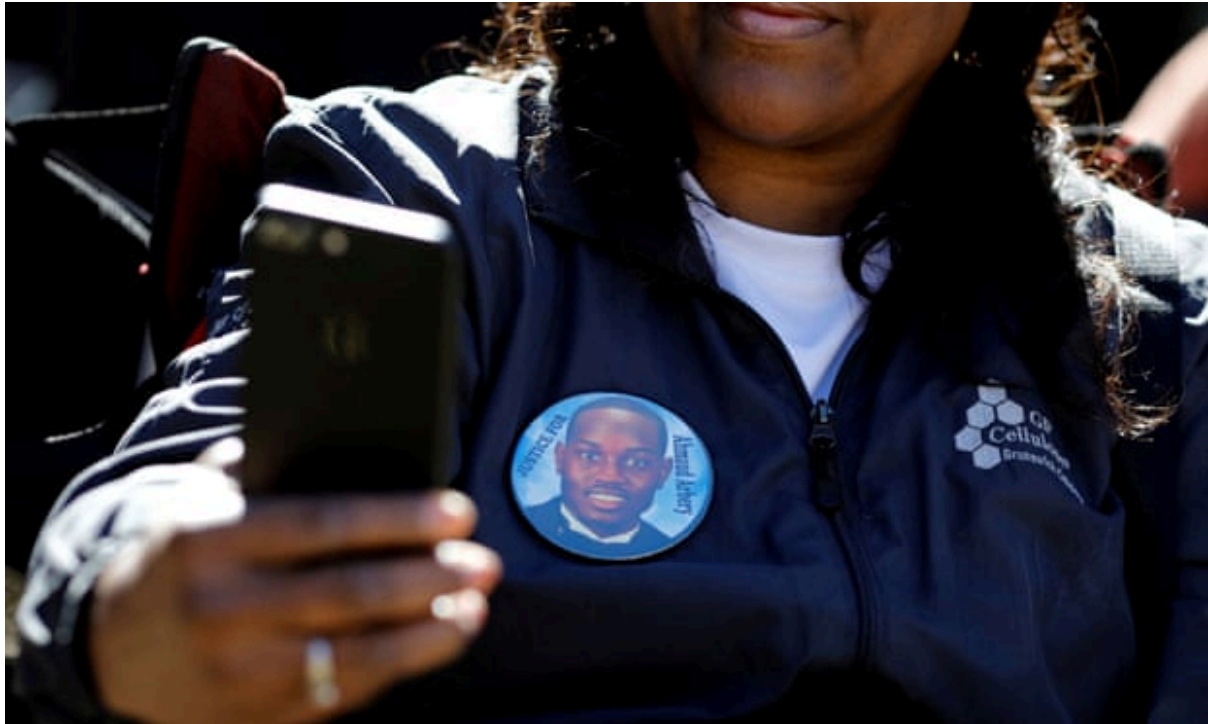


Ahmaud Arbery's murderers driven by 'pent-up racial anger', prosecutor says

Prosecutor makes closing arguments in hate crimes trial of Travis and Gregory McMichael and William 'Roddie' Bryan



A woman wears a badge depicting Ahmaud Arbery. The McMichaels and William 'Roddie' Bryan were convicted of Arbery's murder last fall.

Maya Yang and agencies

Tue 22 Feb 2022

Three white men who chased and killed Ahmaud Arbery on a residential street acted out of "pent-up racial anger" and should be convicted of hate crimes, a federal prosecutor told a jury on Monday.

Travis McMichael, the man who pulled the trigger and fatally shot Arbery, "was just looking for a reason" to hurt a Black person when he saw the 25-year-old jogging on his street, the prosecutor argued, citing a slew of racist comments and videos McMichael had posted online.

Christopher Perras, a special litigation counsel for the US justice department's civil rights division, was delivering closing arguments in the federal hate crimes trial over Arbery's death that began a week ago.

The jury of eight white people, three Black people and one Hispanic person was sent to begin deliberations Monday afternoon.

Travis McMichael, his father, Gregory McMichael, and a neighbor, William “Roddie” Bryan, were convicted of Arbery’s murder last fall in a Georgia state court.

The US justice department has charged them separately in federal court with hate crimes, alleging that they violated Arbery’s civil rights and targeted him because he was Black. They are also charged with attempted kidnapping, and the McMichaels face counts of using guns in the commission of a crime.

The hate crimes trial is about whether racism motivated the trio’s pursuit and killing of Arbery. Legal experts have said that is tougher to prove than the crime of murder. The McMichaels and Bryan have all pleaded not guilty.

Arbery was killed by two shotgun blasts on 23 February 2020 after a five-minute chase through the Satilla Shores subdivision, just outside the port city of Brunswick, Georgia. The murder was captured in a graphic cellphone video that sparked outrage across the country.

The McMichaels have already been sentenced to life in prison without parole. Bryan also received a life sentence, with parole possible after he has served at least 30 years.

When Travis McMichael, his father and a neighbor, who are white, began chasing Arbery, they did so not because he had done anything wrong, but because they assumed he had because he was Black, Perras said on Monday.

When Gregory McMichael saw Arbery jogging, “he didn’t grab his phone and call police”, Perras said. “He called his son and grabbed his gun.”

“There’s a big difference between being vigilant and being a vigilante,” said Perras. He told the jury: “It’s important for you to understand the full depth of the defendants’ racial hatred.”

At one point, Perras played a recording of Gregory McMichael in jail, chuckling as he said: “You’ve all heard the saying, ‘No good deed goes unpunished.’”

In her closing arguments on Monday, Travis McMichael’s attorney told the jury that despite digital evidence of his racist comments, “there is no evidence of any acts of racial violence by Travis McMichael”.

Summarizing previous racist slurs the trio had made, Perras remarked: “The defendants didn’t just make racial assumptions; they made racial decisions. They chose to act on those assumptions.”

The defendants’ reactions to Arbery’s death were further evidence of their racial animus, said Perras, who noted that none of them had tried to aid him after he was shot. Instead, Gregory McMichael spoke to police “like a man who just came back from a hunting trip and wanted to talk about the thrill of the hunt”.



A poster depicting Ahmaud Arbery is seen outside the murder trial in November.

The McMichaels and Bryant saw Arbery as an animal “and they treated him like an animal”, Perras said.

The prosecutor entreated the jury to hold the defendants “accountable not only for what they did but why they did it”.

Defense attorneys have said that the trio pursued Arbery because they believed he had committed crimes in their neighborhood. Before the day of the shooting, security cameras had recorded Arbery several times inside a home under construction a few doors down from the McMichaels’ house. Gregory McMichael told police he recognized Arbery as he came running out of the same unfinished house the day of the shooting.

Those security videos showed Arbery taking nothing from the construction site. Attilio Balbo, Gregory McMichael’s attorney, argued that even though the “evidence doesn’t support” that Arbery was stealing anything, the defense was not required to show that.

FBI agents uncovered roughly two dozen racist text messages and social media posts from the McMichaels and Bryan in the years and months preceding the shooting.

Some witnesses testified that they had heard the McMichaels’ racist statements first-hand. A woman who served under Travis McMichael in the US Coast Guard a decade ago said he had made crude sexual jokes after learning she had dated a Black man. Another woman testified Gregory McMichael had ranted angrily in 2015 when she remarked on the death of the civil rights activist Julian Bond. Defense attorneys did not dispute any of those statements.

The Associated Press and Reuters contributed to this report

