

FROM THE LEFT

AJC
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We have a rotten tree, not merely a few 'bad apples'



Leonard Pitts Jr.
He writes for the Miami Herald.

After George Floyd became the latest unarmed African American killed by police.

After cars were overturned and cities were burned.

After armies of angry people filled our streets with raw screams.

After all that, a white man with an impressive title went on CNN to explain things. "I don't think there is systemic racism," opined national security adviser Robert C. O'Brien. "I think 99.9% of our law-enforcement officers are great Americans."

So why do these great Americans seem to have such trouble not killing unarmed black people? There are, said O'Brien just "a few bad apples that have given law enforcement a bad name."

One did not know whether to laugh or cry.

Not that there's anything new here. O'Brien comes from a school of thought common among those who are unable to face the ugly truth. For them, racism is a character flaw, not unlike having a bad temper. It's something a person ought to work on, yes, but it has no larger resonance.

If, however, racism were just a rare, individual flaw,

surely one of the three other officers who was on the scene when Minneapolis cop Derek Chauvin applied his knee to Floyd's neck for almost nine minutes would have intervened before the tragedy occurred. African Americans would now be able to rest easy in the assurance that justice will be done. It would not have taken 74 days and national pressure to effect the arrest of the men who killed Ahmaud Arbery for jogging while black. And the killers of dozens of other African Americans would not be running around free.

But they didn't, they can't, it did and they are. So it is past time O'Brien and others like him mustered the guts and humanity to face facts. There is no major institution in this country — medical, cultural, commercial, religious, journalistic, law enforcement or otherwise — that is not corroded to its bones by racism. Were that not the case, statistics would not unflinchingly show African Americans at or near the bottom by every measure of success.

No one can condone the burning and looting. And let us duly note eyewitness reports suggesting that at least some of the carnage we've seen was orchestrated, not by people heartbroken at another act of police violence upon another black body, but by agitators and opportunists operating under different agendas.

That said, it would be tragic to be distracted by violence, vandalism or the criminal appropriation

of black people's hurt and anger from the moral grievance being lodged here. It is a grievance people like O'Brien never seem to hear.

They did not hear it when Langston Hughes wrote it in a poem.

They did not hear it when Martin Luther King Jr. thundered it from a mountaintop.

They did not hear it when Marvin Gaye sang it in a song.

They did not hear it when Colin Kaepernick said it with a gesture.

They do not hear it now in the wail of sirens and the crackle of flames.

There are no words for the frustration of that, for saying it every which way you know, as emphatically as you can, only to have someone like O'Brien give you gibberish in reply.

How many more poems and songs, how many more speeches and burning cars do they need? After George Floyd, after Breonna Taylor, after Philando Castile, after more names and more pain than we have space to recount, the truth should be obvious. We don't have "a few bad apples." No, we have a rotten tree.

ABOUT THE AJC'S OP

The AJC brings you some of the left and right, offering viewpoint news events. We believe it's important both liberal and conservative perspectives.

But instead of publishing our columns Tuesday through Friday that space to pieces that move forward.

The national columnists will re

Fearing for lives of blacks an old story

I am a 63-year-old black woman. I grew up with two brothers. I remember my mom always worrying when they left the house. Today, I have legal custody of my 16-year-old great-nephew, and I now know how my mom felt. When he tells me he's going out with his friends, I am fearful that he, a black young man, will be taken advantage of by some racist police officer or some privileged white person who can lie on him and get him into trouble or killed by the police. I told my nephew and his friends to always video any negative contact they have with white people. If we tell the story without the video, nobody believes us. It is so sad in this day and time we are still dealing with this. Every time I look or read the news, it's some story about a black person being killed for doing what white people do all day: just living.

ROSALIND ELLIOTT, ATLANTA