

Opinion: Ja Morant shows how a 'good guy with a gun' can never be Black

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

"Man enough to pull a gun, be man enough to squeeze it," rapped NBA superstar Allen Iverson on his song "[40 Bars](#)."

This was two weeks prior to the 2000–01 NBA season, one in which Iverson would be named league MVP. Ja Morant, the 23-year-old star point guard for the Memphis Grizzlies, was barely 1 year old.

Today, Morant's game conjures [that of the electrifying Iverson](#). With colorfully dyed dreadlocks, an infectious smile and [a signature sneaker](#), Ja represents the next generation of NBA superstars.

But his bursting athletic brilliance, so evocative of Iverson, comes with a cost: the perceived menace of the Black gangster.

On March 4, 2023, Morant posted an [Instagram Live video](#) of him displaying a gun at a Denver strip club. Colorado is an open carry state, but it's illegal to carry a firearm while under the influence of alcohol. Though Morant was never charged for a crime, the NBA suspended him eight games for "[conduct detrimental to the league](#)."

Then, on May 14, 2023, [another Instagram Live video](#) surfaced of Morant holding a gun in a parked car with his friends while dancing to rap music. In response, [the NBA suspended Morant for 25 games](#) to start this upcoming season for "engaging in reckless and irresponsible behavior with guns."

I'm not looking to defend Morant's behavior. It was careless, and he could have harmed himself and others.

[But as a scholar of Black popular culture](#), I can't help but wonder what the reaction would have been if Morant were white.

To many politicians and activists in the gun-obsessed U.S., the freedom to own and flaunt firearms is a sacred right. And yet throughout the nation's history, gun ownership among Black Americans has elicited fear and recrimination. Even when folks who look like Morant innocuously

and legally possess a gun, they find themselves too easily typecast as villains.

Disciplining 'thugs' and 'children'

The NBA has long had a fraught relationship with its Black superstars.

When global sports icon Michael Jordan [retired from basketball in 2003](#), the league found itself in a period of transition.

How would it continue to fill arenas, satisfy advertisers and spread its vision of a global game without its brightest star?

Not only did the NBA need a new crop of superstars to mitigate Jordan's exit, but it also needed a fresh attitude. In response, the league turned to the [marketing juggernaut of hip-hop and Black culture](#).

Players openly professed their love for rap music, with stars like [Shaquille O'Neal](#), [Kobe Bryant](#), Iverson [and others](#) recording and releasing music. Players wore oversized T-shirts, baggy jeans and New Era fitted caps as they traveled. You'd see durags and iced-out diamond chains during postgame interviews.

At first, the league saw opportunity—an opening to usher in a new [post-Jordan audience](#).

However, in 2004, two events prompted a backlash.

First, there was the notorious "[Malice at the Palace](#)," during which players for the Indiana Pacers went into the stands to fight fans who had provoked them at Detroit's Palace of Auburn Hills stadium.

A year later, there was an infamous Team U.S. dinner in Serbia. [As The](#)

[Washington Post reported](#), "Iverson and some of his fellow National Basketball Association professionals arrived wearing an assortment of sweat suits, oversize jeans, shimmering diamond earrings and platinum chains ... Larry Brown, the Hall of Fame coach of the U.S. team, was appalled and embarrassed."

Former commissioner David Stern went on to institute [a controversial dress code for NBA players](#), banning, among other things, baggy clothing, along with the display of gaudy jewelry. But Los Angeles Lakers coach Phil Jackson exposed the ban's quiet truth.

"The players have been dressing in prison garb the last five or six years," [he said](#). "All the stuff that goes on, it's like gangster, thuggery stuff."

The NBA decided its foray into the marketing of hip-hop with basketball required a paternalist brand of discipline to keep its players' "street cool" in line and avoid the poisonous image of Black criminality.

And like Jackson all those years ago, ESPN's Tim MacMahon, on the network's [Lowe Post basketball podcast](#), criticized Morant with not so subtle racial undertones.

"Ja Morant is a child," he announced. "This guy is so worried about being cool: 'Look at me, man: Life is like a rap video.'"

The NBA's gun culture

Ja Morant isn't the first NBA player to find himself in trouble for wielding firearms.

In 2006, [Stephen Jackson](#) was suspended just seven games for firing a gun after an altercation at an Indianapolis strip club. In 2010, [Gilbert Arenas and Javaris Crittenton](#) were suspended for 50 and 38 games,

respectively, after pulling guns on each other in the Washington Wizards team facilities. And in 2014, [Raymond Felton](#) was suspended four games after pleading guilty to charges stemming from an incident where he threatened his estranged wife with a gun.

Like Ja, all these players are Black. But unlike his situation, these incidents were violent, criminal offenses.

The closest analogs to Morant are Chris Kaman and Draymond Green. [Kaman](#), a former center who is white, posted pictures of his arsenal to social media in 2012, 2013 and 2016. In 2018, during a trip to Israel, Golden State Warriors star forward [Draymond Green](#) posed with an assault weapon. Neither Kaman nor Green was suspended for their posts.

The metaphor of guns also saturates the league in ways that reflect the country's obsession with firearms.

The alias of [Andrei Kirilenko](#), a former All-Star for the Utah Jazz, was "AK- 47." Fans anointed Lakers guard [Austin Reaves](#) with the nickname "AR-15" until he denounced it after [the tragic mass shooting in Uvalde, Texas](#). NBA superstar Kevin Durant's [Instagram handle](#) is "easymoneysniper." Watch Hall of Fame broadcaster Mike Breen announce a game, and you'll inevitably hear [his famous catch phrase](#), "BANG."

Was this ever about guns?

After Morant's most recent incident, [Adam Silver](#), league commissioner, said, "I'm assuming the worst."

But why is Morant, according to Silver, all of a sudden a poor role model to "[millions of kids, globally](#)," especially when [former and current](#) athletes have done the same without punishment?

To me, the answer is simple: In America, armed Black folks conjures pathological criminality.

Guns, since the nation's inception, have fortified a uniquely American masculine fantasy: the revolutionary and the cowboy, the cop and the soldier, the spy, the hunter, the gangster—all coalesce around the presumed thrill of the trigger. These fantasies reflect the [National Rifle Association's](#) most pernicious and oddly patriotic lie: "The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun."

At the same time, Historian Carol Anderson's book "[The Second: Race and Guns in a Fatally Unequal America](#)" explores how the imagined danger of armed Black people has long pervaded the national psyche.

In her telling, this story begins in Morant's home state of South Carolina, where the [Negro Act of 1722](#) and the [Negro Slave Act of 1740](#) argued Blacks were "instinctually criminal" and abolished their access to weapons and right to self-defense.

So if people are so sure of Morant's villainy, I ask without a hint of snark: What does responsible Black gun ownership look like?

Does it look like Huey Newton, Bobby Seale and the Black Panther Party, whose armed protests were the impetus behind [California's stricter gun laws—legislation that was backed by the NRA?](#)

Does it look like [Philando Castile](#)? Do we see it in [Marissa Alexander](#), who was sent to prison after she fired a warning shot at her husband, who had threatened to kill her?

To me, this was never about guns—just as, back in the early 2000s, it was never about rap music or baggy clothing.

It's about [white paternalism](#). It's about how Black people can't be trusted with weapons. It's about how the country's veneration of gun ownership as an inalienable right is seconded only by its commitment to rendering armed Blacks an existential danger to the civility and structure of America.

Blackness seems to disavow any possibility of being a "good guy," gun or not. [Kyle Rittenhouse](#) was a "good guy with a gun." So, too, was [George Zimmerman](#). Both meted out extrajudicial killings, and both emerged unpunished.

According to this warped, uniquely American fantasy, "good guys with guns" can never look like Ja Morant—and good guys can always kill bad guys.

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