

■ CHAPTER 20

The Ahmaud Arbery Case

Strategic Communication, Reconciliation, and Policy Change on the Path to Social Justice

Gerald Griggs and Dontaye Carter

As a fifth-generation Georgian, birthed from the red clay of this former Confederate stronghold, I (Gerald) carry within me the weight of history and the unyielding resolve of those who came before. Georgia—fertile ground for both oppression and resistance—has borne witness to some of the darkest chapters in America’s past, yet it has also been home to the architects of justice, such as Martin Luther King, Jr.; Dorothy Bolden, John Lewis, Juanite Jones Abernathy, Maynard Jackson, Andrew Young, and Ruby Doris Smith-Robinson, who fought tirelessly to reshape its future. It is from this soil, rich with both pain and perseverance, that my coauthor, Dontaye, and I rise—humbled and honored—to share with students and advocates across the world how to champion legislative change through the most peaceful and nonviolent methods ever witnessed in human history.

Reconciliation and legislative change go hand in hand, as laws shape justice, accountability, and equity in society. True healing comes when legal reforms acknowledge past wrongs, dismantle systemic oppression, and create a more just future. History has proven that the most powerful movements—led by King, Lewis, Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela—achieved justice through strategic, peaceful resistance. Through nonviolent action such as protests, boycotts, and civil disobedience, alongside legislative advocacy, coalition building, and strategic communication, these leaders transformed societies without resorting to violence. Mobilizing voters, lobbying lawmakers, and using the power of media to expose injustice and shape public perception have all played critical roles in driving policy change. Additionally, legal challenges and direct engagement with policymakers ensure that justice is not just a demand but a reality. The most powerful revolutions are not fought with violence, but with strategy, discipline, and moral force—proving that true change is both peaceful and enduring.

But change does not emerge in isolation. It is cultivated through strategy, through truth, and through the unwavering courage to speak out even when the odds seem insurmountable. The fight for justice is not just about the courtroom battles or the policy victories—it is about the power of the narrative, the control of perception, and the shaping of collective

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consciousness. This is where my brother-in-arms Dontaye has illuminated a truth often overlooked: the ability to shape the narrative is as critical as the legal fight itself.

Dontaye introduced me to the words of Jeremy Bentham (1843): “Publicity is the very soul of justice. It is the keenest spur to exertion, and the surest of all guards against improbity” (p. 316). These words serve as a constant reminder that injustice thrives in silence. The same truth is echoed in Tom Burrell’s (2010) *Brainwashed: Challenging the Myth of Black Inferiority*, in which he exposes the centuries-long marketing campaign designed to degrade Black identity: “In the ‘60s and ‘70s, we paid lip service to being Black and proud, but the sudden conversion was not supported by the necessary psychological machinery to make the change permanent. Even today, we have woefully inadequate countermeasures, no permanent cultural mechanisms to undo what a 400-year marketing campaign has achieved” (p. xiii). The systems of oppression have long understood the power of media, of images, of narratives—so too must those who fight against them.

Armed with this understanding, Dontaye and I sought wisdom from the only surviving member of the inner circle of the civil rights movement, ensuring that the bridge from civil rights to social justice is not only intact but fortified for generations to come. We sat at the feet of Attorney Fred Gray, who once defended Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and represented Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Improvement Association (see Abrams & Gray, 2022). He made clear to us that while movements require preachers and strategists—the roles filled by King and Bayard Rustin, respectively—it is the relentless will of attorneys that transform protests into policy.

Charles Hamilton Houston, the brilliant legal mind who trained Thurgood Marshall, the civil rights attorney who would go on to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court and engineered the legal framework for dismantling segregation, articulated this best: “A lawyer is either a social engineer or a parasite” (McNeil, 1983, p. 84). To stand idly by is to be complicit. To remain silent in the face of injustice is to allow it to continue. This is what the advocates and activists before us understood—that real change requires more than outrage; it requires action. That was the call I received when I first learned of Ahmaud Arbery’s death.

I will never forget the urgency in Reverend John Perry’s voice, then-president of the Brunswick National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), when he called me: “We have a problem here in Brunswick.” It was more than a local issue—it was a national fight for justice. As the first vice president of the Atlanta NAACP and the legal advisor for the Georgia State Conference of the NAACP, I knew immediately that what happened to Ahmaud ¹could not be allowed to fade into the background, buried beneath the weight of a justice system designed to overlook Black lives.

Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man, was lynched in broad daylight while jogging through a neighborhood. The system failed him—local authorities refused to act; justice was deliberately withheld. It was only when video footage surfaced that the world was forced to confront the truth. In that moment, silence was no longer an option. Mobilization became

¹ The choice to refer to Ahmaud Arbery by his first name is intentional. In moments of great civil rights struggles, certain individuals become known by their first names because of the deep personal connection they forge with the public. The movement that arose in response to his killing centered on the phrase “Justice for Ahmaud,” and we honor that legacy by referring to him as he was embraced by the people who fought for him.

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our weapon. Advocacy became our shield. As an attorney, I understood the legal avenues to pursue, but I also knew that legal action alone is never enough. Justice does not happen in a vacuum; it requires the relentless pressure of the people, the unyielding demands of a movement. This is where Dontaye's expertise in media and strategic communications proved invaluable. Without the ability to control the narrative, the truth is easily distorted, manipulated, or ignored.

Together, we ensured that Ahmaud's story was not buried under bureaucratic indifference. We worked alongside attorney Ben Crump, attorney Lee Merritt, and civil rights activist Shaun King, countless members of the Georgia NAACP, and everyday citizens amplifying the voices of Ahmaud's family, organizing protests, and forcing the nation to pay attention. The people's will demanded accountability, and the system had no choice but to respond. Ahmaud's murder was not just a tragedy; it was a catalyst for change. It was a moment that forced Georgia—a state historically resistant to civil rights progress—to pass its first hate crimes law. It led to the repeal of the outdated citizen's arrest statute, a law that had long been used as a tool for racial terror. These legislative victories were not given; they were fought for. They were the direct result of relentless advocacy, media strategy, and legal acumen working in tandem.

But true justice is not just about convictions or policy changes—it is about reconciliation. It is about ensuring that no other family must endure the pain that Ahmaud's family suffered. It is about dismantling the systems that allow such injustices to persist. The civil rights movement did not end in the 1960s. The fight for justice is still ongoing. Inspired by the legacy of those who came before us, this chapter will explore the strategies, challenges, and triumphs of our modern-day fight for justice. It will serve as a testament to what is possible when the law, the media, and the will of the people converge. This chapter will guide the reader through the following key areas:

- *Understanding the six steps of nonviolent social change:* How this framework provided structure to the advocacy for Ahmaud Arbery and continues to be a model for justice movements
- *The role of the law in social justice:* Attorney Gerald Griggs's perspective on how legal strategy and civil rights activism must work in tandem
- *The power of narrative and media:* How controlling the story—rather than letting the system dictate the terms—was essential in securing justice for Ahmaud Arbery
- *Mobilization and grassroots activism:* The role of community organizing in ensuring justice was not only demanded but achieved
- *Legislative and policy impact:* How the repeal of Georgia's citizen's arrest law and the passage of its first hate crimes law were direct results of sustained advocacy and activism
- *Reconciliation and the path forward:* Why justice is not just about convictions but about systemic change, healing, and preventing future injustices

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The murder of Ahmaud Arbery was a tragic reminder of the racial injustices embedded in our society, but it was also a turning point—a moment when communities came together, when legal strategy and activism aligned, and when the demand for justice became undeniable. This chapter is not just a reflection on what happened; it is a blueprint for how we move forward. Justice is not an abstract ideal; it is something we must actively create. Through the lessons share here, we hope to inspire a new generation of legal minds, activists, and storytellers to continue the work, to challenge injustice wherever it exists, and to build a world in which accountability is not the exception, but the norm.

Purpose

The fight for justice is neither a moment nor a single legal battle—it is a continuous movement that requires strategy, persistence, and a deep understanding of systemic change. At the core of our approach in the fight for Ahmaud was the *six steps of nonviolent social change*, inspired by King and discussed by Aldridge in the preface of this book. The *six steps* include information gathering, education, personal commitment, negotiation, direct action, and reconciliation (The King Center, 2024). They provide a structured pathway not only to demand accountability but to cultivate real and lasting reform. While direct action often garners the most attention, it is reconciliation that cements progress—ensuring that communities can heal, institutions can be transformed, and justice can be achieved without lingering bitterness.

This chapter seeks to offer a comprehensive look at how legal strategy, grassroots activism, and strategic communication converge to shape justice. It is an exploration of the intersection of law and advocacy—how the courtroom battles, public pressure, and media narratives all serve as powerful tools in the broader fight for equality. Through our collective experiences as an attorney (Gerald) and a strategic communications professional (Dontaye), we examine how collective action and strategic storytelling mobilized a movement that not only held the perpetrators of Ahmaud’s murder accountable but also spurred historic legislative victories in Georgia.

For attorneys, activists, journalists, educators, and policymakers, this chapter provides an in-depth analysis of how to build and sustain movements for justice. The strategies outlined here are applicable beyond the Ahmaud Arbery case; these lessons extend to every fight for civil rights, police accountability, and systemic reform. For legal professionals, this chapter underscores the necessity of merging litigation with activism. As Gray (1995) explains, “The law can be used as a powerful instrument for social change” (p. 402). The law is not just a means of prosecution or defense—it is a tool for transformation. Through our firsthand account, we see how legal expertise, when combined with grassroots mobilization, can force institutions to act.

For communications professionals, this chapter demonstrates the power of controlling the narrative. Public perception shapes policy and judicial outcomes; without strategic communication, injustices remain hidden. As Burrell (2010) emphasizes, “Our insistence that we have broken free from the negative propaganda is wishful thinking. It takes much more than big afros, clenched fists, and danceable slogans to fight centuries of unremitting

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exposure to twisted images and dehumanizing messages” (p. 15). Advocacy is not just about legal battles; it is about ensuring the truth reaches the masses in ways that inspire action.



For community organizers and activists, this chapter highlights the importance of coalition building. Bayard Rustin (2003), whose activist work predates that of King, illustrates this importance through his series of works. He noted that protest is necessary, but not sufficient and we must build institutions, create viable alternatives, and construct a society in which equal opportunity is not a dream but a practice. The mobilization behind Ahmaud’s case was not the result of any single individual or organization—it was a collective effort that included attorneys, journalists, grassroots leaders, and everyday citizens who refused to stay silent. The “6 County Ride for Justice,” national protests, and voter registration initiatives were all part of a broader effort to demand systemic change.

Setting the Stage

Gerald: Justice requires more than outrage; it requires organization, information, and relentless action. That was the foundation of our work in the fight for Ahmaud. His murder wasn’t just a tragic event—it was the latest in a long line of racial injustices that had been ignored, dismissed, or swept under the rug by a system designed to protect the privileged while oppressing the marginalized. Our approach was deeply rooted in the strategies of the civil rights movement, the very methods we learned from Gray, who taught us that every successful movement requires discipline, organization, and a commitment to nonviolent direct action.

It wasn’t until later that I realized that Dr. King had formalized these exact strategies into what became known as the *six steps of nonviolent social change*. These weren’t just theories—they were the battle-tested methods that had been passed down through generations of Black activists, advocates, and leaders. And it all began with step 1, information gathering, led by Reverend John Perry, then-president of the Brunswick NAACP.

The Break in the Case: Reverend Perry’s Investigative Work

Perry, deeply embedded in the Brunswick community, had been investigating Ahmaud’s murder from the beginning. He spoke with community members, documented inconsistencies in the authorities’ response, and collected crucial details about how the case had been mishandled. Through his diligence, he uncovered a disturbing chain of corruption and neglect—one that revealed not only the failures of the Glynn County Police Department but also the complicity of local prosecutors in delaying justice. When Perry brought the case to me, I was serving as legal advisor for the Georgia NAACP, and the depth of the injustice became undeniably clear. The murder of Ahmaud wasn’t just an act of racial violence—it was a systemic failure. Local officials had suppressed evidence, failed to arrest the perpetrators, and actively worked to protect them from accountability.

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For months, law enforcement had controlled the narrative. Ahmaud was described as a thief, a robber, a young Black man up to no good. The system had already tried to convict him in the court of public opinion, allowing his killers, Gregory and Travis McMichael, to remain free while painting him as the aggressor. Then, on May 5, 2020, about 6 weeks after the murder, everything changed. The video of Ahmaud’s murder was released. The world saw what the system had tried to bury: a terrified young Black man, running for his life, confronted and executed in broad daylight by two White men with shotguns. The video was undeniable proof that Ahmaud had been hunted down. In a matter of minutes, the truth unraveled the carefully crafted police narrative. The public saw the fear in Ahmaud’s eyes, the moment he realized he was trapped, the gunshots that ended his life—and the way his killers stood over his body as if his life meant nothing. That video, combined with the evidence Reverend Perry and I had uncovered, ignited a firestorm. Questions erupted: Why hadn’t the McMichaels been arrested? Why did the police let them walk free that day? What role did local prosecutors play in advising Glynn County Police not to charge them? What had been a local injustice suddenly became a national crisis.

The Role of Strategic Communication: Rewriting the Narrative

Dontaye: I will never forget the moment I saw the video of Ahmaud’s murder. I was holding my then 2-year-old daughter in my arms when I opened the message Gerald had just sent me. I clicked play. In an instant, everything stopped. I watched as a young Black man—who could’ve been my brother, my cousin, even my future son—ran for his life. The terror in his eyes, the desperation in his movement—it was all there. And then the gunshots. I fell to the floor, tears streaming down my face. As vulnerable as I felt in that moment, I knew I had just witnessed something that would forever change me. On the other end of the line, Gerald was there. I could hear the weight in his voice, but also his resolve: “We gotta get justice for this family. We gotta get justice for our community.” At that moment, I knew we had no choice.

A Terrifying Message: The Call From Inside a Georgia Prison

Gerald: As the public outrage grew, so did the urgency for justice. The state had been too slow to act, and it wasn’t just activists and attorneys who noticed. One night, I received an unexpected and chilling phone call. On the other end of the line was a national gang leader calling from inside a Georgia prison. The message was clear and terrifying: “If those boys [Gregory and Travis McMichaels] ain’t off the street in 48 hours, there will be street justice.”

That moment sent a chill down my spine. I knew we were reaching a tipping point—if the legal system didn’t act now, the streets would take matters into their own hands. I immediately contacted the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) and relayed the message in no uncertain terms. The response was swift. Within hours of that conversation, the GBI arrested the McMichaels. Justice was finally moving. But this was just the beginning. How would we sustain the momentum? How would we ensure arrests led to convictions? How would we translate this moment into lasting change? We had informed and educated the public. We had made our personal commitments. Now, it was time to combine our efforts with local leaders and activists mobilize the movement.

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Mobilizing for Justice Through the Power of Storytelling

Dontaye: As a communications strategist, my role is to shape narratives, galvanize public support, and drive meaningful change. But my journey to this moment—when I truly understood the power of communication as a tool for advocacy—began long before I entered the professional realm. It started in childhood, with a moment so raw and profound that it shaped my life’s purpose. I was 5 years old, living in San Francisco, when I first witnessed the brutality of racism. I didn’t know his name was Rodney King² at the time, but I saw the grainy footage of a Black man being beaten mercilessly on the side of an interstate. I didn’t understand the context, but I understood fear and anger. I knew that his dark skin, like mine, wasn’t accepted. That moment planted the seed of awareness that grew as I encountered stories of injustice throughout my life.

My mother, determined to instill pride and resilience in her children, had us read about Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., attorney Fred Gray, Ida B. Wells, and Sojourner Truth. Their advocacy inspired me to pursue journalism, an area in which I worked to expose injustices and amplify the voices of the marginalized. Yet, it wasn’t until I served as the youngest director of public affairs in the Fulton County (GA) district attorney’s office that I witnessed, firsthand, the devastating consequences of systemic failures.

One case still haunts me: Four boys, ages 14–16, stood accused of murdering a White man. The evidence was flimsy, but it wasn’t until the victim’s mother testified that her son had appeared to her in a dream, insisting the wrong people were charged, that anyone listened. An investigation revealed the boys’ cell phone records proved they weren’t near the crime scene. This was the first time I saw how easily poor Black children could be swallowed by a system designed to fail them. (See Chapter 15, this volume, for a recent example involving elementary school children in Tennessee.) It was also the moment I realized the power of strategic communications in reshaping narratives and ensuring accountability.

This realization crystallized further in 2018 when I joined Gerald to fight for the victims of Robert Sylvester Kelly, known to the world as R. Kelly. At the time, no charges had been filed, and the cases lacked public attention. I remember struggling with how to charge for a campaign that had no legal foundation—just an urgent need for justice. My wife’s response was a turning point. She said, “At some point, as women, we need our husbands, fathers, and brothers to act like there’s a problem. And there is a problem.” Her words lit a fire in me. We crafted a campaign to reveal the systemic failures that enabled Kelly’s abuse and to amplify the voices of survivors, but specifically Black women. That work prepared me for the challenge that would come 2 years later.

In early 2020, Gerald called me about a case that had barely made a ripple in the media: the death of Ahmaud Arbery. A young Black man had been chased down and killed while jogging in Brunswick. At that point, there was no video, no public outcry—just another Black life lost to racial violence. Gerald and I began strategizing on how to bring attention to Ahmaud’s story.

2 Rodney King was a Black man whose brutal beating by Los Angeles police officers in 1991 was captured on video and widely broadcast, igniting national outrage. The acquittal of the officers involved led to the 1992 Los Angeles riots, one of the most significant uprisings in modern American history. King later became known for his appeal for peace during the riots, famously asking, “Can we all get along?” His case remains a landmark moment in discussions about police brutality and racial injustice in the United States.

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Discussion/Explanation

Reconciliation in cases of racial violence is often hindered by a complex web of systemic, social, and political barriers. One of the primary challenges is the lack of institutional accountability. When justice systems fail to act swiftly or fairly, communities lose trust in their ability to bring about meaningful change. Additionally, deeply ingrained racial biases and historical injustices continue to shape perceptions of who deserves justice and reconciliation. Another major obstacle is the unwillingness of some individuals and institutions to acknowledge the full extent of the harm inflicted. Without recognition of past and present injustices, the path to healing remains obstructed. Media narratives also play a crucial role—when they distort or diminish the experiences of marginalized communities, they reinforce systemic inequality rather than addressing it.

Our vision of reconciliation is rooted in justice, truth, and systemic transformation. It is not just about symbolic gestures or apologies but about dismantling the structures that enable racial violence in the first place. Reconciliation requires legal reforms, policy changes, and an unwavering commitment to truth telling. It demands that those responsible for injustice—whether individuals or institutions—be held accountable, not just for past actions but for ensuring future equity. True reconciliation means that families like Ahmaud Arbery’s are not just given condolences but guarantees that no other family will have to endure the same pain. It requires that communities engage in difficult conversations about race, privilege, and justice. Most importantly, reconciliation is about ensuring that justice is not just an isolated event but an ongoing process of societal transformation.

Strategies for Action and Change

Dontaye: When the video surfaced, it changed everything. Holding my 2-year-old daughter in my arms, I watched in horror as the footage showed Ahmaud’s life being violently taken. I fell to my knees, overwhelmed by fear, anger, and indignation. With tears streaming down my face, I heard Gerald’s voice on the phone: “We can shed tears later; we’ve got to get justice.” It was at that moment that I realized, not only was my daughter’s life not valued within this system, but neither was mine. From that moment, I knew our work had to be about more than securing justice for Ahmaud—it had to be about reclaiming his humanity. The media often paints Black victims as complicit in their own deaths, reducing them to stereotypes or criminal records. We refused to let that happen to Ahmaud.

Gerald and I crafted a media campaign that highlighted Ahmaud’s humanity while dismantling the narrative attempts to criminalize him. We leaned into social media moments of Black men running that became known as the “Run with Maud” initiative bringing together people from all walks of life to demand justice. Through social media, traditional media, and on-the-ground organizing, we ensured Ahmaud’s name became synonymous with the fight for accountability and systemic change. Our strategy was multipronged:

- *Controlling the narrative on social media:* We flooded platforms with stories about Ahmaud’s life, countering attempts to portray him as a criminal.

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- *Engaging with journalists:* We worked tirelessly to ensure accurate and sensitive reporting, leveraging my background in public relations to connect with national outlets.
- *Organizing peaceful protests:* From Georgia to New York to London, we helped coordinate demonstrations that united people across the globe in demanding accountability.

Looking back, 2020 was the year I truly came to terms with this country’s history and my place within it. It was the year I realized that being a father, a husband, and a strategist meant more than holding a title—it meant taking action. Watching my daughter grow up, I am reminded every day of why this work matters. It’s about ensuring that the world she inherits is one in which justice is not just an ideal, but a reality. The fight for Ahmaud’s legacy was about more than one man—it was about all of us. It was about refusing to accept the status quo, about standing up for what is right, even when it’s hard. And it was about using the tools at our disposal—words, images, stories—to shine a light in the darkness. Ahmaud Arbery’s story continues to resonate because it is a reminder of what’s at stake. His death was a tragedy, but his legacy is a testament to the power of collective action. And for me, it was a lesson I will carry for the rest of my life: Communication is not just about telling stories—it’s about changing them.

Leveraging the Law and Advocacy for Legislative Reform

Gerald: The legal system, left to its own devices, rarely delivers justice for Black victims of racial violence. History has shown us that it is public pressure, strategic legal action, and sustained activism that force the hand of lawmakers. The fight for justice in Ahmaud Arbery’s case wasn’t just about securing convictions—it was about ensuring that the laws that enabled this injustice were dismantled.

Through our combined professional capacities, we leveraged legal advocacy, strategic communication, and grassroots mobilization to push state and local officials to take action. Our work ultimately led to two historic legislative victories in Georgia:

- *The repeal of Georgia’s citizen’s arrest law:* A relic of the Jim Crow era, this law had been weaponized to justify Ahmaud’s murder. Its repeal marked a significant step toward justice and accountability.
- *The signing of Georgia’s first hate crime law:* This legislation sent a powerful message: crimes motivated by hatred have no place in our state.

These victories were hard-won. They required relentless advocacy, strategic messaging, and coalition building. But they also required something deeper: a belief that change is possible, even in the face of centuries of systemic oppression.

As an attorney and civil rights activist, I understood that winning in the courtroom wasn’t enough. Ahmaud’s murder was facilitated by outdated, racist laws—laws that had been used for centuries to justify acts of racial terror. The citizen’s arrest law,

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which the McMichaels attempted to use as a defense, had its roots in slave patrols and Jim Crow-era laws. It had long been used to empower White vigilantes to police Black bodies without consequence. We knew that if we allowed Georgia's citizen's arrest law to remain, it would continue to be weaponized against Black people. Working alongside local civil rights organizations, national legal advocates, and Ahmaud's family, we engaged in legal research and policy analysis to build the case for repeal; public testimony at legislative hearings to explain the direct dangers of the law; and strategic pressure on elected officials, ensuring they knew they would be held accountable if they failed to act.

At the same time, we knew that without a hate crimes law, Georgia would remain one of the few states without additional penalties for crimes committed based on race, gender, sexual orientation, or other protected statuses. The passage of Georgia's first hate crimes law was another critical step in making sure that racial violence was not just prosecuted but actively discouraged through harsher sentencing and broader legal protections. But changing the law requires more than legal arguments—it requires public pressure and strategic communication. That's where Dontaye's expertise came in.

Dontaye: The law alone isn't enough to create change. The public must demand it. As a communications strategist, my role was to make sure that the pressure never let up—that elected officials understood they couldn't hide from the weight of this movement. Every message we crafted, every interview we secured, every media strategy we developed had one goal: to make lawmakers act. We implemented a multitiered strategy to keep public attention focused on the urgency of these reforms:

- *Media domination:* We made sure that every news cycle included Ahmaud's name and the necessity of changing Georgia's laws. We worked with journalists to provide accurate context—ensuring they framed the citizen's arrest law and the lack of hate crimes legislation as direct enablers of racial violence.
- *Public engagement and social media pressure:* We flooded social media with educational content about Georgia's outdated laws, making it clear that change was necessary. We leveraged viral moments, ensuring that hashtags like #IRunWithMaud and #JusticeForAhmaud weren't just about one case—they were about systemic legislative change.
- *Direct confrontation of lawmakers:* We called out state and local officials by name, ensuring they couldn't distance themselves from this crisis. We mobilized protests and rallies outside legislative offices, making sure that lawmakers knew they couldn't ignore our demands.
- *Strategic partnerships:* We worked with national civil rights groups, faith-based organizations, and Black community leaders to ensure that pressure was coming from multiple directions. We amplified the voices of Ahmaud's family, ensuring their personal testimonies reached lawmakers and decision-makers.

The combination of legal advocacy and strategic public pressure created a storm that lawmakers could not ignore.

REVIEW COPY ONLY—DO NOT DUPLICATE, DISTRIBUTE, OR POST***The Tipping Point: Pushing Georgia Lawmakers to Act***

Gerald: Through a relentless combination of legal strategy and grassroots activism, we forced Georgia lawmakers to confront a truth they had long ignored. By the time the Georgia General Assembly met to vote on the citizen’s arrest law repeal and the hate crimes bill, the political cost of inaction was too high. State legislators, many of whom had resisted civil rights reforms for decades, found themselves with no room to hide. The pressure from the legal community made it clear that Georgia’s laws were outdated, indefensible, and dangerous. The public pressure, led by Carter’s strategic messaging, forced officials into a corner—they knew they would be held accountable by voters if they failed to act.

Ultimately, we forced the legislature’s collective hand. In May 2020, Georgia’s first hate crimes law was passed. In May 2021, Georgia became the first state in the United States to repeal its citizen’s arrest law. The passage of these laws was a direct result of legal strategy that made the case for repeal and reform; public relations and media strategy that ensured continuous pressure; and grassroots activism and mobilization that kept Ahmaud’s story front and center. These victories didn’t come easily—they were hard-fought, demanded by the people, and delivered through relentless effort. But these changes also set a precedent. They proved that justice isn’t just about convictions—it’s about changing the laws that enable injustice to continue. And at its core, true justice is about more than punishment—it is about reconciliation. It is about acknowledging the wrongs of the past and ensuring they do not define our future.

Dontaye: These victories didn’t mean our fight was over. The systems that allowed Ahmaud to be lynched still exist. Even with these legislative wins, we continue to see racial profiling in Georgia communities; disparities in how Black and White defendants are sentenced; and barriers to voting that disproportionately impact Black communities. That is why our work must continue. We must keep educating, mobilizing, and demanding systemic change—because justice shouldn’t depend on public outrage. It should be the standard.

Reconciliation demands more than legislative change. It requires an honest reckoning with the past, a commitment to repair harm, and a collective effort to build a society where Black lives are not just protected but valued. We have shown that when the law, media, and grassroots activism come together, real change is possible. But reconciliation is not a single act—it is an ongoing process, one that requires vigilance, accountability, and an unwavering belief in a more just future. And we won’t stop until justice is not the exception, but the norm—until reconciliation is not an afterthought, but the foundation upon which we build lasting change.

Discussion Questions/Conversation Prompts

1. How can reconciliation be incorporated into current social justice initiatives?
2. What lessons from the Ahmaud Arbery case can be applied to other instances of systemic injustice?
3. In what ways can communication strategies influence public perception and mobilization efforts?

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4. How can practitioners balance the need for accountability with the goal of fostering reconciliation?
5. What roles do community leaders and organizations play in sustaining systemic reform?

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