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USA

Memphis Police Charged with Beating Man to Death, Protests Nationwide

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Police in Memphis, Tennessee beat a 29-year-old Black man named Tyre Nichols on January 7 and three days later he died. The family had an autopsy done that found he died from extensive bleeding caused by a severe beating. The department fired the five officers involved in the shooting on January 20 and charged the five with murder on January 26.

Three days later police released video tapes showing the officers, who had stopped Nichols for a traffic violation, dragging him from his car. Though Nichols cooperates, they beat him for three minutes with their fists and nightsticks, attempt to tase him, spray his face with pepper gas, and repeatedly kick him in the head. Black people were once again deeply hurt and angered. The next day there were small demonstrations in cities across the country, some blocking streets, bridges, and highways. In response the Memphis Police Department disbanded the Scorpion police unit of which the officers had been a part. Several firefighters and paramedics who stood by as police beat Nichols are also being investigated.

Many people were horrified by the tapes and politicians expressed their indignation. President Joe Biden said, "Like so many, I was outraged and deeply pained to see the horrific video of the beating that resulted in Tyre Nichols' death. It is yet another painful reminder of the profound fear and trauma, the pain, and the exhaustion that Black and Brown Americans experience every single day."

New York Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez sent an email to her supporters calling for changes in policing in which she said, "Tyre Nichols should be alive. At least 1,176 people were killed by law enforcement last year – a record. Billions of dollars in trainings, body cams, and reforms haven't stopped it. In fact, it's gotten worse. That has only been rewarded with more funding at the expense of schools, hospitals, housing, and more. We must grow out of this cycle together."

Similarly, Senator Bernie Sanders tweeted, "Tyre Nichols should be alive. Yes, the police officers who brutally murdered him must be held accountable. But even their conviction on the strongest possible charges cannot bring Tyre back. We must do everything in our power to end police violence against people of color."

Former president Donald Trump, whose racist rhetoric has encouraged violence against people of color, who advocates law and order, and who has told police to treat people in custody roughly, but is now running for president again and looking for Black votes, said the "horrible" attack "never should have happened."

The case resembles that of George Floyd whose murder by police in Minneapolis set off the Black Lives Matter national protests in the spring of 2020 in which somewhere between 15 million and 25 million people participated. BLM was an expression of opposition to white racism and violent white cops. In the case of Floyd's murder and several earlier police killings of civilians, the officers had been white. But in this case, all five policemen were African American.

A young Black woman speaking to a radio reporter said, "This is not about race, this is about the police." But it is also about race, because even whatever the race of the police, Blacks and Latinos will suffer the brunt of the violence. As Amber Sherman, a young Black activist working with the Nichols family explained, whatever their race, police "are indoctrinated into a practice that sees Black people and brown people as less than."

As some experts say, police departments typically have a culture of machismo and an attitude of contempt for Black

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and Latino people. Police often see their role as keeping the people in fear and meeting out violent punishment.

In 2020, the far left called for abolishing or defunding the police, unpopular slogans that isolated the left from the broader society. No clear demand beyond reform has yet emerged from this most recent murder.

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