

REPORT

With Scenes of Police Brutality, America's Beacon to the World Winks Out

U.S. soft power was already dwindling under Trump. But the new wave of police violence and racial injustice may be drying up the reserves.

BY COLUM LYNCH, ROBBIE GRAMER | JUNE 1, 2020, 3:52 PM

A world that once looked to the United States to champion democracy and human rights watched with dismay and alarm as police departments across the nation unleashed violent crackdowns on anti-police protesters, targeting looters, demonstrators, and journalists alike, even as President Donald Trump on Monday criticized state governors for their “weak” response.

Meanwhile, from [Canada](#) to [New Zealand](#), tens of thousands of people gathered around the world to protest the killing of an African American man, George Floyd, who was suffocated on May 25 in Minneapolis by a white police officer who kneeled on his neck. The officer has since been charged with murder. Floyd's death a week ago touched off U.S. demonstrations that swiftly turned into riots in more than 100 American cities. But memorials also sprouted up in cities around the globe, from a candlelight [vigil](#) in Mashhad, Iran, to a mural painted on the Berlin Wall bearing Floyd's likeness along with his dying plea: “I can't breathe.”

What shocked observers around the world more than anything was the often brutal response of police, some of whom were videotaped ramming demonstrators with SUVs and tasing college students in their car. One heavily armed Minneapolis police officer fired paint rounds Saturday night at a resident watching the events unfold from her porch while another officer called out, “Light 'em up.”

Trump only appeared to encourage official violence, telling U.S. governors in a video conference call on Monday: “You have to dominate, if you don't dominate you're wasting your time. They're going to run over you. You're going to look like a bunch of jerks. You have to dominate.”

The overwhelmingly negative international reaction to the crackdown showed how far the United States' reputation has fallen in the eyes of the world under the Trump presidency, evoking the international opprobrium directed at previous U.S. governments during the Vietnam War and civil rights era, when police in Southern states turned attack dogs on black freedom marchers.

"The erosion of U.S. global leadership has been faster than expected," a senior European diplomat told *Foreign Policy*. "Military supremacy and financial leverage is still there. However, reserves of political and 'soft' power are being depleted rapidly."

"This is placing traditional allies in a difficult position—trying to cling to a traditional value-based connection [with the United States] which is diminishing fast," the diplomat said. "Europe is hoping for a turning point, although everyone is realizing that there is no absolute return to 2016."

The protests have also laid bare to the world deeply rooted societal problems in the United States, undercutting America's standing as a standard-bearer of modern liberal values, including the promotion of human rights, democracy, and free-market capitalism.

"I'm very concerned about how this will impact our leadership and our voice overseas," said Linda Thomas-Greenfield, a former career diplomat who was the seniormost-ranking African American woman in the U.S. foreign service when she retired in 2017. "People look to the United States for leadership, they look to us for support. They are worried that we're losing ground."

In his call with the governors, Trump urged them to increase law enforcement efforts and noted that foreign countries were watching—and judging. "You know, when other countries watch this, they're watching this, the next day wow, they're really a pushover. And we can't be a pushover. And we have all the resources—it's not like we don't have the resources. So, I don't know what you're doing," he told the governors.

Trump's national security advisor, Robert O'Brien, said that U.S. rivals were trying to exploit the situation and rebuked their criticisms as hypocritical. "I want to tell our foreign adversaries, whether it's Zimbabwe or China, that the difference between us and you is that that officer who killed George Floyd ... he'll be investigated and he'll be prosecuted, and he's going to receive a fair trial," O'Brien told ABC's on Sunday. "The American people that want to go out and protest peacefully, they're going to be allowed to seek redress from their government. They're not going to be thrown in jail for

peaceful protesting.” (Peaceful protesters and **journalists** were among some 4,000 arrested across the United States over the weekend.)

Some senior U.S. diplomats have weighed in from afar, explaining how they defend American values abroad even as they condemn Floyd’s killing and struggle to grapple with the reality of racial injustice at home.

“As an African American, for as long as I can remember I have known that my rights and my body were not fully my own. I have also always known that America, conceived in liberty, has always aspired to be better—a shining city on a hill—and that is why I have dedicated my life to her service,” Brian Nichols, a senior U.S. diplomat and the ambassador to Zimbabwe, wrote in a letter the embassy published.

Nichols’s letter reflects how U.S. diplomatic outposts abroad are now **being compelled** to address domestic strife amid a chorus of outcry from foreign countries on systemic racial injustices and police violence in the United States.

In his letter, Nichols tied the struggle of protesters in the United States to civil society activists detained and abused by the Zimbabwean government, noting that a police officer has been charged with murder in Floyd’s death, while Zimbabwean authorities abducted and assaulted democracy activists without consequence.

“In a long, unbroken line of black men and women, George Floyd gave the last full measure of devotion to point us toward a new birth in freedom,” he wrote. “Americans will continue to speak out for justice whether at home or abroad. We can meet the ideals of our founding, we will change this world for the better.”

Thomas-Greenfield, however, said that while the messages coming from U.S. diplomatic outposts abroad are important, they don’t make up for the void in Washington.

“It has to be extraordinarily hard for ambassadors to try to explain what is happening in the United States in the context of human rights and justice, where we had been the voice that people have looked to,” she said. “They’re doing the best with what they have.”

The scenes of protesters over the weekend pressing in on the White House, where the president was reported to be holed up in a secure bunker, served to highlight the isolation for a president who has found little solidarity from allies.

Indeed, Trump's apparent failure to demonstrate leadership over the issue of police abuse and nationwide street protests was only the latest blow to a reputation that was already in tatters around the world, following his fumbling, "America first" approach to the global coronavirus pandemic and his repeated insults to U.S. allies as well as his withdrawals from one major agreement after another—from the Paris climate pact to, most recently, the Open Skies Treaty. Last month, Trump abruptly announced that he would also seek to withdraw from the World Health Organization, a move that has virtually no support from key allies. Trump was also forced to reschedule a June Camp David summit of the G-7 industrial powers after Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel declined to participate, citing the health risks of the ongoing pandemic—but the U.S. president indicated he would invite non-member nations to the rescheduled meeting, including Russia.

Trump's closest European ally, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, on Monday appeared to break with his U.S. counterpart, threatening to block any move by the White House to restore Russia's membership in the big-power club. Asked about Trump's call for expanding the G-7 membership and inviting Russia, which was forced out of the group following its annexation of Crimea, Johnson's chief spokesman said, "We are yet to see evidence of [Russia's] changed behavior which would justify readmittance."

The latest string of police violence and protests are "a piece of a larger puzzle," said Thomas-Greenfield. "I think our face in the world had already diminished ... because of our lack of leadership in the world and on this issue it's just an added reason for countries to question our leadership"

U.S. adversaries—many of which are regarded to have the worst human rights records in the world—piled onto the protests, relishing the sight of a rival power engulfed in the pandemic lockdown and social unrest that exposed enduring racism and inequality.

"Some don't think #BlackLivesMatter," **tweeted** Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's foreign minister, sharing a marked-up version of a statement from the U.S. State Department on protests in Iran. "To those of us who do: it is long overdue for the entire world to wage war against racism. Time for a #WorldAgainstRacism."

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, a longtime critic of same-sex marriage who once **described** homosexuality as a "perversion," **then countered**: "You hang homosexuals, stone women and exterminate Jews."

Beijing, still reeling from the fallout of **racist attacks** against African migrants in China in April, seized on the U.S. protests to detract attention from its own crackdown on pro-democratic demonstrators in Hong Kong. When State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus chided Beijing on Twitter for reneging on its commitment to grant political freedom to the former British colony, her Chinese counterpart, Hua Chunying, **retweeted** the message with the line “I can’t breathe.”

“All lives matter,” she **added** in a subsequent tweet. “We stand firmly with our African friends. We strongly oppose all forms of racial discrimination and inflammatory expressions of racism and hatred.”

The official social media accounts of the Russian Embassy in Washington condemned police violence toward members of the media after a correspondent from the Russian state-owned news agency Ria Novosti was hit with pepper spray. “We are concerned about the increased number of police violence cases and unjustified detentions of journalists during their coverage of protests in the United States that broke out after the murder of George Floyd,” the embassy posted on **Facebook**.

The post came just days after several prominent Russian reporters were detained and later released for holding one-person pickets in support of the arrested Russian journalist Ilya Azar. Azar was arrested and sentenced to 15 days’ imprisonment earlier last week for holding a single-person demonstration against the imprisonment of activist Vladimir Vorontsov, who runs an **online community** that seeks to expose abuses of power within Russian law enforcement.

For many traditional allies, the events in the United States underscore the degree to which the rest of the world is being forced to align themselves with two increasingly problematic superpowers. “The choice is between an unreliable and increasingly transactional and autocratic democracy (U.S.) and a reliably transactional and unforgiving autocratic rising power (China),” one senior Asian diplomat told *Foreign Policy*.

“The United States is and appears to the world divided, diminished, & distracted,” Richard Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, **tweeted** on Monday. “Hard to believe we will not be challenged somewhere somehow by someone wanting to take advantage of these circumstances. To add a 4th ‘D,’ these are truly dangerous times.”

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