



What's Going On? An Editor's Commentary

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As editor of the *Journal of African American Studies*, I would be remiss if I elected not to comment on the goings-on as they pertain to police–community relations in this country, especially where Black people are concern. Indeed, I do so in the interests of our readers. I became interested in studying police use of extra-legal force against Black motorists and pedestrians in the early 1990s following the brutal beating of Rodney King by four members of the Los Angeles Police Department. I was a graduate student at USC at the time. I did not begin publishing on the subject of police brutality, however, until 1999 when Demetrius DuBose, a graduate of the University of Notre Dame and former NFL linebacker, was shot and killed by police officers in the city of San Diego. Many of you have probably forgotten about him, but I haven't. Since then I have assembled a body of work on policing that includes numerous refereed journal articles and a book about the history of policing in urban America.

What can I say about police use of extra-legal force against Black people, both men and women, that has not already been said? For a while there, my writings either featured or touched on many of the high-profile shooting deaths of Black and brown people by police officers around the country. I tackled the issue from, what I thought, every conceivable angle. I even attempted to psycho-analyze the offending officer or officers. Then, at some point, I just stopped. I simply stopped writing about police brutality. After all, what was the point? I treated each criminal incident of police misconduct as its own case study, but the fact of the matter is, all of these developments were interrelated. We all know why Blacks are disproportionately shot and killed by white police officers, and it has nothing to do with inadequate training. Stop with the poor training excuse! If poor training was the cause, we would see similar devilish behavior on the part of Black officers, but we do not! Oh, and the flimsy excuse, “I feared for my life” is also tired and worn out. Been worn out, in fact. You did not fear for your life; people who fear for their lives typically back up or retreat, they do not advance with gun in hand and shoot someone at point-blank range as that person opens a car door

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and attempts to open get behind the wheel of his vehicle. You do not get to claim that you “feared for your life” when you made the conscious decision to shoot someone in the back several times as they fled from you. Then, of course, when all else fails, by all means, pull out the age-old “he resisted arrest.” Malcolm X said it years ago that every incident of police use of excessive force against someone Black follows the same pattern: “they beat you all upside your mouth and then charge you with resisting arrest.”

The simple fact is that police officers murder Blacks with impunity because they know the state will protect them. Although this is becoming less and less true, as more and more police officers are finding themselves in prison, history supports such a belief. In other words, it is still pretty much true. As someone who was reared in a military/law enforcement family, I have the utmost respect for the work that police officers do on a daily basis. On some level, it can be a thankless job. One could, however, easily make the argument that no state agent does, on average, more good on a day-to-day basis than America’s police officers. For example, if I had a dollar for every time I saw a police officer help a lady change a flat tire, I would have a big fat piggy bank. And while we often only hear about police work when the issue revolves around excessive force, the fact of the matter is that (based on my work) very few police officers across the country engage in that type of cowardice. Many people become police officers because they believe that it is a field in which they can make a positive impact on people’s lives. Many are just hardworking stiffs trying to eke out a living and provide for their families. The problem is that there is a sufficient number of bad apples (as small as that number may be) to spoil the entire bushel. In the event these bad apples are allowed to enjoy a career of twenty years or more, what they often leave behind is a jacket as thick as a small-town telephone book comprised of complaints lodged by motorists and pedestrians of all stripes.

It had been years, I mean many years, since I participated in a protest against police brutality, until recently where protests were aplenty in the Columbus metropolitan area. I showed up at two of them: it did not feel right not to. It has been several years since I have produced a scholarly article on police use of excessive force. As I mentioned earlier, what could I say that had not already been said, by myself and others? I have run out of words to describe my utter contempt for those miscreants who dishonor police departments everywhere with their rogue and racist ways. We know what the problem is, and we need not waste precious time and energy explaining and describing it ad nauseam. The question is, what are we going to do about it?

Other than issues surrounding poverty, education, and healthcare, I can think of no greater threat to American democracy at this time, as well as to the internal security of the USA, than allowing these evildoers to continue to injure, maim, and kill the very people on whose backs this country was built. Neither words nor protests will rid society of these violent perverts. To be sure, both are needed, as this is a war that has to be fought on several fronts. But it is going to take way more than that, way more! At the same time, the protests in Portland, Oregon specifically, are as impressive as any demonstrations I have seen in my lifetime. Early September saw the people of Portland rack up their 100th consecutive day of protests. I only wish there were many more cities like Portland. In April 1967, months before Dr. Che Guevara was captured and executed, in a special inaugural

edition of the *Tricontinental* magazine, printed by the Executive Secretariat of the Organization of Solidarity with the Peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the words of Guevara were featured prominently. He spoke of “creating two, three... many Vietnams...” Perhaps there is a lesson in that.

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