

Cops Lynched Tyre Nichols Because They Knew They Could

All police, regardless of race or background, are employed to uphold a system conceived by white people, for white people, that operates to oppress Black people.



People gather in Washington Square Park to protest the death of Tyre Nichols. (John Lamparski / Getty Images)

By Elie Mystal, *The Nation*,
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The race of a cop is “cop.” Nobody should have needed to see a video of five Black cops lynching Tyre Nichols to figure that out. Nichols was beaten to death by Black cops (five of whom have been charged with murder); Tasered by a white cop who encouraged the beating (who has been suspended but still not charged); and abandoned by people with a duty to render aid (three Memphis first responders have been relieved of duty) as he slumped, dying of injuries, for 23 minutes until an ambulance showed up on the scene. A goddamn rainbow coalition of “cops” killed that man. Then, a police force made up of a diverse group of people whose forebears were enslavers, slaves, and slave catchers took to the streets in riot gear and armored personnel carriers to keep Memphis “safe” from people who wanted to protest the brutality of those cops.

All of that should be obvious, but apparently there are people out here who can’t understand how “Black” cops could commit this act born of “white” supremacy.

All cops are employed to uphold a system, a system conceived of by white folks, for white folks, that operates to oppress and control Black people. It's not surprising if Black people do not even find it difficult to participate in the oppression of other Black people, especially when they align themselves with an institution (in this case, the police) instead of working to take down that system. To put it a different way: When a cop says they "bleed blue," believe them.

That isn't to say that the race of cops under their uniform doesn't matter. Other cops may well care about the race or ethnicity of their fellow officers. We see evidence for this in the tepid response of the police unions to the murder charges brought against the five Black officers. Normally, the police union's spokespeople run to any camera they can find to defend officers caught performing violence, but not this time. We can also clearly see that the justice system cares about the race or ethnicity of police officers: These five Black officers were fired and charged faster than any white police officer I can remember, including George Floyd's murderer, Derek Chauvin.

But that just shows, yet again, that systemic racism in the justice system attaches to the race of the accused, not the race of the functionaries within the system. It doesn't matter if that functionary is white, Black, or brown. Systemic racism does not require an individual to harbor hatred for another race in their hearts; it simply requires individuals to participate in the corrupted system. You could drop a Martian in the middle of a local prosecutor's office and, unless they actively and consciously looked for ways to subvert and sabotage the system, they too would soon start charging Black suspects with stunning haste while using their discretion to aid and appease white wrongdoers.

And if you dropped that same Martian into a patrol car, it wouldn't take long before they got out of that car and started cracking Black skulls. That's because the badge and uniform give cops legal authority to become one thing in our society: predators. It's that license to prey on their fellow humans, specifically the Black ones, that transcends race or ancestry, and transforms some cops from alleged protectors into vicious murderers.

Cops do not exist to stop crime (see Uvalde) or solve crime (a 2020 report found that police arrests lead to convictions in only 2 percent of major crimes). They exist to arrest people. One might hope that they're arresting criminals or suspected criminals, but it's important to remember that the very institution of local policing can trace its roots directly back to the old slave patrols and slave catchers of the antebellum South. Studies show that even when a massive influx of cops into a city leads to a small reduction in major crimes like homicide, it comes with an explosion of arrests for petty, victimless crimes, and, of course, increased brutality against Black people.

The police are institutionally designed to be predators: Capturing (and if need be, killing) their targets is the primary way they justify their continued existence. Police are judged everywhere based on their numbers of arrests, the number of people they catch. And like all predators, they tend to target the weakest among us.

Black people are easy prey. We are, overall, less wealthy and less economically powerful. The media trashes us and our communities, making others more accepting of state-

sponsored violence against us. Politicians, and the majority of white folks who put them
55 in power, remain hysterically concerned about being the victim of crime and thus also
support state violence against us, especially since the media tells them we're all criminals
or soon-to-be criminals. Many in our own economically depressed communities, which
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And nobody believes us. One basic rule of predation is that after you identify the prey,
you have to separate it from the herd. The fact that our society doesn't often believe
Black people when we are the victims of police brutality and violence, or thinks that we
70 are ultimately at fault for the violence against us, has the effect of isolating us from that
society and makes us targets of violent cops. It's the same reason serial killers usually
start by preying on those who are homeless, who engage in sex work, who are addicted
to drugs or are otherwise marginalized by society. Nobody takes our word against the
uniform.

75 Black people have complained about violent police since the invention of the police, but
before camera phones and other surveillance technology became ubiquitous, nobody
listened when we told them how the cops treated us. Even now, cops are charged only
when the full measure of their violence is unmistakably captured on video. Even with
clear and convincing video, cops are only convicted when their Black victim dies face
80 down begging for their life. Any attempt to fight back, to live, results in acquittal for the
cop.

Tyre Nichols was beaten to death while calling out for his mother. I believe in that
moment he knew that the only person who would believe what was happening to him
was his mom. He was so close to her house. He was almost safe. He knew that she was
85 the only person who would care about his life enough to save him from his attackers.

That's why you'll never see cops, of any race, beat a white boy to death like that.
Because the cops know that a white male in that situation can call out to anybody from
"CNN" to "lawyer," and somebody might materialize out of thin air to stop them. Another
officer, a medic, a neighbor—there were any number of people who could have interve-
90 ned to save Nichols's life. Nobody did. The cops who beat him knew nobody would be
coming to help.

They also assumed nobody would demand justice after the fact. Note that the most

damning video of his murder does not come from the cops' body cameras (which, as usual in this situation, mysteriously did not capture the full encounter) but from a surveillance camera mounted on the light post that the cops probably didn't know was there. In fact, on the devices the cops knew were recording them, they can be heard making up the usual story that Nichols was trying to go for their guns. One cop even falsely claimed that Nichols "almost had his hand" on the gun. Pure lies. But would people have believed Nichols if he had lived and there were no camera footage?

100 If Nichols had survived his injuries and there were no video evidence of this encounter, the officers would still be on the force and Nichols would be the one charged with a crime.

105 It should go without saying that this kind of predatory behavior cannot be "reformed." You can't fix this with more training videos or diversity initiatives or trust falls or whatever else mayors claim their police need more money to do. As long as we accept armed paramilitary forces roving the streets looking for people to catch, we accept the disproportionate murder of Black people at the behest of the state.

110 I hope they don't get me. I hope they don't get my kids. But all I can do is hope, because too many people have decided that my death or my children's death is a price they're willing to pay for the fear the cops induce. In the meantime, asking me to differentiate between a white cop and a Black cop is like asking me whether a tiger is orange with black stripes, or black with orange stripes. It really doesn't matter.

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