

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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### Opening Statement

**Chairman Jamie Raskin (MD-08)**

### Full Committee Briefing

## **“Voices from the Front: An Overdue Reckoning with Structural Racism in Policing” June 19, 2020**

I want to thank Chairwoman Maloney for hosting this briefing. It is a fitting tribute to our beloved colleague and former Chairman, Elijah Cummings, that we are using our Committee today to amplify the voices of the activists in the streets who have galvanized the conscience of the nation and given us the chance to repair the social contract broken by centuries of uninterrupted police violence against the Black community.

Public opinion polls show that three-quarters of Americans support the protests despite all the violent provocations of Boogaloo and other right-wing extremist organizations determined to sabotage the magnificent nonviolent spirit of the protesters. Americans overwhelmingly want change and reject the kind of murderous government violence embodied in Officer Derek Chauvin’s 8-minute-and-46-second imposition of torture and asphyxiation on the handcuffed George Floyd.

Last week, I had the solemn duty to attend the Judiciary Committee’s hearing on the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, which we passed out of Committee Wednesday and I will be proud to vote for next week. At that hearing, I heard testimony from George Floyd’s brother, Philonese Floyd, which still rings in my ears.

**“I am so tired,” Mr. Floyd told us. “I am tired of the pain . . . I am here to ask you to make it stop. Stop the pain.”**

It will be a long process to stop this kind of pain that has already been inflicted, the pain of losing one’s brother, one’s sister, one’s father, one’s mother, one’s son or one’s daughter at the hands of agents of your own government.

But today, at least, we will provide an opportunity for this Committee to more fully hear and understand the pain and exhaustion experienced by Black communities across America and participate in advancing a comprehensive legislative reconstruction of policing in America to prevent the further imposition of this kind of pain on more Black families.

Federal action is badly needed because state and local governments have failed to effectively address the persistence of police brutality despite repeated efforts at local reform. We must hear and appreciate the grievances and demands of protesters across America who have seen their

local governments turn a deaf ear to pleas for justice and reform as Black citizens continue to be murdered by police officers. And, finally, we must understand how deeply these abuses are entrenched in our national history of racism and discrimination.

The whole point of civil government is that we will be safer and more secure inside the social contract than outside of it, where the Hobbesian “state of nature” is a “state of war,” as Hobbes put it, “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” But where was the social contract for George Floyd or Breonna Taylor or Tamir Rice? Where is the social contract for millions of Black Americans who live in fear of police officers whose salaries they pay?

Put simply, for Black Americans, the social contract has always been contaminated by racism and violent white supremacy, our Nation’s original sin. The basic governmental promise to provide safety and security rings hollow for too many communities that have been ravaged by episodes of police violence. Black Americans are killed by the police at more than twice the rate of white Americans.

**1 in 1,000** Black men and boys will be killed by police over a lifetime, a risk 2.5 times higher than that of a white man. **Police encounters are a leading cause of death for young Black men.** It is no wonder that protesters across the nation are demanding decisive action and rallying behind the cry of “Black Lives Matter.” This is a pandemic of violence, and Congress must address take urgent and sweeping steps at the federal level to stop the spread.

**Even if my Republican colleagues are right in saying that police brutality is merely a problem of a few “bad apples,” they are forgetting the rest of that aphorism: “a few bad apples can spoil the barrel.”**

The public is crying out for action. Millions of people are marching in the streets, and 86% of Americans agree that police reforms are necessary. This is not a time to tinker at the margins. It is a time for a new Reconstruction that answers people crying out in pain and despair about justice.

The problems of police brutality we confront today reflect the persistence of embedded structural racism in our country. Violent white supremacy is the real “deep state” we must uproot and discard in America. Racism is the real “deep state” in America.

Before I close, I would like to take a moment and remind everyone watching that we decided to hold this hearing on Juneteenth, our national commemoration of the end of slavery in the United States. These have been a difficult few months for our country, and together we have encountered hard truths about what we must do to together create a better society. Juneteenth is a celebration of emancipation and freedom for all—it provides that none of us is free until the very last ones of us become free.

James Baldwin once wrote, **“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”** On this Juneteenth, let us face the heartbreaking and disturbing realities about structural racism in policing, and work together to change them and launch a new Reconstruction in America, a badly overdue rebuilding process for our Nation.