

Defense rests case in murder trial of Ahmaud Arbery's killers, closing arguments set for Monday

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The defense team in the murder trial of the three white men who ran down and killed 25-year-old black jogger Ahmaud Arbery in a neighborhood just outside Brunswick, Georgia rested its case Thursday after calling seven witnesses over two days of testimony. Judge Timothy Walmsley scheduled closing arguments in the trial for Monday, setting up the possibility of verdicts next week.

Gregory McMichael, Travis McMichael and William “Roddie” Bryan each face charges of felony murder, aggravated assault and false imprisonment and face up to life in prison if found guilty.

The defendants presented a joint defense, but Travis McMichael, the shooter, was the only one to testify in court. McMichael claimed Arbery forced him to make a split-second “life-or-death” decision by attacking him and grabbing his shotgun.

On Wednesday, Travis McMichael said he and his father decided to pursue Arbery after seeing him run by their home on the afternoon of February 23, 2020. A neighbor previously called the police to say a man later identified as Arbery was alone at a construction site. Gregory McMichael believed Arbery matched the description of someone who had been recorded at the construction site before.

Prosecutors said surveillance videos showed Arbery at the site multiple times, including the day of the shooting but always without breaking in or stealing anything. Furthermore, prosecution witnesses have testified that the McMichaels did not know at the time if Arbery was at the site that day or if anything was ever taken from the construction site.

Travis McMichael said his father told him he saw “the guy that has been breaking in down the road,” and

they jumped into their truck to follow him. McMichael said they caught up to Arbery and tried talking to him twice, but that Arbery did not respond. McMichael told jurors Arbery “turned and ran” when the younger McMichael told him the police were on their way.

McMichael then said Bryan joined the pursuit in another truck. Prosecutors stated Bryan joined even though he did not know what was going on and hit Arbery with his truck. The McMichaels pulled ahead of Arbery further down the road, Travis testified, before he exited and pointed his shotgun at Arbery, telling him to stop. McMichael claimed Arbery charged him, grabbed the gun and hit him before he then shot Arbery.

Cellphone video from the incident shows Arbery running around the back of McMichael’s pickup truck after McMichael first points the shotgun while standing next to the open driver’s side door. Arbery then ran around the passenger side as Travis McMichael moves to the front, and the two come face to face. After that, the truck blocked any view of them until the first gunshot was fired.

In his testimony on Wednesday, Travis McMichael stated, “It was obvious that he was attacking me, that if he would’ve got the shotgun from me, then it was a life-or-death situation. And I’m going to have to stop him from doing this, so I shot.”

On Thursday, prosecutor Linda Dunikoski challenged McMichael over inconsistencies in his testimony and original accounts to authorities.

This included not telling police initially that he and his father were trying to make a citizen’s arrest even though that is what the defense has since contended and whether or not Arbery had reached for the shotgun. She

also covered differences in his accounts on when and where he told Arbery certain things, such as to stop. McMichael also conceded that his father had not called the police while they were pursuing Arbery.

Travis McMichael further admitted under questioning by Dunikoski that the unarmed Arbery never presented a threat to him, answering in the negative when asked if Arbery had reached in his pocket, yelled or brandished a weapon at him.

When pressed by Dunikoski, McMichael said his initial accounts of the shooting were “choppy” because he was nervous and under stress. He said he misspoke to police at times or “had it wrong” when giving his initial testimony hours after fatally shooting Arbery.

“What were you nervous about?” Dunikoski asked.

“I just killed a man,” McMichael responded. McMichael said he was “scattered” and “mixed up” in the hours after the shooting, because “this is the most traumatic event I’ve ever been through in my life.”

“You were nervous because you thought you were going to jail, right?” Dunikoski asked.

“No. I gave them a statement,” McMichael replied.

Dunikoski also questioned McMichael’s testimony that he tried to be calm when calling out to Arbery during the chase and used polite language, including the word “please.” She contrasted this with the threatening language McMichael’s father used, according to his accounts to police.

Quoting from police documents, Dunikoski asked Travis McMichael if he heard his father shout at Arbery, “‘Stop or I’ll blow your fucking head off.’” McMichael said he did not recall hearing that.

In addition to the state charges, a federal grand jury indicted the McMichaels and Bryan on hate crime charges in April. A February trial date has been slated for those charges.



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