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USA

Legacy of Police Impunity Boils Over

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Once again the deep racism and racial divide in the United States has burst upon the national scene, dominating newspapers, TV and social media.

Since 2014 videos taken by witnesses of police murders of Black people spurred the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. In spite of the overwhelming visual proof of the guilt of the police murderers, they have almost all have gotten away with it. This has emboldened the police, as they know they can use force up to and including killing against Blacks with impunity.

This explains why two cops in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, thought nothing of killing 37-year-old Alton Sterling while he was on the ground incapacitated. Two videos were taken of the event, which showed two cops kneeling on top of Sterling, when one of them took out his gun and pumped three bullets into him. This happened on July 5.

The next day, in a suburb of Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota, a cop pulled over Philando Castille, for a broken taillight. In the car were his fiancée, Diamond Reynolds, and her four-year-old daughter. An earlier victim, Sandra Bland, was also pulled over and arrested for a broken taillight, and she died in custody. Both Castille and Bland were caught driving while Black in the wrong neighborhood.

The cop shot Castille as he reached for his wallet to produce his license and registration as the cop demanded. Reynolds, to protect herself and her child, started to video the dying man and the cop, who then pointed his gun at her. What the cop didn't know was that her video was being sent live-streamed to her Facebook friends, who sent it out and soon it became known to millions. More cops arrived, ordered her out of her car at gunpoint, arrested her and took her and her daughter into custody. She kept videoing while she was in the police car. Her anguish as she talked to the cops, along with her presence of mind, made a deep impression.

The police separated her from her daughter, grilled her for hours to intimidate her and see if they couldn't charge her. Someone must have told them that the video was already widely seen, so they couldn't just take away her phone, and they released her and her daughter.

In all these incidents, the police seek to silence witnesses. In the case of the Sterling murder, one of the men who took the video, Abdullah Muflahi, the owner of the store outside of which Sterling was murdered, the police took his phone away, locked him for hours in a police car, and seized the security camera footage from his store, which they are still sitting on.

An Air Force veteran who posted the first video of the Sterling shooting to some 10,000 followers on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter which then went viral, was subsequently detained at his job at the Dobbins Air Reserve Base. Police then led him from his job in shackles and held him for 26 hours. His job is in jeopardy.

These two police murders sparked largely Black but interracial protests of tens of thousands in cities across the country for days. At one of these, in Dallas, Texas, an African American Army veteran, Micah Johnson, opened fire with military precision from surrounding buildings on officers who were policing the demonstration, killing five and wounding another seven.

The police say Johnson wanted to kill white police officers in retaliation for the police murder of Blacks. Acquaintances and relatives say he came back from Afghanistan a changed man. It is not surprising that an

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individual with emotional problems in this polarized atmosphere would decide to carry out such an action, however misguided and harmful to the cause. We may see more such incidents.

This then became the major story in the media, swamping the two police murders. In spite of the fact that Johnson was not part of the demonstration and had nothing to do with Black Lives Matter, many jumped on the incident to charge that it was the protesters and BLM that were to blame.

Former Republican Congressman Joe Walsh sent out a tweet that got wide circulation saying, "This is now war. Watch out Obama. Watch out black lives matter punks. Real America is coming after you."

In a televised interview, the head of the National Association of Police Organizations blamed President Obama for waging a war on cops. On the CBS TV show "Face the Nation" former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani opined, "When you say black lives matter, that is inherently racist" and blamed the movement for the shooting of the police. The blowhard talk-show host Rush Limbaugh, whose show is followed by millions, joined in.

Obama is singled out because he is Black. This is not new. Giuliani for example was speaking for many when he said last year, "I do not believe that the president loves America! He wasn't brought up the way you and I were brought up."

Writing in the Financial Times, Edward Luce wrote, "In response to the Blacks Lives Matter movement, there is now a Blue Lives Matter campaign for the police. A number of Republican figures, including the lieutenant governor of Texas, have blamed the killings on Black Lives Matter at whose protest they took place. The internet is awash with invented stories of how the group incites its supporters to attack the police."

In face of this racist onslaught, the protests of police violence were not deterred. The weekend and beyond following the Dallas shootings saw tens of thousands of people taking to the streets and blocking roads, bridges and highways in more than a dozen cities, including Chicago, Atlanta, Baton Rouge, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Los Angeles and Phoenix. Hundreds were arrested.

In this situation of increasing polarization, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump emphasized his previous position that he stands with the police against Black Lives Matter. He says that he is the "law and order" candidate.

President Obama and Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton say that the problem is the result of a lack on communication between the police and the Black community, and urge "both sides" to reconcile. At the same time, Obama takes center stage at the memorial for the fallen Dallas police officers, but has never attended memorials to the growing list of Black victims of police murders, including Sterling and Castille. Neither has Clinton

Of course Obama (or whomever is the next president, Clinton or Trump) is the chief executive officer of the government that is charged with protecting the system that spawns racism.

The problem is not a breakdown in communication between the Black community and the police. The real problem begins to be seen in a closer look at the situation in Dallas. There has been a massive media campaign emphasizing the "irony" that the killing of police occurred in Dallas, where such great progress has been made. The city even has a Black police chief.

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An article in the New York Times dug a little deeper. It begins with how one man has been stopped regularly by police when he is not going to work to his job in demolition, asking for identification "about four times in the last four months alone. So now he wears his hardhat, vest and work gloves every time he goes out. "I got to fake like I'm wearing my work stuff, so they won't mess with me."

The article sums up: "But for all the progress that the Dallas police have made, this remains one of the most segregated big cities in the country, with yawning racial gaps in housing, schools and employment. Decades of discriminatory federal, state and local policies have concentrated the city's black population in deeply poor and underdeveloped neighborhoods south of Interstate 30, which serves as a line of demarcation between opportunity and neglect. While downtown Dallas is flush with glassy skyscrapers and high priced restaurants, large tracts of the city's southern sector are empty and ragged."

"People look at the Blacks Lives Matter movement as people protesting against police brutality," said Terry Flowers, the executive director and headmaster of St. Phillips School and Community Center in South Dallas. "I think it is much larger than that. People are protesting against a social engineering of inequity."

What is termed the Black community is in reality concentration of Blacks in ghettos, with high unemployment, poverty and resultant street crime made worse by the so-called war on drugs. The police are charged with enforcing this segregation and keeping the lid on the ghettos, functioning as an occupying force, with daily harassment, arrests, beatings and even murder. While segregation by law was defeated by the mass civil rights and Black liberation movements of the 1960s, de facto segregation is more pronounced today than in 1970.

Blacks who escape from the ghettos and have gotten better-paying jobs, largely the result of the gains of the Black movements of the Sixties, are also swept up in this institutional, structural racism that is deeply embedded in 400 years of American capitalism. It will take more than better communication to break this down.

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