

Statement on Black Lives Matter



KEREM YUCEL—AFP/Getty Images <https://time.com/5847883/george-floyd-autopsy-covid-19-coronavirus/>

I've been asked for my take on the grave times we've entered since the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis last week. To me that horrendous event is not the central problem, but more of an alarm bell that as a society we've been tolerating practices and discriminatory neglect of whole classes of citizens that we can't tolerate anymore.

The Floyd killing has understandably drawn most of our attention to brutally racist police behavior. A vast majority of law enforcement officers do their job well and fairly—I know for a fact that's true in my community—but we have systemic problems that let a few persist in race- and class-based violence that hurts people, communities, and America's social fabric generally.

Recent examples have brought this issue to the front burners of the Legislature. I'll be working with others, either in special session or the regular 2021 session, to make Oregon's public safety system more responsive and fair, and less prone to the abuses that tear communities apart. The legislative possibilities range from outright bans on cruel, pointless practices like the one that killed George Floyd to information systems that make sure that abusive officers permanently lose their badges to better training and screening to powerful oversight by panels of community members to making sure investigations are run by qualified people from the outside.

The right mix of new measures could make a big difference. But they won't be enough. The dynamics of racism are so intertwined with poverty, crime and wealth inequality that we're fooling

ourselves if we look to policing reforms to solve the whole problem. The deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor—along with a shockingly long list of names we’ve heard and countless more that we haven’t—are branches of a diseased tree. If we do nothing at the roots, more will always sprout.

Some of the people now marching in America’s streets carry signs with a slogan from the 1960s: “No justice, no peace.” While some read that as hostile or threatening, history shows it’s accurate. When masses of people come to think they have nothing much to lose, societies tumble into decay and violence. So those of us who make laws and budget tax dollars have to attend to the basics: maintaining housing, health, educational and economic systems designed to offer equal access to opportunities that are the building blocks of secure, prosperous lives. If we can’t provide public services that meet the needs of traditionally ignored Oregon communities, measures we take to tamp down racism or improve policing will just be band aids.

Just a few words on the violence we’re seeing in the streets of major cities. Much of it comes from military-style over-reaction from police departments following the President’s advice to “dominate” and punish people exercising their first amendment rights, often in demonstrations that are wholly peaceful. It’s true that they’re not uniformly peaceful, and the looting that some of us remember from the 1960s has returned to major cities. One complicating element is well-documented street violence instigated by far-right groups, apparently a tactic to turn public opinion against the original protestors. That might be effective; the images of burning cars, shattered windows and rock-throwing teens shift the spotlight from the George Floyd episodes to the need for civic order, whatever it takes to get it. We’re in a dark tangled mess that triggers endless arguments about blame and responsibility.

I sometimes wonder what I’d be thinking now if I’d grown up black in Detroit or L.A. or Chicago or Washington, D.C. struggling endlessly for social justice and opportunity. I might have the same take as a long-time civil rights leader who was asked by a reporter this week if he thought the sporadic looting and arson would hurt the cause. “Look,” he said, “I’m past the point of preaching peace to the younger folks out there. For decades we’ve been pursuing justice peacefully within the system, just like we’re told to do. For decades we’ve been on the frontlines, putting out fires and protecting storefronts and chilling out the folks throwing rocks. We’ve done it again and again. And *nothing gets better*. Some things get worse. Maybe it takes something different to get the changes going in the right direction.”

Whether that makes sense to you or not, this much is unlikely to change: *no justice, no peace*. Thanks for writing me. It’s time for all of us to do what we can do for a more just, peaceful future.

Jeff