

Preface to 8 minutes and 46 seconds of silence

Before the moment of silence, I'd like to say a few brief remarks about George Floyd. I know most, and I hope all of you have followed this story in the news, but I want to make sure everyone understands the significance of 8 minutes and 46 seconds. There's no way to do this topic justice in brief remarks, and I have no special insight or wisdom, but this is a time when we must all speak out as best we can.

George Floyd was a Black man of about my age, who had worked as a security guard before the COVID-19 shutdown. He was killed on May 25 by a police officer in Minneapolis, who pinned him to the ground with a knee on his neck for nearly nine minutes, 8 minutes and 46 seconds, to be precise. This disgusting assault on an unarmed and helpless man continued past his pleas for help, to the point where he was unable to breathe at all, lost consciousness, and died. It even continued for three minutes after he stopped moving and had no pulse.

Suffocation is a terrible way to die, and I find it moving that Mr. Floyd called out for his late mother with his very last breath. His murder goes far beyond the bounds of any reasonable policing, and amounts to a brutal display of dominance and power.

If this were an isolated event, it would in itself be a shocking and revolting tragedy. Instead, it is one incident in a pattern deeply woven into society, which should fill us with horror, rage, and shame. The list of victims grows longer and longer, while we as a society have been unable to protect Black people from our own public servants, as well as other racist violence.

Today we come together in grief and determination to affirm that Black Lives Matter, and to observe 8 minutes and 46 seconds of silent reflection, accompanied by a scrolling list of names of African Americans whose lives have been unjustly cut short by extrajudicial violence. If this silence feels long to you, please contemplate how long it must have felt to George Floyd.

Henry Cohn