

## IDEAS

# The Coronavirus Was an Emergency Until Trump Found Out Who Was Dying

The pandemic has exposed the bitter terms of our racial contract, which deems certain lives of greater value than others.

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ARSH RAZIIDDIN / THE ATLANTIC

***Editor's Note:** We've gathered dozens of the most important pieces from our archives on race and racism in America. Find the collection [here](#).*

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IX WEEKS AGO, AHMAUD ARBERY went out and never came home. Gregory and Travis McMichael, who saw Arbery running through their neighborhood just

S outside of Brunswick, Georgia, and who told authorities they thought he was a burglary suspect, armed themselves, pursued Arbery, and then shot him dead.

The local prosecutor, George E. Barnhill, concluded that no crime had been committed. Arbery had tried to wrest a shotgun from Travis McMichael before being shot, Barnhill wrote in a letter to the police chief. The two men who had seen a stranger running, and decided to pick up their firearms and chase him, had therefore acted in self-defense when they confronted and shot him, Barnhill concluded. On Tuesday, as video of the shooting emerged on social media, a different Georgia prosecutor announced that the case would be put to a grand jury; the two men were arrested and charged with murder yesterday evening after video of the incident sparked national outrage across the political spectrum.

To see the sequence of events that led to Arbery's death as benign requires a cascade of assumptions. One must assume that two men arming themselves and chasing down a stranger running through their neighborhood is a normal occurrence. One must assume that the two armed white men had a right to self-defense, and that the black man suddenly confronted by armed strangers did not. One must assume that state laws are meant to justify an encounter in which two people can decide of their own volition to chase, confront, and kill a person they've never met.

*[ Ibram X. Kendi: Ahmaud Arbery could have been me ]*

But Barnhill's leniency is selective—as The Appeal's Josie Duffy Rice notes, Barnhill attempted to prosecute Olivia Pearson, a black woman, for helping another black voter use an electronic voting machine. A crime does not occur when white men stalk and kill a black stranger. A crime does occur when black people vote.

The underlying assumptions of white innocence and black guilt are all part of what the philosopher Charles Mills calls the “racial contract.” If the social contract is the implicit agreement among members of a society to follow the rules—for example, acting lawfully, adhering to the results of elections, and contesting the agreed-upon rules by nonviolent means—then the racial contract is a codicil rendered in invisible ink, one stating that the rules as written do not apply to nonwhite people in the same way. The Declaration of Independence states that all men are created equal; the racial contract limits this to white men with property. The law says murder is illegal; the racial contract says it's fine for white people to chase and

murder black people if they have decided that those black people scare them. “The terms of the Racial Contract,” Mills wrote, “mean that nonwhite subpersonhood is enshrined simultaneously with white personhood.”

The racial contract is not partisan—it guides staunch conservatives and sensitive liberals alike—but it works most effectively when it remains imperceptible to its beneficiaries. As long as it is invisible, members of society can proceed as though the provisions of the social contract apply equally to everyone. But when an injustice pushes the racial contract into the open, it forces people to choose whether to embrace, contest, or deny its existence. Video evidence of unjustified shootings of black people is so jarring in part because it exposes the terms of the racial contract so vividly. But as the process in the Arbery case shows, the racial contract most often operates unnoticed, relying on Americans to have an implicit understanding of who is bound by the rules, and who is exempt from them.

The implied terms of the racial contract are visible everywhere for those willing to see them. A 12-year-old with a toy gun is a dangerous threat who must be met with lethal force; armed militias drawing beads on federal agents are heroes of liberty. Struggling white farmers in Iowa taking billions in federal assistance are hardworking Americans down on their luck; struggling single parents in cities using food stamps are welfare queens. Black Americans struggling in the cocaine epidemic are a “bio-underclass” created by a pathological culture; white Americans struggling with opioid addiction are a national tragedy. Poor European immigrants who flocked to an America with virtually no immigration restrictions came “the right way”; poor Central American immigrants evading a baroque and unforgiving system are gang members and terrorists.

The coronavirus epidemic has rendered the racial contract visible in multiple ways. Once the disproportionate impact of the epidemic was revealed to the American political and financial elite, many began to regard the rising death toll less as a national emergency than as an inconvenience. Temporary measures meant to prevent the spread of the disease by restricting movement, mandating the wearing of masks, or barring large social gatherings have become the foulest tyranny. The lives of workers at the front lines of the pandemic—such as meatpackers, transportation workers, and grocery clerks—have been deemed so worthless that legislators want to immunize their employers from liability even as they force them to work under unsafe conditions. In East New York, police assault black residents

for violating social-distancing rules; in Lower Manhattan, they dole out masks and smiles to white pedestrians.

Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign, with its vows to enforce state violence against Mexican immigrants, Muslims, and black Americans, was built on a promise to enforce terms of the racial contract that Barack Obama had ostensibly neglected, or violated by his presence. Trump's administration, in carrying out an explicitly discriminatory agenda that valorizes cruelty, war crimes, and the entrenchment of white political power, represents a revitalized commitment to the racial contract.

*[ Adam Serwer: White nationalism's deep American roots ]*

But the pandemic has introduced a new clause to the racial contract. The lives of disproportionately black and brown workers are being sacrificed to fuel the engine of a faltering economy, by a president who disdains them. This is the COVID contract.

**A**S THE FIRST CASES OF THE CORONAVIRUS were diagnosed in the United States, in late January and early February, the Trump administration and Fox News were eager to play down the risk it posed. But those early cases, tied to international travel, ensnared many members of the global elite: American celebrities, world leaders, and those with close ties to Trump himself. By March 16, the president had reversed course, declaring a national emergency and asking Americans to avoid social gatherings.

The purpose of the restrictions was to flatten the curve of infections, to keep the spread of the virus from overwhelming the nation's medical infrastructure, and to allow the federal government time to build a system of testing and tracing that could contain the outbreak. Although testing capacity is improving, the president has very publicly resisted investing the necessary resources, because testing would reveal more infections; in his words, "by doing all of this testing, we make ourselves look bad."

Over the weeks that followed the declaration of an emergency, the pandemic worsened and the death toll mounted. Yet by mid-April, conservative broadcasters were decrying the restrictions, small bands of armed protesters were descending on state capitols, and the president was pressing to lift the constraints.

In the interim, data about the demographics of COVID-19 victims began to trickle out. On April 7, major outlets began reporting that preliminary data showed that black and Latino Americans were being disproportionately felled by the coronavirus. That afternoon, Rush Limbaugh complained, “If you dare criticize the mobilization to deal with this, you’re going to be immediately tagged as a racist.” That night, the Fox News host Tucker Carlson announced, “It hasn’t been the disaster that we feared.” His colleague Brit Hume mused that “the disease turned out not to be quite as dangerous as we thought.” The nationwide death toll that day was just 13,000 people; it now stands above 70,000, a mere month later.

As Matt Gertz writes, some of these premature celebrations may have been an overreaction to the changes in the prominent coronavirus model designed by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington, which had recently revised its estimates down to about 60,000 deaths by August. But even as the mounting death toll proved that estimate wildly optimistic, the chorus of right-wing elites demanding that the economy reopen grew louder. By April 16, the day the first anti-lockdown protests began, deaths had more than doubled, to more than 30,000.

That more and more Americans were dying was less important than who was dying.

The disease is now “infecting people who cannot afford to miss work or telecommute—grocery store employees, delivery drivers and construction workers,” *The Washington Post* reported. Air travel has largely shut down, and many of the new clusters are in nursing homes, jails and prisons, and factories tied to essential industries. Containing the outbreak was no longer a question of social responsibility, but of personal responsibility. From the White House podium, Surgeon General Jerome Adams told “communities of color” that “we need you to step up and help stop the spread.”

Public-health restrictions designed to contain the outbreak were deemed absurd. They seemed, in Carlson’s words, “mindless and authoritarian,” a “weird kind of arbitrary fascism.” To restrict the freedom of white Americans, just because nonwhite Americans are dying, is an egregious violation of the racial contract. The wealthy luminaries of conservative media have sought to couch their opposition to restrictions as advocacy on behalf of workers, but polling shows that those most

vulnerable to both the disease and economic catastrophe want the outbreak contained before they return to work.

*[ Read: What the 'liberate' protests really mean for Republicans ]*

Although the full picture remains unclear, researchers have found that disproportionately black counties “account for more than half of coronavirus cases and nearly 60 percent of deaths.”\* The disproportionate burden that black and Latino Americans are bearing is in part a direct result of their overrepresentation in professions where they risk exposure, and of a racial gap in wealth and income that has left them more vulnerable to being laid off. Black and Latino workers are overrepresented among the essential, the unemployed, and the dead.

This is a very old and recognizable story—political and financial elites displaying a callous disregard for the workers of any race who make their lives of comfort possible. But in America, where labor and race are so often intertwined, the racial contract has enabled the wealthy to dismiss workers as both undeserving and expendable. White Americans are also suffering, but the perception that the coronavirus is largely a black and brown problem licenses elites to dismiss its impact. In America, the racial contract has shaped the terms of class war for centuries; the COVID contract shapes it here.

This tangled dynamic played out on Tuesday, during oral arguments over Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers’s statewide stay-at-home order before the state Supreme Court, held remotely. Chief Justice Patience Roggensack was listening to Wisconsin Assistant Attorney General Colin Roth defend the order.

“When you see a virus like this one that does not respect county boundaries, this started out predominantly in Madison and Milwaukee; then we just had this outbreak in Brown County very recently in the meatpacking plants,” Roth explained. “The cases in Brown County in a span of two weeks surged over tenfold, from 60 to almost 800—”

“Due to the meatpacking, though, that’s where Brown County got the flare,” Roggensack interrupted to clarify. “It wasn’t just the regular folks in Brown County.”

Perhaps Roggensack did not mean that the largely Latino workers in Brown County’s meatpacking plants—who have told reporters that they have been forced

to work in proximity with one another, often without masks or hand sanitizer, and without being notified that their colleagues are infected—are not “regular folks” like the other residents of the state. Perhaps she merely meant that their line of work puts them at greater risk, and so the outbreaks in the meatpacking plants, seen as essential to the nation’s food supply, are not rationally related to the governor’s stay-at-home order, from which they would be exempt.

[ *Eric Schlosser: The essentials* ]

Yet either way, Roggensack was drawing a line between “regular folks” and the workers who keep them fed, mobile, safe, and connected. And America’s leaders have treated those workers as largely expendable, praising their valor while disregarding their safety.

“There were no masks. There was no distancing inside the plant, only [in the] break room. We worked really close to each other,” Raquel Sanchez Alvarado, a worker with American Foods, a Wisconsin meatpacking company, told local reporters in mid-April. “People are scared that they will be fired and that they will not find a job at another company if they express their concerns.”

In Colorado, hundreds of workers in meatpacking plants have contracted the coronavirus. In South Dakota, where a Smithfield plant became the site of an outbreak infecting more than 700 workers, a spokesperson told *BuzzFeed News* that the issue was their “large immigrant population.” On Tuesday, when Iowa reported that thousands of workers at meat-processing plants had become infected, Governor Kim Reynolds was bragging in *The Washington Post* about how well her approach to the coronavirus had worked.

Although, by the official tally, more than 70,000 Americans have died from the coronavirus, many governors are rushing to reopen their states without sufficient testing to contain their outbreaks. (Statistical analyses of excess deaths in comparison with years past suggest that COVID-19 casualties are approaching and may soon exceed 100,000.) Yet the Trump administration is poised to declare “mission accomplished,” engaging in the doublespeak of treating the pandemic as though the major risks have passed, while rhetorically preparing the country for thousands more deaths. The worst-case scenarios may not come to pass. But federal policy reflects the president’s belief that he has little to lose by gambling with the lives of those Americans most likely to be affected.

“We can’t keep our country closed down for years,” Trump said Wednesday. But that was no one’s plan. The plan was to buy time to take the necessary steps to open the country safely. But the Trump administration did not do that, because it did not consider the lives of the people dying worth the effort or money required to save them.

**T**HE ECONOMIC DEVASTATION wrought by the pandemic, and the Trump administration’s failure to prepare for it even as it crippled the world’s richest nations, cannot be overstated. Tens of millions of Americans are unemployed. Tens of thousands line up outside food banks and food pantries each week to obtain sustenance they cannot pay for. Businesses across the country are struggling and failing. The economy cannot be held in stasis indefinitely—the longer it is, the more people will suffer.

*[ Annie Lowrey: The small business die-off is here ]*

Yet the only tension between stopping the virus and reviving the economy is one the Trump administration and its propaganda apparatus have invented. Economists are in near-unanimous agreement that the safest path requires building the capacity to contain the virus before reopening the economy—precisely because new waves of deaths will drive Americans back into self-imposed isolation, destroying the consumer spending that powers economic growth. The federal government can afford the necessary health infrastructure and financial aid; it already shelled out hundreds of billions of dollars in tax cuts to wealthy Americans. But the people in charge do not consider doing so to be worthwhile—Republicans have already dismissed aid to struggling state governments that laid off a million workers this month alone as a “blue-state bailout,” while pushing for more tax cuts for the rich.

“The people of our country are warriors,” Trump told reporters Tuesday. “I’m not saying anything is perfect, and will some people be affected? Yes. Will some people be affected badly? Yes. But we have to get our country open and we have to get it open soon.”

The frame of war allows the president to call for the collective sacrifice of laborers without taking the measures necessary to ensure their safety, while the upper classes remain secure at home. But the workers who signed up to harvest food, deliver packages, stack groceries, drive trains and buses, and care for the sick did not sign up for war, and the unwillingness of America’s political leadership to protect them



is a policy decision, not an inevitability. Trump is acting in accordance with the terms of the racial contract, which values the lives of those most likely to be affected less than the inconveniences necessary to preserve them. The president's language of wartime unity is a veil draped over a federal response that offers little more than contempt for those whose lives are at risk. To this administration, they are simply fuel to keep the glorious Trump economy burning.

Collective solidarity in response to the coronavirus remains largely intact—most Americans support the restrictions and are not eager to sacrifice their lives or those of their loved ones for a few points of gross domestic product. The consistency across incomes and backgrounds is striking in an era of severe partisan polarization. But solidarity with the rest of the nation among elite Republicans—those whose lives and self-conceptions are intertwined with the success of the Trump presidency—began eroding as soon as the disproportionate impact of the outbreak started to emerge.

The president's cavalier attitude is at least in part a reflection of his fear that the economic downturn caused by the coronavirus will doom his political fortunes in November. But what connects the rise of the anti-lockdown protests, the president's dismissal of the carnage predicted by his own administration, and the eagerness of governors all over the country to reopen the economy before developing the capacity to do so safely is the sense that those they consider “regular folks” will be fine.

Many of them will be. People like Ahmaud Arbery, whose lives are depreciated by the terms of the racial contract, will not.

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*\*Correction: An earlier version of this piece misdescribed a study showing disproportionately black counties were responsible for more than half of coronavirus cases in the United States by describing those counties as “majority black.”*

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*We want to hear what you think about this article. [Submit a letter](#) to the editor or write to [letters@theatlantic.com](mailto:letters@theatlantic.com).*





