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DON'T SLEEP THROUGH THE RACE FOR JUSTICE—JOIN IT

In 1991, I was the Brevard County, FL, champion for ninth-grade boys in the one-mile race. If memory serves, my time was in the low five minutes. I was light and fast then, and my knees were still young. Today, I am less light, less fast, and my knees are less young. Still, I love to run.

I fell in love with running then, and all over again a few years later as a plebe at West Point. There's a running culture at the Academy. At any given moment on any given day, you can watch cadets run all over the installation. It's a sight to behold. If you aren't a runner when you begin at West Point, you become one over the course of the four years.

I had gone for a morning run the day I learned about the killing of Ahmaud Arbery. That's reason number one his killing hit close to home. Reason number two: I'm an African American man.

Prior to the pandemic, I ran once a week as part of a small group of three African American men.

Part of the addictive beauty of running is that it's good for the soul as well as the body. We would discuss everything on these runs—current events, politics, family, religion, popular culture, music, and art.

One of my running partners and I once had a conversation while stretching about running attire for black men. We agreed there are unspoken rules of running for black men in particular. We had to make it very obvious that we were joggers and not criminals escaping the law, particularly since our runs were generally timed to begin at 6 a.m. when it's often still dark outside.

Whenever I buy running shoes, I inherently gravitate toward bright and conspicuous pairs; I believe they help keep me safe. Anyone would see my shoes and think, "ahh, he's a jogger." But my running partner took it a step further; he would go out of his way to warmly greet everyone he passed as we jogged by. That would keep him safe. People would think, "ahh, he's a jogger—and a very pleasant one at that." We both felt we needed those safeguards. After all, we were running not many miles from where Michael Brown, Jr., had once been walking.

After Brown's shooting death in Ferguson, MO, then-Gov. Jay Nixon (D-MO) empaneled a commission of 16 individuals. The commissioners worked for nearly a year and published an elegant, practical and actionable report. It is a road map for not just the St. Louis, MO, region, but for our entire country.

My hope is that the commission's work will help point the way to justice in the case of Ahmaud Arbery. After the appointment of Special Prosecutor Joyette Holmes by Georgia Attorney General Chris Carr, I hold out hope that justice has a better chance than Ahmaud Arbery did. But for the video of the incident, which led to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation's ultimate involvement, justice, too, may have become a statistic. And, sadly, it still might. As W.E.B.

Du Bois wrote in *Black Reconstruction in America*, “So again the nation waited, and its conscience sank to sleep.”

A colleague shared that quote with me as we exchanged reactions to Ahmaud’s killing. Du Bois inked those words over 80 years ago to describe our nation’s relationship to slavery. The context is different today, but the quote is as relevant as ever.

The uneasy truth is our country has sunk back to sleep repeatedly after being stirred awake by injustices too loud to escape notice. We awoke, questioned, debated and then fell asleep after Trayvon Martin. Then again after Michael Brown, Jr., and a tragic procession of victims since then. In honor of Ahmaud Arbery’s legacy, let us stay awake.

We are preoccupied by the pandemic for important reasons—the racial inequities they have widened is high among them. But coronavirus, in time, will run its course. There is little question about that. What remains an open question is whether we can defeat the elements of our culture and society that foster this kind of killing. We, collectively, get to decide the answer.

As young as seven years old, I remember my dad instructing me never to run out of a store, lest someone mistake me for a shoplifter. That was in 1983. I was too young then to fully grasp why my father felt he needed to issue that warning. More than one generation has come of age since 1983, but sadly I’m confident my father’s advice would be no different today.

Given the repeated and tragic killing of unarmed black men in our country, I sadly feel compelled to have the same talk with my own son, who already loves to run. By the time my eight-year-old is grown enough to run on a street by himself, my hope and prayer is that every neighborhood in America will be safe for him to jog through. That he won't have to worry about whether he wears shoes that set other people's minds at ease.

I don't know what color shoes Ahmaud Arbery wore the day he was killed. Given the circumstances of his death, I'm not sure it would have mattered. The men who pursued him seemed more motivated by a color Ahmaud couldn't choose. But our fates, whether we live or die, shouldn't turn on either.

As a nation, we must race forward toward that better future. We have no time to lose. We have miles and miles to go.

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