White Americans Say They Are Waking Up to Racism. What Will It Add Up To?

Anti-racism activists have detailed concerns that are not only about symbols or slurs but also about entire systems governing how Americans live.

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One recent afternoon, while washing his car, Greg Reese, a white stay-at-home dad in Campton, Ky., peeled off the Confederate flag magnet he had placed on its trunk six years earlier. He did not put it back on.

It was a small act for which he expected no accolades. It should not have taken the police killing of George Floyd, Mr. Reese knew, to face what he had long known to be true, that the flag he had grown up thinking of as "a beautiful trophy" was "a symbol of hate, and it's obviously wrong to glorify it."

The sustained outcry over Mr. Floyd's death has compelled many white Americans to acknowledge the anti-black racism that is prevalent in the United States — and to perhaps even examine their own culpability for it. It is as though the ability of white people to collectively ignore the everyday experience of black people has been short-circuited, at least for now.

Large numbers of white Americans have attended racial justice demonstrations, purchased books about racial inequality and registered for webinars on how to raise children who are anti-racist. Some have asked themselves pointed questions, like how much professional advantage they have garnered from being white, and whether they would willingly cede it if they could. Others are going to tattoo parlors to cover up images of Confederate flags, swastikas and Ku Klux Klan symbols on their bodies.

It is hard to know how deep or wide these responses run — and whether they are the result of pressure from peers to appear tolerant, or if meaningful action will follow. Anti-racism activists have specified concerns that are not about only symbols or slurs but entire systems governing how Americans live.

Some of the same communities where white liberals have been marching with "black lives matter" signs have seen steep resistance to efforts to integrate public schools and neighborhoods. And what some consider a profound questioning of white supremacy can seem laughably little and unconscionably late to others. The most frustrating thing

about this moment, said Jeremy O. Harris, a playwright and the writer of “Slave Play,” is “listening to white people say this is the first time they realize how bad it is.”

In interviews, some white Americans admitted that even the process of reflecting on racism underscored for them how little they grasp the everyday experience of being black in America.

Research shows there is scant interpersonal contact between white and black Americans: One in five white respondents to a poll from the Public Religion Research Institute last year said that they rarely or never had an interaction with someone of a different race. In a 2013 study by the same group, a nonpartisan nonprofit, respondents were asked to identify the race of as many as seven people with whom they had discussed important matters in the six months before the survey. Among white respondents, 75 percent named only white individuals as their core friendship network.

“Many white Americans have chosen places to live, places to send their children to school, places to vacation, jobs to pursue, in ways that allow them to avoid thinking about racial inequality,” said Jennifer Chudy, a political scientist at Wellesley College. Her research suggests that only one in five white Americans consistently express high levels of sympathy about racial discrimination against black Americans.

The combination of the coronavirus pandemic, an economic collapse and a bungled emergency response by the Trump administration indirectly laid the foundation for the furor among white Americans that followed the cellphone video of Mr. Floyd’s death.

“All of that, I believe, is converging at this point to make people, white people in particular, think through America,” said Carol Anderson, author of “White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide” and a professor of African-American studies at Emory University. “What kind of nation is this, that can be comfortable with a police officer kneeling on someone’s neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds? And when you start asking that question, then all of the kinds of narratives and shibboleths begin to quake.”

It was the words of Mr. Floyd’s daughter, Mr. Reese said, that propelled him to join the activist group Southern Crossroads and to create a “Rednecks for Black Lives” decal that he hopes will appeal to politically conservative friends and neighbors. The group’s leaders say that majority-white, working-class communities like Mr. Reese’s stand to benefit by forming multiracial alliances.

“The one thing that flipped me and made me really want to do something was when that baby said that her daddy changed the world,” said Mr. Reese, referring to comments by Mr. Floyd’s 6-year-old daughter, Gianna. “And I want to make that true. I want that baby’s words to come true.”

A shift in the priorities of white Americans regarding racial equality, race scholars said, is critical to achieving it. In the first two weeks of coast-to-coast protests, support for the Black Lives Matter movement increased by nearly as much as it had the previous two years, according to Civiqs, an online research firm. Just over half of American voters support the movement, and in dozens of towns that held protests, the population was almost exclusively white.

"This is the first time that I think a lot of us have felt that the battle is legitimately joined," the author Ta-Nehisi Coates said on "The Ezra Klein Show" last week. Significant swaths of people in nonblack communities, Mr. Coates said, have come to perceive something of the deep pain and suffering experienced by black Americans. "I think that's different."

One source of angst for white Americans who say they want to dismantle racism, though, is not knowing precisely where to start. They worry about sounding racist and not sounding sufficiently anti-racist. Some have made misguided offers of cash to black acquaintances who feel condescended to. Others have formed anti-racist study groups with other white people — but worry that those, too, are lacking.

"I'll be thinking, 'Constantly acknowledging racism right now, it's so draining,'" said Erin Lunsford, 29, of Richmond, Va., who has engaged in dozens of conversations regarding defunding the police, a popular policy proposal among anti-racism activists that she initially rejected. "And then I'm like, 'Imagine being a black person doing that your whole life.'"

In the month since Mr. Floyd's death, a museum on the courthouse square in Sumner, Miss., dedicated to Emmett Till, whose horrific 1955 murder helped to galvanize the civil rights movement, has received 10 times the usual number of calls. Patrick Weems, executive director of the Emmett Till Memorial Commission — which founded the museum — said the callers were white Americans wanting to contribute to preservation projects or to help develop curriculum. Dozens more downloaded a smartphone app that guides users on a virtual tour of civil rights history.

Since the first week of protests, Akbar Watson, the owner of a black bookstore in Boynton Beach, Fla., has been slammed with book sales and requests from customers as far away as California and Maine. One day, he said, he sold 40 books before lunch. Another day, a woman in Ohio purchased 34 black children's books for her daughter's school classroom. And for the first time in his 28 years in business, he has sold out of books about racial inequalities.

"These are white Americans who are calling and ordering books to try to educate themselves and to try to figure out what to do as a response to what is happening," said Mr. Watson, 60, the owner of Pyramid Books, who spent Saturday hand-delivering books in Palm Beach County.

Matt Bartley, a tattoo artist in Pikeville, Ky., has fielded more than 20 requests to cover up racist tattoos since he began offering the free service after Mr. Floyd's death. One client had the words "Mein Kampf" tattooed on him, by his father, when he was a teenager, Mr. Bartley said. Similar services are being performed by tattoo artists in Dallas; Murray, Ky.; Charlottesville, Va.; Maryville, Tenn.; and Nashville.

Among Mr. Bartley's clients was Kyle Kessler, a 29-year-old who had a Confederate flag tattoo covered last week.

Mr. Kessler said he did not see the Confederate flag as a racist symbol until recently. He got the tattoo when he was 18, in tribute to one of his favorite bands.

But in conversations with his wife and sister about Mr. Floyd's death, he began to wonder what impact the flag has on black Americans. He also wondered what the repercussions could be for his 3-month-old son and whether he would be setting the wrong example.

"With everything going on, he's going to be taught that's racist, which I now know it is," Mr. Kessler said. "I didn't want him thinking, 'Daddy's got that and it's racist, so it's OK to be racist.'"

Mr. Kessler said Mr. Floyd's death, and the protests that followed, have made him think differently about Black Lives Matter. Now, Mr. Kessler said he appreciated that people were standing up for themselves and their right to equality. His new tattoo — the same guitar but without the Confederate banner — reflects that changing perspective.

In Somerset, a small town in southwestern Pennsylvania, Cindy Kinsella, 61, said she knew far more police officers than black people — her brother is a state police officer in Maryland, and she knows plenty of corrections officers.

She was not sure what to make of the protests when her son told her he was helping to plan a demonstration. She wished him luck. Then she thought a little more about it.

"I got off the phone and thought, 'You know what? I'm going to take my grandson, who is 12, and we're going down,'" she recalled. "Just because I thought we could educate ourselves a bit."

They went to the rally and though they did not march, they watched and listened to the speakers. It was peaceful, nothing like some of the violent protests she had seen in photographs and videos.

It is unclear what he got out of it. But she said she changed her thinking on some things, like the phrase "black lives matter."

"Before," she said, "I thought, 'Why do we have to say black lives matter? Because all lives matter, police lives matter, white lives matter.' But as they explained a little bit,

‘We’re not saying all lives don’t matter. It’s that all lives can’t matter until black lives matter.’”

Dana Goldstein, Campbell Robertson and Will Wright contributed reporting. Jack Begg contributed research.