

# Black Lives Matter: A Singaporean's perspective

My experience of a racially segregated America in the 1960s drove home the deep historical roots of racism there



**Tommy Koh**

For *The Straits Times*

I went to the United States in 1963 to study at Harvard Law School. Coming from multiracial Singapore, I was quite shocked to find that America had a system of racial segregation akin to apartheid.

The few black students in my class, for example, could not eat at some restaurants which did not welcome black people. They could not stay at some hotels for the same reason. In 1963, the blacks in America were treated as second-class citizens.

I arrived in America in August 1963. On Aug 28 that year, a historic event took place in the nation's capital, Washington, DC. About 250,000 people of all races marched peacefully to demand an end to racism.

The enormous crowd filled the length of the Washington Mall.

Addressing the gathering from the Lincoln Memorial, a young preacher mesmerised the audience. He was the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. His oration, *I Have A Dream*, was a defining moment in the Civil Rights Movement.

I can still recall his ringing words: "I have a dream, a dream deeply rooted in the American dream – one day this nation will rise up and live up to its creed, 'we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal!'"

I also remember these words: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character."

Then US President John F. Kennedy wanted to help the African-American community. He submitted a civil rights Bill to the US Congress. It met with strong opposition in the US Senate. He saw the peaceful march on Washington as bolstering the prospects of the Bill. He invited Dr King and the other leaders of the Civil Rights



Demonstrators at the Martin Luther King Jr Memorial in Washington last Thursday, protesting against the death of Mr George Floyd. The writer says that there have been too many cases of innocent and unarmed black men, women, boys and girls who have been killed by the police in America. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Movement to meet him at the White House.

President Kennedy would, however, not live long enough to see the Bill enacted into law. He was assassinated on Nov 22, 1963.

President Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson, was from Texas, a state in the south. The states in the south were former slave-owning states. They had opposed President Abraham Lincoln's proclamation to free the slaves in 1862.

The southern states, constituting the Confederacy, fought the northern states in a bitter civil war from 1861 to 1865. The south lost the war and slavery was abolished throughout the US.

While slavery was eventually outlawed, many states later enacted a series of laws to segregate blacks in housing, education and social life that lasted well into the 20th century.

President Johnson decided to honour the memory of President Kennedy by pushing the Civil Rights Bill through the US

Congress. It became law on July 2, 1964. The law prohibits discrimination based on race, colour, religion, sex or national origin. It outlaws racial segregation in schools, employment and public accommodation.

In 1965, President Johnson managed to push through another landmark legislation, the Voting Rights Act. This law overrules state and local laws which, for nearly 100 years, had prevented African-Americans from exercising their constitutional right to vote.

President Johnson should be remembered by American history as the president who enacted these two landmark laws and not for his failed Vietnam War policy.

The southern states felt betrayed by the Democratic Party. They began to switch their allegiance to the Republican Party. The Republican Party is now viewed by some as the party of white privilege, not supportive of blacks and other minorities.

Harvard University is located in

the town of Cambridge, Massachusetts, a predominantly white upper-class community. Before leaving the US, I wanted to experience living in a black community. I enrolled as a volunteer to help the black folk who lived in a ghetto called Roxbury. For half the summer in 1964, I lived in Roxbury. I was treated with kindness and accepted as a "brother".

#### AFRICAN-AMERICAN LAW DEAN AT NUS

From 1962 to 1964, the law school at the National University of Singapore had an African-American dean. He was Professor Harry E. Groves, an expert in comparative constitutional law. He had served as the dean of the law school at Texas Southern University before coming to Singapore.

Prof Groves was a good legal scholar, a fair-minded administrator, and a kind and good man. The fact that he was black was

of no consequence to his colleagues or the students. He was very good-looking and we used to tell him that he was better looking than Sidney Poitier, the most famous black actor at that time.

In contrast to Singapore, no major American law school has ever appointed a black man as its dean until very recently. The College of William and Mary, one of the oldest universities in the US, just appointed a black legal scholar as its law dean.

The college announced last month: "A. Benjamin Spencer, a nationally renowned civil procedure and federal courts expert and current professor of law at the University of Virginia, will begin at William and Mary law school July 1. Spencer will be William and Mary's first African-American dean of any school at the university, including the law school."

#### THE ELECTION OF BARACK OBAMA

The election of Mr Barack Obama

as the 44th president of the US was nothing short of a miracle. I did not think it would happen in my lifetime. I had expected America to have a woman president before a black president.

Mr Obama served for eight years as the president. During his tenure, he did his best to advance the course of justice for minorities.

It was, however, not possible to erase, in eight years, the legacy of slavery, segregation and racism.

Slavery was legal in America from 1619 to 1863, a total of 244 years.

Segregation was legal from 1863 to 1964, a total of 101 years.

Racism has deep roots in America.

#### THE POLICE AND THE BLACK COMMUNITY

America is a big country of many contrasts. Policing is a local responsibility. The result is that some police forces are better than others. There are many good police officers and a smaller number of bad ones.

It is, unfortunately, true that there are some white racists serving as police officers. The result is that, instead of protecting the law-abiding black people, the rogue police officers have become their predators.

There have been too many cases of innocent and unarmed black men, women, boys and girls who have been killed by the police.

The shocking fact, according to research organisation Mapping Police Violence, is that in 99 per cent of the killings, no charges were made against the police officers. To the blacks, it looked like the police had a licence to kill and were protected by a culture of impunity.

#### GEORGE FLOYD AND BLACK LIVES MATTER

The killing of Mr George Floyd by the police in Minneapolis was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. Mr Floyd died after a white policeman put a knee on his neck while he was lying on the street, in a chokehold that lasted 8min 46sec, captured on camera. The act was so blatant. It was one too many. It was an example of systemic racism in the police forces of America. It has unleashed a storm of protest, both in the US and around the world.

The daughter of a good friend asked her mother: "Why Black Lives Matter? Don't all lives matter?"

The answer is, of course, that all lives matter. However, in the specific case of America, Black Lives Matter, the movement behind the slogan, is a response to the fact that, in recent years, many innocent and unarmed black men, women, boys and girls have been killed by white racists or by the very people who are supposed to protect them – the police.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Professor Tommy Koh, a veteran diplomat, was ambassador to the United States of America from 1984 to 1990.