

Three killers of Ahmaud Arbery sentenced to life in prison

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Adhering to prosecutors' recommendations, Georgia Judge Timothy Walmsley sentenced the three white men responsible for the murder of African American jogger Ahmaud Arbery on February 23, 2020 to life in prison.

Prosecutors did not seek the death penalty for the three men, all of whom were convicted of felony murder, or committing felonies that caused Arbery's death. Walmsley sentenced Travis McMichael, 35, and his 66-year-old father, Gregory McMichael, to life in prison without the possibility of parole, while 52-year-old William "Roddie" Bryan received a lesser sentence of life in prison with the possibility of parole.

The defense teams for all three defendants asked the court for life sentences with the possibility of parole. Bryan will not be eligible for parole for at least 30 years.

This past November a Georgia jury, comprised of 11 white people and one black person, convicted all three men on felony murder charges as well as lesser assault charges. It is likely the convicted will seek to appeal their sentences to the Georgia Supreme Court, however all three still face federal hate crime and attempted kidnapping charges with that trial set to go forward next month.

Before Friday's hearing, Lee Merritt, an attorney for Wanda Cooper-Jones, Arbery's mother, told assembled press that federal prosecutors had approached her to see if she would accept a plea deal regarding the federal charges which would include a 30-year prison sentence for the three men.

Speaking to CNN, Merritt said: "She rejected that offer because we believe that today the state will move forward with life sentences without the possibility of parole, and we think that's the appropriate sentence."

In victim impact statements made before the judge

prior to sentencing, members of Arbery's family requested that all three men be sentenced to life in prison without parole. Cooper-Jones told the court: "... these men have chosen to lie and attack my son and his surviving family. They each have no remorse and do not deserve any leniency. This wasn't a case of mistaken identity. Or mistaken fact. They chose to target my son because they did not want him in their community."

She continued: "These men deserve the maximum sentence for their crimes. Ahmaud never said a word to them. He never threatened them. He just wanted to be left alone. They were fully committed to their crimes. Let them be fully committed for their consequences. Your honor I'm standing here before you as the mother of Ahmaud Arbery, asking you to please give all three defendants who are responsible for the death of my son the maximum punishment in this court, which I do believe is life behind bars without the possible chance for parole."

Prior to imposing the sentence, Judge Walmsley held a minute of silence, which he said, "represents a fraction of the time that Ahmaud Arbery was running in Satilla Shores," the Georgia suburb where Arbery was shot and killed.

Arbery, a standout linebacker at Brunswick High School, had been out for a jog less than two miles from his home when the McMichaels saw him run by their house. The former cop and his son armed themselves and pursued Arbery in Travis's pickup truck, which he had adorned with a Confederate emblem, while their neighbor, Bryan, gave chase separately in his truck filming the incident.

Arbery managed to elude his pursuers for roughly five minutes, but eventually the three men used their vehicles to corner Arbery with the armed McMichaels

attempting to perform a “citizens’ arrest” on the unarmed man. In the ensuing altercation Travis shot Arbery three times with a shotgun.

Prior to sentencing, judge Walmsley remarked that Arbery was “hunted down and shot” and that he “kept coming back to the terror that must have been in the mind of the young man running through Satilla Shores.”

The killers, none of whom were ever physically or verbally threatened by Arbery, or witnessed the young man commit any crimes, were not arrested at the scene and walked free for months, facing no charges. This was due in part to ex-Brunswick Judicial Circuit District Attorney Jackie Johnson, who refused to bring charges against the men, no doubt due to her prior relationship with the McMichael family.

The elder McMichael retired in 2019 after spending 37 years as a cop, which included a stint as an investigator in Johnson’s office until 2019. After participating in the murder of Arbery, Greg McMichael—from the scene of the crime—called Johnson and left a voice mail seeking protection: “Could you call me as soon as you possibly can?”

For months, prosecutors refused to bring charges, regurgitating the defendants’ thinly-veiled racist lies that Arbery “initiated” the altercation and that the killers were well within their rights to perform a “citizens’ arrest” of the “threatening” Arbery.

On May 5, the Arbery family, through their attorney, released video footage proving the McMichaels lied in description of the incident. The release of the footage, along with mass outrage following the police murder of George Floyd on May 25, uncorked a geyser of social anger worldwide. Workers around the world identified with Arbery and demanded that his killers be charged.

While the sentencing of Arbery’s killers provides some measure of justice, the fact is, had Arbery’s family not been able to produce the cell phone footage, which went viral worldwide, Arbery’s killers would have likely gotten away with their crime. The sentencing of Arbery’s killers is the exception that proves the rule. Overwhelmingly, current and former police are given free rein to terrorize the working class.

In 2021, US police killed 1,123 people according to data compiled by Mapping Police Violence, which has tracked similar figures over the past seven years. From 2013 through 2020 the website has found that 98.3

percent of police killings do not end up in charges filed against the officers.



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