

All three of Ahmaud Arbery's killers found guilty of murder

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The three white men on trial for killing Ahmaud Arbery in a neighborhood just outside Brunswick, Georgia, were found guilty of murder and other charges on Wednesday in a case that, together with the killing of George Floyd, sparked massive interracial protests across America and internationally last summer.

Gregory and Travis McMichael, father and son, chased after Arbery, a 25-year-old black man, on February 23, 2020 in a pickup truck after they saw him running through their neighborhood, and their neighbor William “Roddie” Bryan joined the chase and recorded Travis McMichael fatally shooting Arbery.

The defense claimed Arbery’s killing was “justified” because the trio of men thought Arbery was a burglar, in a town that allegedly held growing concerns about crime. They also blamed Arbery for his own death, arguing in court that his resistance to the men’s attempts to perform a “citizen’s arrest” caused Travis McMichael to fear for his life and shoot Arbery three times with a shotgun.

Throughout the trial, the defense sought to vilify Arbery’s character, in thinly-veiled racist overtones. Robert Rubin, a lawyer for Travis McMichael, said the men were acting that day out of a “duty and responsibility” to detain a man they believed was a burglar.

The elder McMichael’s lawyer, Laura Hogue, described Arbery as a frightening intruder with “long dirty toenails,” using a description from Arbery’s autopsy report. Hogue said Arbery was “a recurring nighttime intruder—and that is frightening, and unsettling.”

However, the jury, composed of 11 white people and one black person, refused to buy this account.

Lead prosecutor Linda Dunikoski rightfully pointed out that Arbery was chased by the defendants for

approximately five minutes around the neighborhood streets and pushed back against the idea that a fleeing unarmed man would constitute a threat to three men, two of whom were armed, in a pair of pickup trucks.

The men launched their attack on Arbery, she said, “because he was a black man running down the street.”

The jury found Travis McMichael, the man who shot Mr. Arbery, guilty on all nine charges, including malice murder and felony murder. Gregory McMichael was found not guilty of malice murder, but guilty of all other counts he faced, including felony murder. William Bryan, who filmed the fatal encounter, was found not guilty of malice murder, one count of felony murder, and one count of aggravated assault but guilty of three counts of felony murder and three other charges.

The men have also been indicted on separate federal charges, including hate crimes and attempted kidnapping, and are expected to stand trial in February on those charges.

The verdicts brought considerable relief to Arbery’s family, who fought against local officials’ attempted cover-up of the shooting. Arbery’s killers were not initially arrested or charged and instead allowed to walk free for several weeks after the shooting.

Jackie Johnson, the local prosecutor who initially handled the case, was indicted this year by a grand jury for “showing favor and affection” to Gregory McMichael, a former investigator in her office, and for directing police not to arrest Travis McMichael. Arrests were only made after video footage of the incident was released, prompting the Georgia Bureau of Investigation to take over the case. The trial was ultimately held in Cobb County, roughly 300 miles from Brunswick in metropolitan Atlanta.

“It’s been a long fight. It’s been a hard fight. But

God is good,” Arbery’s mother, Wanda Cooper-Jones, said outside the courthouse. “He will now rest in peace.”

Earlier, her head sunk into her chest as she wept upon hearing the verdict. Arbery’s father Marcus Arbery leapt up and cheered, prompting the judge to have him removed from the court.

The outcome of the trial is a blow against the push to legitimize vigilantism in America under the guise of “self-defense” and carries considerable political consequences. Georgia’s Republican Governor Brian Kemp was compelled to sign a hate crimes statute into law and helped repeal significant portions of the state’s citizen’s arrest statute. In a statement, he said that Arbery “was the victim of a vigilantism that has no place in Georgia.”

Senator Jon Ossoff (Democrat, GA) also spoke out against the reaction on display in the trial.

“Ahmaud Arbery’s murderers will be held accountable, but a historic civil rights mobilization was necessary for the killers to face prosecution at all. There was nearly impunity for this murder, and further investigation is necessary to determine how and why officials initially refused to pursue the case. The circumstances of Ahmaud Arbery’s murder and the struggle required to secure a prosecution demonstrate profoundly the urgency of reforms to make equal justice real in America,” Ossoff said.

At the same time, the facts of the trial refute the racist claim that racism is embedded in the “DNA” of American society and demonstrate that the civil rights struggles waged by workers over the last century have not been in vain.

The state of Georgia has a long history of reaction and white supremacy. It was the last state to rejoin the Union after the Civil War. In November 1915, a group led by William J. Simmons burned a cross on top of Stone Mountain, inaugurating a revival of the Ku Klux Klan, which soon grew to occupy a powerful role in state and local politics, enforcing the segregationist Jim Crow regime that brutalized and terrorized black people.

The fact that a nearly all-white jury in the Deep South convicted Arbery’s killers and that the prosecution was led by a white woman refutes the claims of growing racial tensions put forward by proponents of identity politics.

Even Reverend Al Sharpton was forced to admit the common humanity on display at the conclusion of the trial.

“All of us, this is a day white and black activists showed we could unite and beat the lynch mob that killed Ahmaud,” Sharpton said in front of the courthouse Wednesday afternoon. “And though I never say this often, I must say, we want to thank the prosecutors. They stood and fought for this family.”

Marcus Arbery’s tearful speech outside the courthouse after the verdict was the most profound, reflecting a genuine understanding of the tragedy which befell his family.

“All lives matter, not just blacks. We don’t want to see nobody go through this. ... It’s all our problem. So, hey, let’s keep fighting, let’s keep doing it, and keep making this place a better place for all human being—all human beings.”



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