

The 'poison' that is killing American blacks

The killing of 10 black people by a white gunman in Buffalo, New York, earlier this month has raised troubling questions not just about gun violence but also rising racially-motivated crimes against African Americans. President Joe Biden likens white supremacy to a poison spread by the Internet. But the roots of this phenomenon run deeper – to America's original sin.



Tommy Koh

The world is understandably confused about the situation of the African Americans in America. On the one hand, the world celebrated the election in 2008 of an African American, Barack Obama, as the 44th president of the United States.

On the other hand, the world was shocked to learn that between 2015 and mid-2021, 6,355 black people were killed by the police, based on a database maintained by *The Washington Post* since 2015.

The killing of African Americans George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Eric Garner ignited the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020.

In this essay, I will try to cast some light on these contradictions. To understand the present, we have to begin with the past.

THE SLAVE TRADE

Slavery is one of the most vicious institutions invented by mankind. And yet, it was practised in all the ancient civilisations. Slavery was widely practised in South-east Asia, including Singapore. It was abolished in Singapore in 1823 by the British governor Stamford Raffles.

From the 16th to the 19th centuries, many innocent African men and women, living in Western and Central Africa, were kidnapped by African and Arab slave traders and sold to the Portuguese, British, Spanish, French, Dutch and Danish slave traders. The Africans were transported, against their will, to the Americas. It has been estimated that about 12 million Africans were shipped across the Atlantic Ocean, over the span of 400 years. Many more perished on the journey across the Atlantic Ocean.

AMERICA'S ORIGINAL SIN

The transatlantic slave trade came to America in 1619, when it was a British colony. The African slaves were treated by their owners as a source of cheap labour. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the slaves were employed in the tobacco, rice and indigo plantations.

After the invention of the cotton gin, cotton replaced tobacco as the main cash crop and the American south became one of the world's biggest producers of cotton. Slaves were needed to work on the cotton plantations.

In the beginning, all the 13 American colonies had slaves. With the passage of time, sentiment in the northern states turned against slavery. In 1808, the US Congress outlawed the African slave trade.

This did not, however, affect the domestic slave trade, which continued to flourish. By 1860, there were about 4 million African slaves in America, mostly in the cotton-producing states of the south.

There was a political divide between the northern states, which had abolished slavery, and the southern states, which were slave-owning.

Things came to a head in 1860, when Abraham Lincoln, an abolitionist, was elected as the US president. Eleven southern states seceded, and this led to the Civil War between the North and the South. The American Civil War began on April 12, 1861 and ended on April 9, 1865.

In the beginning, president Lincoln said the war was to preserve the union. However, in 1863, he issued the Emancipation Proclamation which freed the slaves. In 1865, slavery was legally abolished by the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution.

Slavery was therefore legal in America, from 1619 to 1863, a total of 244 years. Although the South lost the Civil War, many people in the southern states still have not come to terms with that loss. Thus, we see the confederate flag flown all over the southern states. The generals of the confederate army are still honoured.

My conclusion is that history



The sun shone through a Black Lives Matter flag at a protest held a week after black American Andrew Brown Jr was killed by sheriff's deputies in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, in April last year. The killing of African Americans George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Eric Garner ignited the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. PHOTO: REUTERS

never dies.

FROM 1863 TO 1964

The 13th Amendment had abolished slavery. The 14th Amendment gave the former slaves citizenship and the equal protection of the law. The 15th Amendment gave them the right to vote.

The reality on the ground, in the south, was quite different. The white power structure prevented the African Americans from enjoying their constitutional rights. The white ruling class introduced a system of segregation, under the rubric, "separate but equal". In reality, it was more like the apartheid system of South Africa. The blacks were treated as second-class citizens.

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

At some point, oppressed people will rise up against their oppressors. By the 1960s, the African Americans had enough of oppression and discrimination. They started a non-violent Civil Rights Movement, to obtain equality and justice. One of the leaders of that movement was a young preacher from Atlanta, Georgia, Dr Martin Luther King Junior.

The Civil Rights Movement waged many epic struggles, to desegregate the bus system, to desegregate the restaurants and diners, to desegregate the schools and universities, and to register the black citizens to vote. During that struggle, many young activists were brutally murdered by white racists.

The breakthrough came in 1964, when the US Congress, pressured by president Lyndon Johnson, passed the Civil Rights Act. In 1965, Congress enacted the Voting Rights Act. Together, these two laws brought about the second emancipation of the African Americans.

PROGRESS AFTER 1964

After the passage of the Civil Rights Act, a paradigm change took place in America. Schools and universities were desegregated. The places of work, public transport, hotels and other public amenities were desegregated.

The African Americans have seized the new opportunities and have made impressive progress. Talented African Americans have made their mark in every field of American life: in music, sports, literature, military, religion, academia and politics.

Ms Kamala Harris is the first

black woman to serve as the Vice-President of the United States. Mr Lloyd Austin is the first black man to serve as the Secretary of Defence. Two black individuals, Mr Colin Powell and Ms Condoleezza Rice, had served as Secretary of State. The current US Ambassador to the United Nations, Ms Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the chair of the Council of Economic Advisers, Ms Cecilia Rouse, and the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, Mr Michael S. Regan, are black.

Three African Americans have won the Nobel Prize for Peace. They are: Dr Ralph Bunche (1950), Dr Martin Luther King (1964) and Mr Barack Obama (2009). Novelist Toni Morrison won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993.

Two African Americans, Mr Thurgood Marshall and Mr Clarence Thomas, have served on the US Supreme Court.

Talented African Americans have dominated American sports, including track and field, boxing, football and basketball. The same can be said of the music industry. Among the most famous American musicians and athletes are many black ones.

The problem is the big black