. But right then, I wasn't. I didn't have time to worry, and I most certainly couldn't show it. I blocked everything out and kept chanting.

I raised my fist back in the air. "BLACK LIVES MATTER!"

A middle-aged white man in the crowd yelled at me: "Get your little ass out of here! Go home, n**ger!"

Tyranny is begotten from hatred and division sown, and it is no secret that the current administration fuels the kind of conflict that is modeled by authoritarian leaders elsewhere across the globe. In his criticism of the recent ambush against peaceful protesters demonstrating legally in front of the White House, former Secretary of Defense James Mattis remarked,

Donald Trump is the first president in my lifetime who does not try to unite the American people—does not even pretend to try. Instead he tries to divide us. We are witnessing the consequences of three years of this deliberate effort. We are witnessing the consequences of three years without mature leadership. We can unite without him, drawing on the strengths inherent in our civil society. This will not be easy, as the past few days have shown, but we owe it to our fellow citizens; to past generations that bled to defend our promise; and to our children.

The words of General Mattis are striking, and the road we must follow is difficult, for it is a long and plodding effort to exact much-needed change. Yet, we are all tasked with uniting in this common cause, and we must do more than simply generate awareness of racism and injustice. Indeed, the onus is upon each of us to work toward making constructive changes toward advancing justice and equality for the black community. Ponder ways to make a difference, show no tolerance for injustice, and consider making a contribution to your local NAACP branch. Let us all join together in this fight. Black Lives Matter!

A friend of California Geography and a regular participant at CGS conferences for many years, Mike DeVivo has often brought his students from Michigan, who frequently presented papers at the annual meetings on the geography of social injustice. He is Professor of Geography at Grand Rapids Community College and author of Leadership in American Academic Geography: The Twentieth Century.