

## LRT #27 Rethinking the Police in America

Good evening—and welcome to Living Room Talk, some thoughts on issues and events that you might be thinking about, too.

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Tonight's topic: Rethinking the Police in America.

As you know, the former Minneapolis police officer who killed George Floyd was convicted on two counts of murder and one count of manslaughter.

Since then there's been nonstop coverage and analysis of the trial. Many people feared that the killer would get off because history shows it's extremely difficult to get a murder conviction of a police officer.

Juries give cops enormous latitude and, if that wasn't enough, in too many cases, key facts are omitted, evidence disappears, reports are twisted — the “blue wall of silence” descends—it takes a very brave cop to leap that wall and tell the truth about a law-breaking colleague.

In the Minneapolis case, however, there was a videotape of the murder from start to finish and the killer's conduct was so clearly wrong that even his fellow officers condemned it in court.

The great majority of Americans applauded the verdict, including many police officers and officials from all over the country.

But at the same time many people seemed to miss the crucial broader perspective—seemed to see this trial only as the bringing to justice of one arrogant, cruel man who thought he could get away with murdering a helpless unarmed black man and then hide behind his badge.

But the killing and the trial were about way more than justice coming down on one cop, one rotten apple in the barrel.

The national conversation that needs to happen now, and is beginning to happen, is about the rotten barrel—is about a system of policing in this country that permits and even encourages police officers to use violence—too often lethal violence and too often against Blacks—to respond to situations that could be effectively and peacefully handled by other means, including by unarmed professional civilians.

The problem is a system in which a black man risks his life if he just walks outside at night, or reaches into his car's glove compartment for license and registration.

The problem is a system that allows police to break into black people's homes and shoot them in their beds, that allows police to shoot a child if they're frightened by his toy gun, that treats wearing a hoodie as evidence of guilt.

Let me be clear: I think that the vast majority of police officers are doing a hard and dangerous job with honor, intelligence, and courage. My concern is about the system that hires, trains and equips them, and sets the rules for their conduct. That system needs to be re-thought and re-purposed.

State and local jurisdictions across the country have taken up the issue of police reform, as has the US Congress.

The outline of what needs to be done is becoming clear:

Repurposing the police means hiring, training and equipping them to be agents not for antagonizing or terrorizing communities, but for providing protection, stability and support.

That means demilitarizing police forces. Portland is not Faluja and police in armored Humvees and Darth Vader battle armor should not be “deployed” in our cities and towns.

Repurposing means community policing with cops walking beats again, talking to people, learning who they are and what their lives are about, building trust. You can't do that from inside a patrol car.

It means not forcing police into situations for which they haven't been trained, and instead tasking appropriate social workers, psychologists and other *unarmed* professionals to take the lead in responding to many 9-11 situations, like mental health crises, domestic violence, and drug overdoses.

Repurposing the police means significantly changing the way police officers are trained. By all means continue to train them to deal effectively with truly violent situations and people, but stop recruiting and training them as if they were combat soldiers going into a war zone instead of becoming defenders of the peace in a community.

Spend more time training young officers in skills such as conflict resolution, communication, critical thinking and problem solving. Teach new officers the history and social situations of the communities in which they'll serve.

There need to be significant shifts in police tactics so that violence is the last and not first resort. This means banning chokeholds and no-knock warrants, and ending or at least severely restricting the use of tools like teargas and stun grenades against peaceful protesters.

Police need to be more accountable for their behavior—no more “qualified immunity,” That legal provision gives them far too much protection from responsibility for their actions. In practice this means they can use lethal force with impunity, no matter how unnecessary or unwise such force might be, so long as they *feel* they're in danger. “Qualified Immunity” means they know they can act even if their impulses are wrong, and be pretty sure there won't be consequences.

Another important step in increasing the accountability of policing should be to diminish the power of police unions, which today can overrule elected officials, quashing any criticisms of police conduct or the firing of bad cops. The police unions are a major factor in rotting the barrel.

The George Floyd murder and trial showed white America a white police officer murdering a Black American.

It was far from the first time that has happened, but *this* time the whole world *saw* it happen.

This time, it wasn't just words on the news.

This time a powerful, persistent movement kept the pressure on.

This time, white America didn't— *couldn't* look away.

To quote a recent Op-Ed in the *New York Times* that I think nails it:

“Justice is not a system where the Derek Chauvin's of the world are punished, but instead, a world where doing what Derek Chauvin did is unthinkable.

‘Justice is not a system where the man who killed George Floyd gets punished, it's a system where George Floyd is still alive because the police did their job and didn't kill a man during an arrest.

Basically, the question should not be “how do we punish the man who killed George Floyd?” it should be “how do we make sure nothing like this ever happens again?”

That's it for now.

Thanks for watching.

Please share this message widely.

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After the verdict in Minneapolis, the national conversation that needs to happen, and is beginning to

happen, is about a system of policing in this country that permits and even encourages police officers to use violence—too often lethal violence and too often against Blacks—to respond to situations that could be effectively and peacefully handled by other means, including by unarmed professional civilians.

The system that hires, trains and equips police, and sets the rules for their conduct, needs to be re-thought and re-purposed. The outline of what needs to be done is becoming clear.