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Riots Threaten to Undo Progress on Police Accountability

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"Anger over George Floyd's death is justified. But the answer to violence is never more violence."

Jon Miltimore is managing editor of FEE.org and a writer whose work has appeared in the *Washington Times*, *Federalist*, and other publications. In the following viewpoint, the author discusses the civil unrest in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and other US cities in the days following the police killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. Miltimore identifies police violence as an injustice against which Black Lives Matter and other protesters have demonstrated. However, the author argues, extreme actions such as looting and vandalism are inappropriate and should be condemned by people who support the cause. Among other evidence, Miltimore cites research suggesting that extreme protest actions alienate neutral onlookers who might otherwise be sympathetic to calls for police reform.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to the author, in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd, what was most surprising to people who have followed police brutality in the United States?
2. How does the author use the adage "violence begets violence" to support his position on rioting as a form of protest? Do you find it persuasive?
3. What forms of extreme protest actions mentioned by the author, if any, do you consider to be forms of violence? Explain your answer.

One of the overlooked factors of George Floyd's senseless and tragic death was that the wheels of justice were turning even as the protests across the United States descended into riots and street anarchy.

Floyd, a 46-year-old African-American, was killed last week while lying face-down on a street in Powderhorn, a neighborhood south of downtown Minneapolis, after he was arrested by four police officers for allegedly passing a counterfeit \$20 bill at a local deli.

According to a police complaint, Floyd "did not voluntarily get in the [police] car," which led to a struggle. He was taken to the ground by the officers, one of whom kept a knee pressed on Floyd's neck for more than 8 minutes.

Video footage shows Floyd pleading with officers in the final moments of his life and calling out to his mother.

"I can't breathe," Floyd said repeatedly. "Please, please, please."

Floyd's death, which was recorded on several cameras, soon went viral. The outrage was immediate and universal. Calls for swift action flooded televisions and social media.

What was surprising, at least to those who have followed America's history of police brutality, was that the action taken against the officers was swift.

Floyd was killed by police on May 25, a Monday. By Thursday, all four officers involved had been fired by the Minneapolis Police Department. Derek Chauvin, the officer who knelt on Floyd's neck, was charged the following day. He currently resides behind bars at Oak Park Heights, Minnesota's only Level Five security prison.

These actions, of course, do not wash away what happened to George Floyd. Nothing can. But they are evidence that justice may have been delivered this time: that, unlike so many times before, the crimes against him would not be whitewashed, ignored, or

trivialized.

If the actions taken in response to Floyd's death don't sound swift, compare them to those taken by the Mesa Police Department following the fatal shooting of Daniel Shaver, a 26-year-old man from Granbry, Texas.

On January 18, 2016, Shaver was shot dead in a La Quinta Inn & Suites hotel in Mesa, Arizona by police officer Philip Brailsford. Someone had spotted Shaver, a pest control specialist, with a pellet gun. Police ordered Shaver, who was unarmed, to walk across the floor on his knees with his hands behind his head. He died crying on his knees when Brailsford opened fire when Shaver appeared to try to pull up his pants, which were slipping down. (You can watch Shaver's execution at The Atlantic. Viewer discretion is advised.)

In contrast to the relatively swift actions taken by the Minneapolis Police Department in Floyd's death, the Mesa Police Department did not fire Brailsford, the son of a police sergeant, for *two months*. The department later temporarily rehired Brailsford, who was acquitted by a jury in December 2016 and now draws a \$30,000 annual public pension.

The moral of the story is that police violence is real, and for far too long police officers have been shielded from the consequences of their actions by police unions and doctrines like qualified immunity.

The relatively swift actions taken against Chauvin and his fellow officers suggested that maybe just maybe something had been learned since the deaths of individuals like Eric Garner, Shaver, Freddie Gray, and many others. Perhaps it was the hundreds of peaceful demonstrations that showed police violence would not be tolerated. Perhaps it was the ubiquity of handheld electronic devices (and officer worn body-cams) that showed the extent of police brutality and injustice in America. Whatever the case, we saw that George Floyd's death was being treated differently than so many others.

Unfortunately and ironically the spasms of violence and destruction threaten to diminish what progress has been made in our society's tolerance of police violence.

New research published in *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* suggests the popularity of social reform movements suffers when movements use "extreme protest actions," which tend to alienate neutral observers and even supporters of a given cause. Study leaders conducted six experiments involving 3,399 participants to measure how people responded to a variety of social causes, from Black Lives Matter movement to anti-abortion groups.

"[Researchers] found that more extreme behaviors such as the use of inflammatory rhetoric, blocking traffic, and vandalism consistently resulted in reduced support for social movements," writes Eric W. Dolan, the founder of *PsyPost*, a psychology and neuroscience news website.

Studies aside, it's not difficult to imagine how people will react to watching cities torn apart and elderly shop owners manhandled by masked men.

Anger over George Floyd's death is justified. But the answer to violence is never more violence. Nor would it be what Floyd would want, those close to him say.

"Floyd would not want people to get hurt," his fiancée Courtney Ross told *The Star Tribune*. "He lived his life protecting people. That is the truth."

The civil unrest is like nothing America has seen since 1968. Peaceful protests have turned into rioting, looting, and vandalism on a level not seen in generations.

George Floyd's tragic, senseless death can still be a catalyst for police reform. But only if we renounce the assaults, destructiveness, and anarchy we're witnessing in US cities and understand an eternal truth: violence begets violence.

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