



From George Floyd to Chris Cooper: Ibram X. Kendi on “Racist Terror” Facing Black People in America

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“I can’t breathe” — that’s what George Floyd, an unarmed African American man, repeatedly told a white Minneapolis police officer who pinned him to the ground Monday with a knee to his neck. Video of the police attack went viral. Now four officers have been fired. This comes

as another video went viral of a white woman calling the cops on a Black man in New York City’s Central Park and falsely accusing him of “threatening her life” after he asked her to leash her dog. We discuss these developments and more with Ibram X. Kendi, founding director of the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University and National Book Award–winning author of “Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America” and “How to Be an Antiracist.”

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Transcript

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AMY GOODMAN: We're going to Minneapolis right now, where police fired tear gas and rubber-coated bullets at thousands of demonstrators who gathered Tuesday to protest the killing of George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American man who died in police custody Monday after a white police officer pinned him to the ground.

A video circulated widely on social media shows Floyd gasping for air, saying, "I cannot breathe," while officer Derek Chauvin holds a knee to his neck. A warning: The video is extremely graphic.

EYEWITNESS 1: You have your knee on his neck.

EYEWITNESS 2: You've got your knee right on his neck, officer.

EYEWITNESS 1: He ain't even resisting arrest.

GEORGE FLOYD: I cannot breathe.

EYEWITNESS 3: Are you having fun?

GEORGE FLOYD: I cannot breathe.

EYEWITNESS 1: You're just a grown — you're a tough guy. You're a tough guy, huh?

OFFICER TOU THAO: What's that?

EYEWITNESS 1: I said he's a tough guy. He's not even

resisting arrest, bro.

OFFICER TOU THAO: Did you get the whole part when we fought with him?

EYEWITNESS 1: But, bro, why are you just sitting there? He ain't doing nothing now. Put him in the car.

GEORGE FLOYD: Don't kill me. Don't kill me.

AMY GOODMAN: The video shows the officer continued to pin George Floyd to the pavement with his knee in over his neck even after Floyd became silent and still. Four officers involved in Floyd's killing were fired Tuesday. The FBI has launched a federal civil rights investigation. Minnesota authorities are also investigating. "I can't breathe" were the same last words Eric Garner said before he was killed by a police officer in Staten Island in 2014. This is Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey.

MAYOR JACOB FREY: Whatever the investigation reveals, it does not change the simple truth that he should be with us this morning. I believe what I saw, and what I saw was wrong at every level. ... Being Black in America should not be a death sentence. For five minutes, we watched as a white officer pressed his knee into the neck of a Black man. For five minutes. When you hear someone calling for help, you are supposed to help. This officer failed in the most basic human sense. What happened on Chicago and 38th this last night is simply awful. It was traumatic. And it serves as a clear reminder of just how far we have to go.

AMY GOODMAN: George Floyd's family says the officer should be charged with murder. They're being represented by civil rights lawyer Benjamin Crump — the family is — who said, quote, "This abusive, excessive and inhumane use of force cost the life of a man who was being detained by the police for questioning about a nonviolent charge." This is Floyd's

brother Philonise speaking on CNN Tuesday.

PHILONISE FLOYD: I loved my brother. Everybody loved my brother. Knowing my brother is to love my brother. They could have tased him. They could have maced him. Instead, they put their knee in his neck and just sat on him, and then carried on. He screamed, “Mama! Mama! I can’t breathe! I can’t breathe!” And they didn’t care. So, I don’t — I just don’t understand what more we’ve got to go through in life, man. They didn’t have to do that to him.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, for more, we’re joined by Dr. Ibram X. Kendi, professor of history and international relations, founding director of the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University, National Book Award-winning author of *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, his latest book, *How to Be an Antiracist*. His forthcoming children’s book is titled *Antiracist Baby*.

It’s great to have you with us, Professor Kendi, but under terrible circumstances, from the pandemic to what we just see happened in Minneapolis. Can you respond to the killing of George Floyd?

IBRAM X. KENDI: I mean, I think, like so many Americans, so many Black Americans, in particular, I’m just completely outraged. And it’s certainly the case, as the mayor said, that when we cry out for help, other human beings should seek to help us. But, essentially, the job of a police officer is to listen to those calls for help, is not to be our executioners. And so, the fact that a police officer did not hear the cry for help, that’s more — that’s even worse than any of us. We’re not sworn to protect. We’re not trained to hear those cries. But police officers are. And so, to me, you know, I’m outraged, like so many people who care about Black lives.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: And, Professor Kendi, in this particular

case, the actions of the mayor, not only in immediately firing the officer involved, but also the three other officers who were on the scene – so often many of these cases of police abuse depend on the officer being able to get away with it because other members of the force, in essence, back them up through the blue wall of silence. So, your reaction to how the city immediately moved on this case?

IBRAM X. KENDI: So, I mean, I think, obviously, their firing was immediately warranted. I think they should also be seeking to charge the officers with murder. I also think that we really need to consider: If we did not have a video, would the officers have been fired as quickly? Would they have believed all of those witnesses who were looking at what was happening and who was the asking officers to stop?

But it's not enough to fire the officers. You literally need to root out other officers in the Minneapolis police force that have the capacity to do this, I mean, and just like all over this country. It's not enough to imagine that there are bad apples. You know, we need to recognize that there's something wrong with the tree.

AMY GOODMAN: I wanted to read Bernice King's tweet, the youngest child of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King. She tweeted a picture of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin with his knee on the neck of George Floyd, next to a picture of Colin Kaepernick taking a knee to peacefully protest deaths like this, for which he's banned from the NFL. Next to the pictures, King wrote, quote, "If you're unbothered or mildly bothered by the 1st knee, but outraged by the 2nd, then, in my father's words, you're 'more devoted to order than to justice.'" she said. "And more passionate about an anthem that supposedly symbolizes freedom than you are about a Black man's freedom to live" was her final part of that tweet. Dr. Kendi, talk about that.

IBRAM X. KENDI: Oh, I just think it was a powerful, powerful statement and speaking certainly not only to her father's legacy, but even Dr. King — Dr. Bernice King's analysis of the situation. I mean, fundamentally, Colin Kaepernick was kneeling for the freedom to live, you know, for the freedom to have equity, even for the freedom, as he would, I suspect, say now, from infection. I mean, you know, Black people are — you know, we're not only sort of — we were running from racist terror, only to run into the face of COVID-19, only to run from COVID-19 into the face of racist terror.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: And, Ibram Kendi, I wanted to ask you about the second video that we mentioned that went viral over Memorial Day weekend of this Amy Cooper, this New York resident in Central Park, calling — falsely calling police on Christian Cooper, when he urged her to leash her dog, and claiming he was assaulting her. Franklin Templeton, the investment firm, subsequently fired her. Interestingly, Franklin Templeton is the same investment firm that fought the government of Puerto Rico over its bankruptcy, had no problem with creating massive distress for millions and millions of Puerto Ricans during their crisis, but now, because of the bad publicity, immediately fired Amy Cooper. Your response to that particular incident?

AMY GOODMAN: And let's go to a clip of what exactly happened, the clip filmed by the man, Christian Cooper — no relation to Amy Cooper — a writer, editor and avid bird watcher, a board member of New York City Audubon Society, who filmed this.

AMY COOPER: Could you please stop? Sir, I'm asking you to stop.

CHRISTIAN COOPER: Please don't come close to me.

AMY COOPER: Sir, I'm asking you to stop recording me

with your camera.

CHRISTIAN COOPER: Please don't come close to me.

AMY COOPER: Please take your phone off.

CHRISTIAN COOPER: Please don't come close to me.

AMY COOPER: Then I'm going to [inaudible]. I'm calling the cops.

CHRISTIAN COOPER: Please call the cops. Please call the cops.

AMY COOPER: I'm going to tell them there's an African American man threatening my life.

CHRISTIAN COOPER: Please tell them whatever you like.

AMY COOPER: Excuse me? I'm sorry, I'm in the Ramble, and there is a man, African American. He has a bicycle helmet. He's recording me and threatening me and my dog. There is an African American man. I am in Central Park. He is recording me and threatening myself and my dog. And like — I'm sorry, I can't hear you, either. I'm being threatened by a man in the Ramble. Please send the cops immediately! I'm in Central Park in the Ramble. I don't know!

CHRISTIAN COOPER: Thank you.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: The incident involving Amy Cooper and Christian Cooper. When the police arrived on the scene, they arrested no one and issued no summons. Your response, Ibram Kendi?

IBRAM X. KENDI: Well, I think, first and foremost, it's critical for us to recognize that oftentimes, too often, what Amy Cooper did is typically the beginning of racist terror. And what happened to [inaudible] the end. In other words, you have a white woman weaponizing her white womanhood. And instead of seeking to resolve a dispute with another person and actually follow the rules and leash her dog, instead she projects herself as the victim and then calls the cops, through that projection, so they can come and protect her. And then, oftentimes, those cops actually believe that this white woman is being threatened by this so-called superpredator of an African American male. And then, oftentimes, or too often, it leads to that unarmed victim ultimately becoming harmed or even killed. I mean, the fact that we are talking about these two stories on the same day [inaudible] obviously did not lead to, you know, he is safe. Too often, it leads to people being harmed. And I don't think white women should have the power to do that anymore.

AMY GOODMAN: Ibram Kendi, we're going to break, and then we're going to go back to you to talk about this COVID Racial [Data] Tracker that you've developed. Ibram Kendi is a professor of history and international relations and founding director of the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University in Washington, D.C., also National Book Award-winning author of *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* and, his latest book, *How to Be an Antiracist*. Stay with us.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: Miles Davis's "All Blues," featuring drummer Jimmy Cobb. He passed away Sunday at the age of 91 of lung cancer.

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