

Jury finds Ahmaud Arbery's murderers guilty of federal hate crimes

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On Tuesday, a 12-person jury found the three white men that chased down and murdered Ahmaud Arbery two years ago guilty of all charges in their federal hate crimes trial.

With its guilty verdict, the jury agreed with the US Justice Department that the men pursued the 25-year-old African American Arbery through the streets of their neighborhood just outside Brunswick, Georgia, and shot him because he was black.

Arbery's mother, Wanda Cooper-Jones, told reporters outside the courthouse, "Ahmaud will continue to rest in peace. But he will now begin to rest in power." She also said, "We as a family will never get victory because Ahmaud is gone forever." Marcus Arbery Sr., Ahmaud's father, said his son used to call every day, even if it was just to tell his family that he loved them. "Ahmaud was a kid you can't replace, because of the heart he had," he said. "I'm struggling with that every day. It hurts me every day."

All three defendants, Gregory McMichael, 66, his son Travis McMichael, 36, and their neighbor William "Roddie" Bryan, 52, were found guilty of interfering with Arbery's rights and kidnapping, while the younger McMichael was found guilty of discharging a firearm and the elder McMichael was found guilty of brandishing a firearm, both during a violent crime.

The facts of what happened on February 23, 2020, were well established prior to the federal hate crimes trial. The three men had already been convicted during a state criminal trial of murdering Arbery while he was jogging in the Satilla Shores subdivision. The men followed him in their pickup trucks, cornered him and then Travis McMichael shot him at close range with a Remington shotgun.

The jury in the state trial rejected the claims made by the defendants' legal teams that the men were justified

in their actions because they suspected Arbery of trespassing and being responsible for several robberies in the area. On January 7, Georgia Judge Timothy Walmsley sentenced all three to life in prison following their criminal convictions, calling the events that were captured on smartphone video by Bryan "a chilling, truly disturbing scene."

With the federal convictions on Tuesday, the men now face up to life in prison for the federal crimes in addition to the life sentences they had already received. As legal experts have explained, the federal convictions also ensure that the men will serve significant prison time even if their state convictions are overturned or their state sentences are reduced on appeal.

In convincing the jury of the racist motivation behind the murder of Arbery, the prosecution focused on statements made by the men as recalled by witnesses and as recorded in their electronic communications. Although there was no evidence that the three directed their hatreds specifically at Ahmaud Arbery, a voluminous number of examples were presented by the prosecution showing that they held deeply racist views about black people for many years.

Text messages on Bryan's phone showed he used a racial slur to describe a black man that his daughter had been dating just four days before the killing of Arbery. Travis McMichael was shown to have used racial slurs repeatedly and expressed an interest in seeing black people violently attacked and killed. The elder McMichael made racially charged comments about black people being "nothing but trouble," during a conversation about the death of civil rights leader Julian Bond.

In her closing statement, prosecutor Tara Lyons denounced the claims of the defense that the white men would have chased Arbery no matter what race he was,

telling the jury that the proof of their racism was demonstrated in their lack of remorse and refusal to provide aid to their victim as he lay dying in the street. She said, they did not recognize, “that in the middle of that pool of blood was an actual human being.”

She went on, “These defendants didn’t show Ahmaud Arbery the dignity that a dog deserves when it gets hit by a car. That’s because these defendants saw Ahmaud as less than human.” The jury of eight white people, three black people and one Hispanic person deliberated for three hours after the conclusion of closing arguments on Monday but did not arrive at a verdict. After deliberating for one more hour on Tuesday morning, the jury announced it had reached a verdict on all counts.

Attempting to take credit for the verdicts against Arbery’s killers, US Attorney General Merrick Garland told a press conference on Tuesday, “Today’s verdict makes clear that the Justice Department will continue to use every resource at its disposal to confront unlawful acts of hate and to hold accountable those who perpetrate them.”

While the Justice Department did bring the federal hate crimes indictment on April 28, 2021, it is a fact that a state-coordinated conspiracy was underway to sweep the murder of Arbery under the rug while he was still lying in the street the day he was killed. During the presentation of the evidence in the federal trial, it was revealed that the McMichaels were questioned by police and county sheriffs and not charged or arrested.

It is clear, had it not been for the determination of the family along with the mass movement against police violence and murder that erupted following the killing of George Floyd on Memorial Day 2020 by Minneapolis police, the criminal shooting of Ahmaud Arbery would not have made it out of the environs of Brunswick, Georgia. Due to Gregory McMichaels’s prior service as a police officer and an investigator for the Glynn County prosecutor’s office, he and his son were being protected by local criminal justice officials.

The cover-up by Glynn County district attorney Jackie Johnson was so blatant—she refused to charge the McMichaels and told police not to arrest Bryan—that she was forced to recuse herself from the case and was later criminally indicted in relation to the case. But the conspiracy only deepened from there, as the case was sent to George E. Barnhill, district attorney in

Waycross, Georgia, who also was forced to recuse himself when Arbery’s mother exposed that Barnhill’s son worked for Johnson’s office.

Before Barnhill relinquished the case, he wrote in a letter that there was insufficient probable cause to arrest the McMichaels, saying that they were legally carrying their firearms and lawfully pursued “a burglary suspect” and were attempting to make a “citizen’s arrest.” Barnhill also argued that Arbery assaulted Travis McMichaels who was “allowed to use deadly force to protect himself” under Georgia law.

Finally, as was pointed out to the media by Cooper-Jones following the Tuesday’s guilty verdict, the US Justice Department was in negotiations in January to work out a deal with her son’s killers which would have permitted them to plead guilty and have their 30-year federal sentences run concurrent with their state sentences. Both of Arbery’s parents intervened and demanded that Judge Lisa Godbey Wood reject the deals being promoted by the Democratic Party-led US Justice Department because they would have allowed the men to spend the bulk of their sentences in a federal prison instead of the harsher environment of the Georgia state prison system.

The dual jury convictions of the McMichaels and Bryan demonstrate that there is widespread opposition and contempt among people of all backgrounds to racist hatred and violence. While the instances of hate crimes in the US have been on the rise in recent years—in the form of bias against race, ethnicity, ancestry, religion, sexual orientation, disability, gender and gender identity—this is the product of the capitalist system that seeks to pit workers against each other and a social crisis fueled by historic levels of social inequality that has only been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.



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