

# United States: Black Lives Matter movement grows stronger - A look back at US history

Tuesday 13 September 2016, by [MIAH Malik](#) (Date first published: 1 September 2016).

**While police tactics and accountability measures are being examined, many black people are also questioning their safety and place in society. They worry about the next time they interact with police, and about the difficult conversations they must have with their children.**

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*We're just a bullet away from being a hashtag.* — Mistah F.A.B.

*Hearing my son say to the officer, "You shot me," it pierced my heart.* — Wanda Johnson

*I'm 61 years old, and I have been stopped by police 53 times in my life.* — John William Templeton

*As a physician I watch these videos and I see health care infractions.* — Dr. Tiffany Chioma Anaebere

*I'm not ready to have the conversation with my daughters.* — W. Kamau Bell, (*The San Francisco Chronicle*, 7/31/16)

The quotes above came from Black residents living in the liberal San Francisco Bay Area. The statistics on police stops of Blacks and violence mirror other cities, especially in the Midwest and South. San Francisco has a six percent Black population — which suffers 40 percent of the city's shootings by cops.

The two major party conventions occurred in July and showed the powerful impact of the three-year-old Movement for Black Lives. At the Republican Party convention that nominated demagogue Donald Trump, the theme was that only white and blue lives matter. Black Lives Matter movement leaders were demonized and called violent, anti-cop and evil.

At the Democratic Party convention that nominated war hawk Hillary Clinton, the theme was to emphasize "unity." While nodding to Black Lives Matter, the focus was "All Lives Matter." Whenever the question was asked to delegates on the floor, the reply was to downplay a reality that Black lives for 400 years have mattered much less than whites.

Only the radical wing of the Bernie Sanders campaign mentioned the positive impact of the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) and defended its demand for real reform of the police and criminal

justice system.

## **Anti-Black Code Words**

“All Lives Matter” is code to attack Black Lives Matter and defend the status quo. It is in line with the worst traditions of America’s long racist origins. African Americans who have suffered oppression and systemic discrimination are told to wait for change — “tone it down.”

In the South, under legal segregation, “states’ rights” were enforced to deny Blacks the right to vote. It is being done again since the Supreme Court gutted the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

The ongoing daily police violence against Black men and women is an extension of a long racist history that is rarely taught in schools. Whites and Blacks aren’t educated in true racial history. It is whitewashed. Cops are rarely arrested or convicted. It is why the Movement to defend Black bodies continues to grow stronger, and the demand “No Justice, No Peace” is heard from Oakland to Chicago to Dallas and New York.

One of the most prominent business magazines, *Bloomberg Business Week*, ran a prominent article and a photo on the front page of the August 8 issue of Alicia Garza, a co-founder of the BLM. “If we want to get to the place where all lives matter,” she said, “then we have to make sure that Black lives matter too.”

When the parents of a fallen Muslim soldier (Humayun Khan, an Army captain killed in Iraq in 2004) spoke out against Trump for his smearing of Muslims and his plan to ban them from entering the country, Khizer Khan made a rare point that few understand: it is the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution that gives citizenship rights to “all persons born or naturalized in the United States.” and also confers upon all citizens “equal protection of the laws.”

That amendment was adopted after the Civil War and guaranteed former slaves their citizenship. It can’t be taken away easily, Khan reminded us, even by an authoritarian figure like Trump as president.

His wife, Ghazala Khan, added that Islam is a religion of peace, that terrorists are not following the religion and that Muslims are as patriotic as other religious citizens.

## **What the Founding Fathers Knew**

The founding fathers who wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution knew that the documents — including the Bill of Rights (the first 10 amendments to the Constitution) — only applied to whites. The Declaration’s famous “all men are created equal” was exclusionary — Africans were considered property like any other livestock.

Women were raped and their children sold. Genocide/ethnic cleansing of Native tribes was legal.

Not until after the Second American Revolution (known as the 1861-65 Civil War) did a radical change to the Constitution occur with the addition of the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments.

Blacks have always seen “American exceptionalism” and the founding fathers differently than whites. On July 5, 1852, Frederick Douglass gave a speech at an event commemorating the signing of the Declaration of Independence. He said, “This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice,

I must mourn.” And he asked them, “Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak today?”

Some Blacks did fight in the Revolutionary War hoping for freedom. Others fought with the British colonialists. Ironically the British banned slavery in the Empire between 1833-38. It compensated slave holders for their economic losses.

Yet the U.S. federal government rejected this course as the slaveholding states incorporated their right to keep slaves in the Constitution. They later declared independence from the union when they saw this “right” under attack.

## **The Abolitionist Example**

The Black Lives Matter Movement stands on principles in the tradition of the Abolitionists who refused to compromise or tone down their demand to immediately end slavery. They were threatened by slaveholders and pro-slavery sympathizers.

The liberals of the day, including President Lincoln, were opposed to human bondage. But they still respected the rights of slaveholders. The Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863 was a tactic to defeat the Confederacy. It only applied to slave states in rebellion. It didn’t apply to slaves in non-rebelling border states (Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland and Missouri).

The capital in Washington D.C. was built primarily by slave labor. When First Lady Michelle Obama made this simple point at the Democratic Party convention the far right attacked her including a leading Fox commentator, Bill O’Reilly, who said these slaves were fed well and had decent housing. (Their wages went to their owners!)

Khan’s point about the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment is extremely important. It set the framework for the next 100 years of struggle for full equality. He correctly explained that no religion — neither the Bible nor the Koran — can be a replacement for the Constitution, unless those amendments are repealed.

Blacks were not legal “Americans” until the late 1860s. Former slaves then faced organized violence by the state governments to take away that citizenship. The police, Congress and courts kept Black people in the segregated South and the entire country as second class.

The battle for life and respect has been a central feature of the Black freedom struggle. It is why the middle class and more wealthy Blacks (forced to live in segregated communities) had little choice but to join the movement or become agents of the oppressors.

Class divisions within the Black community widened after the victory of the civil rights revolution. The upper class Blacks can now live in areas that previously excluded them. That’s a good thing, but also why they generally represent the “tone down” critics of the BLM.

## **Violent State Counter-Offensive**

The state has pushed back hard to limit freedoms for African Americans. In the early 1900s, the ruling class had no problem with Booker T. Washington, the leader of those who accommodated with the racist status quo. The NAACP and other new civil rights groups challenged the perspective of accommodation. These leaders faced hostility from the government, even though their main demand was to end lynchings.

The most concerted attacks were against the rising Black Nationalist formation led by Marcus Garvey. His urban-based movement (sometimes called “Back to Africa”) fought for freedom by demanding reparations and an end to police violence. Garvey’s movement was strong not only in the Black communities but in the Caribbean where he was from. He was later deported to Jamaica.

The mass protests in the urban Black communities struck fear in the minds of whites and the ruling class. The present-day FBI began in the 1920s in two dirty campaigns: against Garvey’s nationalism and against the “Red Scare” socialists.

In the 1930s with the deep economic depression and rise of militant labor struggles, African Americans were not explicitly covered in the “New Deal.” FDR’s Democratic Party included the segregationists of the South who resisted any law that weakened white power.

Big unions formed white-only locals in the South. Northern labor downplayed racism under the guise of “unity” to win economic issues.

Housing discrimination was enhanced under the new Federal Housing Administration. Low-cost real estate loans (the way most working class whites created wealth) excluded African Americans. In the Second World War, white women could get hired in war plants ahead of Blacks, who organized protests to get some of those jobs.

A March on Washington Movement in 1941 pressed for jobs in the war industries. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor did express sympathy for Blacks — a change in attitude more than in practice.

The military was segregated because most whites did not trust the loyalty of Blacks to “their” country. The end of military segregation happened after WW II. It was done by an Executive Order by President Truman. Congress would never have adopted such legislation.

## **Mass Action Tactic**

The modern civil rights movement used mass peaceful protests. Martin Luther King Jr. understood that visible peaceful protests were key to facing down violence from southern city and state governments and extralegal terrorist groups (like the Ku Klux Klan) that murdered Blacks without fear of arrest.

The mass action tactic of previous battles set the stage for today’s Black Lives Matter movement. Militant organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party, and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in the Detroit auto plants, sent fear into the ruling class.

Malcolm X, who was assassinated in 1965, had a big influence on the younger generation of activists who did not view these legal rights as addressing society’s structural racism. Many became socialist-minded.

In the 1970s a Republican president, Richard Nixon, backed legislation for affirmative action, Title IX for women in sports and supported school desegregation laws. Nixon was no vocal friend of Black rights. He acted because of the anti-Vietnam war movement, the legacy of the civil rights victory, and a rise of other social movements (Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Native peoples, women, gays).

The political pushback and reversals began with presidents Reagan, Bush and Clinton. The first

Black president, Barack Obama, has never sought to reverse these losses. In fact, he hailed the leadership of Ronald Reagan.

## **Movement for Black Lives Platform**

The vanguard leadership of the young women who started the Black Lives Movement with the #Blacklivesmatter on Twitter, after the killings of Trayvon Martin in Florida and Michael Brown in Missouri, continues to advance and has led to similar formations in other countries.

As in the past the police, courts and state institutions have targeted these activists. The propaganda is classic obfuscation — similar to saying “reverse racism” to attack Black Power. Today it is “All Lives Matter” and “Blue Lives Matter” to belittle the idea that Black Lives do matter.

The power of the movement is its breadth and the role of dynamic women and men in leadership. There is a simple objective — justice and respect for Black bodies and arrest and prosecution of criminal cops.

After the two major party convention, leaders from a coalition of grassroots BLM groups drafted a Platform for going forward as a movement. It is a strong document (see <https://policy.m4bl.org/platform/>).

A 10-point program is outlined ranging from the rights of Black youth, immigrants, the LBGT community and an end to mass surveillance of Black communities. It is discussed under a key category: “End the War on Black people.”

There are five other broad categories: support for economic reparations; calls for demands to invest in Black communities and divest from forces that oppress Black people; for economic justice, community control and ending Black incarceration; independent Black political power and self-determination.

The detailed platform (available on the website) is the most important independent political action program since the National Black Independent Political Party and Black Power conventions in the 1970s.

It is an organizing tool that takes the movement beyond where it is today and can win broad political support for fundamental change. It does not rely on elections as a Movement even though individual activists may run for office.

Elected Black officials stress working within the system and urge African Americans to join the electoral process. The Black Lives Matters leaders know better. Mass public actions are what bring real change. That’s why their ongoing protests against police murders and violence along with the new Platform points the way forward.

BLM is increasing the confidence of Black youth that what they do matters. The marchers who said, “It is not illegal to kill Black people in America,” are ready to press on until that is no longer the case

**Malik Miah**

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**P.S.**

\* Against the Current n°184, September-October 2016:  
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/4744>