

OPINION | DECLARATIONS

On Some Things, Americans Can Agree

George Floyd's killing was brutal. Good cops are needed. And Trump hurt himself badly this week.



By

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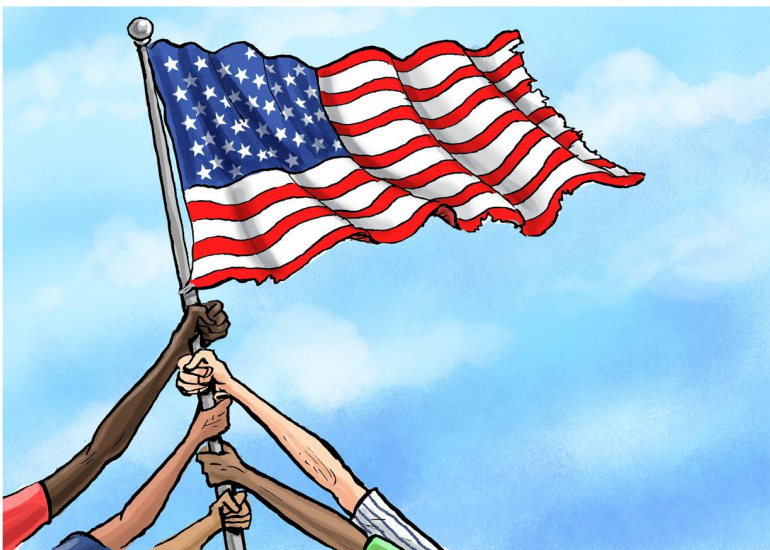


ILLUSTRATION: CHAD CROWE

There's so much to say but my mind keeps going back to New Year's Eve, when we watched the ball come down and knew the story of 2020 was the presidential election and whatever stray harassments history throws our way. No one that night guessed—no one could have guessed—that in the next few months we'd have a world-wide pandemic, an economic catastrophe and fighting in the streets. The point is not that life is surprise or history turns on a dime, it's that we've been battered. We've been through a lot. And with economic and cultural indexes down, with the world turned darker and more predatory, we will go through more. We thought we'd be telling our grandchildren about the spring of 2020. Actually we'll be telling them about the coming 10 years, and how we tried to turn everything around.

The painful irony of the protests and riots is that for a few days everyone was in agreement. We all saw the nine-minute tape. We saw the casual brutality as the dying man begged for mercy and the cop didn't care. In the past there were arguments about similar incidents. Not this time. Most everyone concedes the problem—that black men are profiled and cannot feel safe in their own country. Walking while black, driving while black—Tim Scott of South Carolina has been stopped for trying to impersonate a U.S. senator, which is what he is. In an interview a few years ago he told me that seven times in his first six years in Washington he'd been pulled over for “driving a new car in the wrong neighborhood.”



Rioters Torch the Rule of Law



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Following the killing of George Floyd, America would totally accept protests and demonstrations, would understand expressions of anger and pain.

What Americans wouldn't accept was looting, violence, arson. They wouldn't accept that shopkeepers just out from lockdown were pulled from their stores and beaten. They won't accept this because they will not accept more battery.

We're now supposed to hate cops. No. Hate bad cops, help good ones. A great cop does as much to help society as a great doctor or nurse, and is in the line of fire. In New York, one officer was mowed down by a hit-and-run driver; another was stabbed in the neck; two were shot. One cop was shot in Las Vegas and four in St. Louis, where the police chief said someone randomly shot at a police line. Also in St. Louis a 77-year-old retired police captain, David Dorn, black, on the force 38 years, was shot and killed during the looting.

Cops witness the worst things in America. They answer the 911 call at 3:20 a.m. and see things so horrible they can't tell anyone because if it gets around there will be imitators. They see the violent parents and the kids watching television, checked out at age 8. They see what meth does. They're often poorly trained and have to get everything right, and they assume between the cops and public opinion no one really has their back except the unions that too often keep cities from weeding out bad cops so that good cops can thrive.

There is a phrase among medical professionals, “moral injury.” Health-care workers who are strung out, stretched to the breaking point, suffer from moral injury.

So do a lot of cops. A lot of black men, too. The thing for all of us now is to keep our moral poise and intellectual balance, try to be fair and make things better. Some cops failed to do that this week—unnecessary roughness, targeting journalists. Some really came through. Among them were the police who were face to face with demonstrators and took a knee. This has been criticized as obsequious, bowing to the mob. No, it is how we are saved, by showing love and sympathy. It happened from New York to Los Angeles. Yahoo News reported on what happened in Flint, Mich., when Sheriff Chris Swanson told protesters, “I took off the helmet and laid the batons down. Where do you want to walk? We’ll walk all night.” Protesters cheered. In Fayetteville, N.C., there was a standoff between demonstrators and the police. The officers, some 60 of them, took a knee before marchers on Murchison Road. The department later said they wanted to show “understanding” for “the pain” many civilians are feeling. Witnesses said some officers and protesters had tears in their eyes.

To the extent things were contained this week, that’s how it happened.

That’s the big story, what happened in America.

As to the president, this week he altered his position in the political landscape. Something broke. He is no longer the force he was and no longer lucky. In some new and indelible way his essential nature was revealed.

It got out that faced with protests around the White House, he hid. Or perhaps let the Secret Service, which might have struggled with realistic threat assessment, talk him into going into the White House bunker. (Mr. Trump later said he was simply “inspecting” it.) He tweeted that he was protected by the “most vicious dogs” and “ominous weapons.”

On Monday, he spoke in the Rose Garden. “I will fight to protect you,” he said. “I am your president of law and order.” This was unsubtle, and seemed more aimed at protecting his political prospects than your safety and property.

Then, upset that people might be getting the impression he was a physical coward, he set out to prove he is brave. Protected by a phalanx of police, Secret Service, sharpshooters and what looked like a Praetorian Guard with shields, he marched to St John’s, the church of the presidents. Aides said it was a Churchill moment. And it was just like Churchill during the blitz, if Churchill secretly loved rubble. Upon arrival with his friends, the people who work for him, he brandished a Bible like—who in history?—the devil?

In all this he gave up the game and explicitly patronized his own followers. It was as if he was saying: *I’m going to show you how stupid I know you are. I’ll give you crude and gross imagery and you’ll love it because you’re crude and gross people.*

And some would love it. But not all. Not most, I think.

He has maxed out his base. He's got his 40% and will keep it, but it isn't growing. His polls are down, he has historically high negatives. As for suburban women, they'd crawl over broken husbands to vote him out.

He is proud of his many billionaire friends and think they love him. They don't. Their support is utterly transactional. They're embarrassed by him. When they begin to think he won't be re-elected they will turn, and it will be bloody and on a dime.

This will not end well. With his timing he'd know it. He should give an Oval Office address announcing he's leaving: "America, you don't deserve me." Truer words have never been spoken in that old place. And he won't be outshone by his successor. Network producers will listen to Mike Pence once and say, "Let's do 'Shark Week.'" But you know, America could use a shark week.

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