

Opinion

'I Can't Breathe' protests: calls for justice, peace and systemic change

Politicians and media utilize dog whistle politics to change conversation

Matthew Steinberg, Contributing Writer | June 4, 2020



In the wake of George Floyd's horrific death at the hands of four Minneapolis police officers, protests calling for justice and systemic change have organized across the United States. Demonstrations first began in the Twin Cities as thousands of people demanded Derek Chauvin — the officer who, with his hands in his pockets, pressed his knee against Floyd's neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds and ignored his gasps for air, pleading and cries for his mother — be arrested and charged with murder, along with the three officers who stood idly by and watched Floyd die: Tou Thao, J. Alexander Kueng and Thomas Lane. All four officers were charged after nine days of protests in New York, Los Angeles and dozens of American cities in all 50 states.

Yet, politicians and powerful leaders are actively ignoring the point of the protests and are heavily focusing on law and order. During a news conference on May 29, Governor of Minnesota Tim Walz opened by saying, "our community, especially our Black community, is hurting beyond words," and followed that statement with "Minneapolis and St. Paul are on fire." A day later, he continued to tell Minnesotans to "go home" and expressed his grave concern about the destruction the Twin Cities have sustained since protests began. He called for the "full force" of the Minnesota National Guard to stop the "chaos," "rioting" and "looting"

that is occurring on the streets of the Twin Cities.

Walz and other politicians like Mayor of Minneapolis Jacob Frey, Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms of Atlanta and Mayor Bill Peduto of Pittsburgh are justified to be concerned about violent protesting. However, it is alarming to see this concern overshadow the calls for justice and systemic change from thousands of protesters.

To be clear, many people are denouncing the violence and destruction that is sweeping American cities. With his brother's memorial in the background and dozens of community members surrounding him, Terrence Floyd said on June 1, "In every case of police brutality, the same thing has been happening: Y'all protest, y'all destroy stuff," and all for the same end result: nothing. Like many social justice icons have said before, he strongly encouraged protesters to use their voices and vote for change.

Speaking out against violent protesting is not an issue, but it appears that terms like "rioters" and "looters" are being used as political dog whistles in an effort to stop the protests completely.

Dog whistle politics is a vague and confusing concept, but politicians have openly admitted to employing it in past political strategies. In 1981, Lee Atwater, political strategist and consultant to Ronald Reagan, infamously described how the Reagan administration used terms like "forced bussing" to imply the n-word without actually saying it. In 1996, Hillary Clinton used the term "superpredator" to paint an image of black youth that spent their time with gangs, flooded cities with drugs and were altogether merciless, chaotic and had no regard for human life.

Therefore, dog whistles are terms and phrases that appear to have a concrete, non-offensive meaning, but are actually being used to attach an insidious label to a group of people, often in the interest of maintaining power. In the 1970s and 80s, Reagan used the term "welfare queen" to send a covertly racist, sexist and offensive message to his ideological base: Single, Black women were taking advantage of welfare benefits, and therefore the state needs to roll back public assistance programs.

As protests continue for a ninth day in the U.S., I fear that a number of political dog whistles are being used to justify the insane increase of police presence and force, calling in of the National Guard and installation of curfews that effectively silence the voices of tens of thousands of non-violent protesters calling for justice, peace and systemic change. For politicians, the real problem is not the violence and destruction from a fraction of the protesters, it is that their foundation of economic and social power is being rattled, and therefore covert rhetoric is deployed in an effort to sustain that power.

There have been a number of examples of political dog whistle usage, followed by excessive law enforcement, over the past week, but none are more blatant or worrisome than Donald Trump's June 1 speech in the Rose Garden. Trump opened by saying he "took an oath to uphold the laws of our nation, and that is exactly what I will do," and went on to describe how if governors of states do not stop the "rioting" and "looting" that is occurring across the U.S., then he will take it upon himself to use military force to do so.

To justify this disturbing and authoritarian action, Trump said he and his administration “cannot allow the righteous cries of peaceful protesters to be drowned out by an angry mob. The biggest victims of the rioting are peace-loving citizens in our poorest communities, and as their president I will fight to keep them safe.”

He later used various terms that have been uttered by a number of politicians, Republican and Democrat alike, and pasted across print and digital news networks: anarchists, arsonists, looters, criminals. He even used the word “thug” during his speech, as he did on a May 29 tweet that was flagged by Twitter, which is known to be a coded term for the n-word.

Trump claimed that he was “ending the rioting and lawlessness that has spread throughout our country” by “dominating the streets” of American cities. He called upon governors to “establish an overwhelming law enforcement presence until the violence has been quelled,” and threatened to deploy the U.S. military if they failed to do so. Unlike his many baseless ultimatums, this frightening assertion is possible because of the 1807 Insurrection Act.

In normal Trump fashion, his message panders to his right-wing audience, but make no mistake, mayors and governors throughout the country are taking similar measures. Governors like Walz have followed through on their word to flood American streets with law enforcement to the fullest extent. Tear gas and smoke have penetrated the eyes of protesters, some being children. People have been shot by rubber bullets just for using their voice as politicians and social justice icons have instructed them to do. Images of rioting and looting are causing a fascist retaliation by politicians of the right and left wing.

Calls for unity and peace exist but have been drowned out by calls for law and order. Protesters who are exercising their First Amendment right exist by the tens of thousands, but are overshadowed by the individuals causing violence and destruction, which exist by the dozens. This is not democracy.

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Matthew Steinberg is a senior majoring in communication arts and double minoring in journalism in the public interest and Spanish. This year, he serves...

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