

Killers of Ahmaud Arbery sentenced to life terms for federal hate crimes

Kevin Reed
8 August 2022

Travis McMichael and his father Gregory McMichael were both given life sentences on Monday by a US district judge in Georgia for their conviction on federal hate crime charges in connection with their role in the murder of 25-year-old African American jogger Ahmaud Arbery in February 2020.

A third man, William “Roddie” Bryan, was sentenced to 35 years also for hate crime by Judge Lisa Godbey Wood for assisting the McMichaels in hunting down and shooting Arbery in the Satilla Shores neighborhood near Brunswick, Georgia, a coastal town about 80 miles south of Savannah.

The hate crime sentences will be served by the three men concurrently with the sentences they received in state court in Georgia for murdering Arbery. This means that the federal and state sentences will be served at the same time.

On February 23, 2020, Arbery was jogging through the residential neighborhood when father and son McMichael armed themselves, got in their truck, chased him down and cornered him. Travis McMichael exited the pickup truck with his shotgun drawn, confronted Arbery and fired three times, fatally striking the young man twice in the chest. Gregory McMichael looked on from the bed of the pickup with his handgun drawn.

Seeing the McMichaels give chase, Bryan had jumped into his own truck and helped the other two block the path of Arbery and then recorded the shooting on his smartphone. This video became critical evidence in proving that Arbery was pursued and murdered and not, as the McMichaels had maintained, shot in self-defense.

The three men, who are white, were convicted by a jury in the federal district court last February. Travis McMichael, 36, and Gregory McMichael, 66, were

found guilty of interference with rights—a hate crime—and also attempted kidnapping and weapon use charges.

Travis was found guilty of using, carrying, brandishing and firing his Remington shotgun during a crime of violence and Gregory was found guilty of using, carrying and brandishing a .357 Magnum revolver during a crime of violence. Bryan was also convicted on the interference with rights and attempted kidnapping charges. His sentence was less, the judge said, because he did not use a weapon and turned over the video to law enforcement that he took of the fatal shooting.

In convicting the men of interfering with the rights of Arbery, a black man, the jury agreed that the McMichaels were motivated to kill him because of his “race and color.” The two men were also sentenced to 20 years each for the kidnapping charge to be served concurrently. Travis McMichael received an additional 10-year sentence for the weapons charge and Gregory McMichael received an additional seven years for the weapons charge, both to be served consecutively.

At the time of their federal convictions, the men had previously been found guilty of murder in state court in November and already sentenced to life terms. The McMichaels’ sentence in Georgia was imposed without the possibility of parole while Bryan’s state sentence included parole eligibility.

Ahmaud Arbery’s family spoke both before and after Judge Wood imposed the sentences on Monday. Arbery’s mother Wanda Cooper-Jones asked the judge to give Travis McMichael the maximum possible sentence under the law. “My son was shot not one time, not two times, but three times. Your honor, I feel every shot that was fired every day,” she said.

Speaking to reporters after the hearing, Cooper-Jones

responded to the apology given by Gregory McMichael before he was sentenced. She said, “Being the person that I am, I think now he realizes he made some horrible decisions back in February [2020]. Unfortunately, his apology doesn’t bring back my son, but I do accept the apology.”

Also, after the sentencing, Arbery’s father, Marcus Arbery Sr., said, “They asked for mercy. They didn’t give him no mercy that day. That February 23, that sunny hot day, they didn’t give him no mercy. They didn’t even give him a chance to finish his run. And you asking for mercy?” He added that they deserved to “rot” in state prison. “You killed him because he was a black man and you hate black people,” he said. “You deserve no mercy.”

In obtaining a guilty verdict from the jury on the interference with rights charges, federal prosecutors proved that the men killed Arbery because of his race by showing roughly two dozen text messages and social media posts in which Travis McMichael and Bryan used slurs and made racist comments about African Americans.

Attorneys for the McMichaels argued before the judge that their clients should be kept in federal custody and not sent to a Georgia state prison to serve their sentences. Travis McMichael’s lawyer said that for him to be sent to state prison would be “a back door death penalty” because of the threat of “vigilante justice” he would face there as a “publicly reviled” defendant.

The lawyer for Gregory McMichael made a similar request for federal custody, although it was presented for health reasons.

The prosecution opposed the McMichaels’ requests on the grounds that the court that issues its sentence first takes precedence. Judge Wood denied the motions, saying that she had “neither the authority nor the inclination” to override the rules.

While much of the campaign to demand justice for Ahmaud Arbery and his family has been focused on the blatant racism that motivated his killers, the case has exposed some of the normal functions of the American criminal justice system.

First of all, members of the Glynn County Police Department (GCPD) arrived on the scene soon after the shooting of Arbery, but no arrests were made of the McMichaels for more than two months. Both the Brunswick District Attorney Jackie Johnson and the

Waycross District Attorney George Barnhill told the GCPD not to make any arrests.

It has now come to light that Gregory McMichael held at least 16 phone conversations with the former Brunswick DA Johnson in the immediate aftermath of the shooting. On the day of the shooting, the elder McMichael left a voice message for the DA asking her to call him back because, “my son and I have been involved in a shooting and I need some advice right away.”

It was not until the video of the shooting was posted online by Bryan in early May that the facts of what happened to Arbery in the Satilla Shores neighborhood could be seen and the McMichaels were arrested.

The primary reason that Gregory McMichael was able to rely upon both the Brunswick and Waycross prosecutors’ offices not to arrest him was because he had been a police officer in Glynn County between 1982 and 1989 and he was an investigator for the Brunswick DA from 1995 to 2019. It has been established that Gregory McMichael had been involved in an investigation of a shoplifting charge against Arbery in 2018 which led to an extension of the young man’s probation.

It is clear that immediately following the shooting of Arbery, Gregory McMichael began working his contacts in the law enforcement community—just like a police officer who attempts to cover his tracks in a case of brutality or murder—to concoct a narrative that Arbery was responsible for his own death.

The state and federal convictions and sentencing of the men who killed Ahmaud Arbery are part of a pattern of recent police murder cases where the truth of what happened came to light from smartphone video that was captured by bystanders or witnesses. The murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, for example, would have been swept under the rug as the result of a “medical incident during police interaction,” had it not been for the video captured by teenager Darnella Frazier, who then shared it on social media.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact