**Headline:** Black Lives Still Don’t Matter in America

**Teaser:** A welcome change in national leadership in the U.S. means little for the scourge of racism infecting the nation—unless words are matched by action.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

**Author Bio:** Sonali Kolhatkar is the founder, host and executive producer of [“Rising Up With Sonali,”](https://www.risingupwithsonali.com/) a television and radio show that airs on Free Speech TV and Pacifica stations. She is a writing fellow for the [Economy for All](https://independentmediainstitute.org/economy-for-all/) project at the Independent Media Institute.

**Source:** Independent Media Institute

**Credit Line:** *This article was produced by* [*Economy for All*](https://independentmediainstitute.org/economy-for-all/)*, a project of the Independent Media Institute.*

**Tags:** Social Justice, History, Activism, Politics, Opinion, North America/United States of America, Trump, Biden, Economy, Social Benefits, Health Care, Criminal Justice

**[Article Body:]**

There is a scene in the new film “Judas and the Black Messiah,” directed by Shaka King and produced by Ryan Coogler, in which Chairman Fred Hampton of the Illinois Black Panther Party explains to a group of Black students that just because their school was allowing them to change its name to “Malcolm X College” did not mean they were now free from oppression. Hampton, who is played by actor Daniel Kaluuya in the film, clarified that there is a “difference between revolution and the candy-coated façade of gradual reform.” Hampton, a [real-life revolutionary](https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/true-history-behind-judas-and-black-messiah-180976975/) who was murdered by the state in 1969 at just 21 years of age, was ultimately seen as the greater danger to American society than white supremacy and racism.

Indeed “candy-coated” reform is all that most politicians have offered Black communities in America for decades. Evidence of it abounds in the form of damning statistical measures showing racial discrimination against Black Americans in [health](https://ufhealth.org/news/2020/perceived-discrimination-increases-health-risks-among-african-americans-uf-health-research) (including from the [novel coronavirus](https://www.healthline.com/health-news/theres-more-evidence-that-black-americans-face-high-risks-from-covid-19)), [law enforcement](https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/equality/502277-black-people-5-times-more-likely-to-be-arrested-than-whites), [criminal justice](https://news.gsu.edu/research-magazine/spring2020/incarceration), [voting rights](https://www.businessinsider.com/why-black-americans-still-face-obstacles-to-voting-at-every-step-2020-6), [education](https://truthout.org/articles/racial-disparities-in-science-and-math-education-are-hurting-black-communities/), [employment](https://www.epi.org/publication/black-workers-covid/) (including during the [pandemic](https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/09/laid-off-more-hired-less-black-workers-in-the-covid.html)), [housing](https://homelessvoice.org/african-americans-have-highest-rate-of-homelessness-in-minorities-for-a-decade-running/), and [life expectancy](https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/08/27/906002043/racial-inequality-may-be-as-deadly-as-covid-19-analysis-finds) before and especially during the past year.

The starkest symbol of how little the lives of Black people mean to the state are the ongoing reckless killings by police that almost always go unpunished. In one of the more recent and widely covered instances, the brutal police killing of [Daniel Prude](https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-happened-daniel-prude.html) in Rochester, New York, that took place nearly a year ago as he lay naked, hooded, and handcuffed in the middle of the street, has gone unpunished after a grand jury declined to press charges. Although a medical examiner ruled that he had died from “complications of asphyxia in the setting of physical restraint,” and the police initially refused to release the incriminating and deeply disturbing video of his last conscious minutes of life, it seems that there will be no justice for Prude.

Prude, like countless other Black people killed by police—whether they were women like [Breonna Taylor](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/kidspost/no-police-officers-charged-in-breonna-taylor-shooting-death/2020/09/23/6cc83ebc-fdc2-11ea-9ceb-061d646d9c67_story.html), or children like [Tamir Rice](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/no-federal-charges-officers-2014-fatal-shooting-tamir-rice-doj-n1252506)—are sacrifices to the altar of white supremacy. They are daily reminders of the bottom-rung status that Black people occupy in the American consciousness. Even George Floyd, whose deadly videotaped encounter with Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin was so egregious and widely viewed that even Donald Trump, among some of the nation’s most [vociferous white supremacists](https://apnews.com/article/89d86d28110b5f9a6d5a6df1b9f3be30), could not immediately deny the injustice that unfolded, is yet to receive justice. Floyd would have likely been alive today had Chauvin only been held accountable for the [previous incidents](https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/05/29/officer-charged-george-floyds-death-used-fatal-force-before-had-history-complaints/) in which he attempted to use fatal force, including at least [one in which](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/02/us/derek-chauvin-george-floyd-past-cases.html) he placed his knee on the neck of a Black suspect.

Meanwhile, all that is offered up in response to widespread anger over police killings are more examples of “candy-coated” reform. No matter how much money is spent on training police to not be so violent, they routinely kill on average about [1,000 Americans a year](https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/protests-spread-over-police-shootings-police-promised-reforms-every-year-they-still-shoot-nearly-1000-people/2020/06/08/5c204f0c-a67c-11ea-b473-04905b1af82b_story.html), with stunning consistency. Their victims are disproportionately Black.

White supremacists emboldened by Donald Trump’s presidency want to ensure that justice will remain ever elusive. In a stunning exchange between Senator John Kennedy (R-LA) and Judge Merrick Garland at a recent hearing for Garland’s nomination as attorney general, Kennedy [spent more than five minutes](https://twitter.com/cspan/status/1363952924259471364?s=20) attempting to trap the judge over his position on racism. The white Southern conservative senator who [voted to acquit Trump](https://www.kennedy.senate.gov/public/2021/2/kennedy-statement-on-vote-to-acquit-former-president-donald-trump) of responsibility for the January 6 Capitol riot, who cast doubt on the [results of the 2020 election](https://lailluminator.com/2020/12/08/sen-john-kennedy-casts-doubt-on-bidens-election-im-not-so-sure-something-didnt-happen/), and who denounced four congresswomen of color (“the Squad”) as “[whack jobs](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/sen-john-kennedy-whack-jobs_n_5d2f5641e4b0a873f645b50e)” tried vainly to test Garland’s understanding of the definitions of “systemic racism” and “implicit bias.”

Kennedy was clearly hoping he could get the judge to claim that entire agencies in the U.S. government were racist because there might be some evidence of systemic racism in their ranks. The senator—more invested in being protected against [accusations of racism](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/john-kennedy-racist-comment_n_5f84cfb7c5b6e5c320026ab2) than actually not being racist—is a powerful elected official representing a state with the [second-largest percentage](https://worldpopulationreview.com/states/louisiana-population) of its population that is Black in the nation.

The nation’s standard for tackling racial discrimination in the United States is so low that the fact that Garland, the man who would be the nation’s top cop, was able to clearly explain systemic racism and accept that it does indeed exist has been [hailed as a triumph](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/02/23/judge-merrick-garland-teaches-country-about-racism/). What went less noticed is Garland’s [absurd defense](https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/merrick-garland-says-capitol-riot-means-we-can-t-defund-n1258580) of the extraordinarily generous funding that police departments enjoy because Capitol police officers were attacked by white supremacist Trump supporters on January 6. He told senators that he is of the same mind as the current liberal president: “Biden has said he does not support defunding the police, and neither do I.” Garland said he believes “in giving resources to police departments to help them reform and gain the trust in their communities.” In other words, he understands there is deep racism in American society but is unwilling to take the hard steps to dismantle it.

The main difference between white supremacist supporters of police and liberal reformist supporters of police centers on rhetoric. The former group wants to claim American racism is over while the latter wants credit for admitting it is still a problem. Regardless of who is making decisions—Kennedy, Trump, Garland, or Biden—police are free to keep killing Black people with impunity.

Rather than be distracted by pretty words, following the money offers a much clearer picture of liberal priorities. American cities, including those run by Democrats, spend [inordinately large percentages](https://www.motherjones.com/crime-justice/2020/08/the-blue-budget-what-major-cities-spend-on-police/) of their budgets on police. The central demand of Black Lives Matter, to “defund the police,” has largely gone unmet. It matters little how much lip service [politicians](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/democratic-convention-embraces-black-lives-matter/2020/08/18/f1de2ce8-e0f7-11ea-b69b-64f7b0477ed4_story.html), [institutions](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/07/17/black-lives-matter-isnt-partisan-political-federal-agency-says/5452397002/), [corporations](https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/06/10/big-tech-black-lives-matter/), and others paid to the notion of equality last year when mass protests rocked the nation over Floyd’s killing. If offenders are not held legally accountable and money is not moved to reflect a priority for racial justice, empty words are nothing more than “candy-coated” reform.

“Judas and the Black Messiah” reminds Americans that just a few decades ago, law enforcement officials from the city, county, and federal level [collaborated to brutally murder Fred Hampton](https://www.newsweek.com/fred-hampton-murder-judas-black-messiah-1568375), a charismatic revolutionary leader of the Black Panther Party. While law enforcement painted the killing as a justifiable response to shots fired at them during a raid of Hampton’s apartment, in the end it was determined that only one shot was fired by the Panthers while police unloaded nearly 100 bullets, killing Hampton and one of his colleagues and injuring others. [No officer was ever held accountable](https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2019/12/04/police-raid-that-left-two-black-panthers-dead-shook-chicago-changed-nation/), but the survivors of the attack were instead charged with attempted murder—as stark an example as one might find of the racism of American justice.

Having just experienced a dramatic change in leadership from an avowed and dangerous white supremacist to a more traditional liberal leader, the nation has understandably breathed a sigh of relief. After four years of openly racist rhetoric, policies and actions, even the [diverse demographics of President Biden’s Cabinet appointments](https://www.npr.org/sections/president-biden-takes-office/2021/02/05/963837953/biden-pledged-historic-cabinet-diversity-heres-how-his-nominees-stack-up) are enough to inspire excitement for a better future. But we’ve been here before. Reforming the police is simply not as good as defunding the police. The symbolic hallmarks of reform are no substitute for revolutionary change.