

Suspicious Suspicion

Written by Walter Fields
Wednesday, 18 September 2013 06:56 -



It seems the mantra “shoot first, ask questions later (if alive)” applies to how law enforcement reacts to Black males. The latest in a long-line of police shootings occurred on Saturday in Charlotte, North Carolina where, according to published reports, police opened fire on 24 year-old Jonathan Ferrell, an unarmed Black man and killed him. The victim was apparently running toward the officers – seeking assistance. He had been involved in an auto accident and he was looking for help. When he sought the assistance of a nearby homeowner, she shut the door because “she thought he was trying to rob her” according to the Charlotte Observer. Police were apparently responding to the homeowner’s report of an attempted break-in.

There is no such help for Black men in America.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Officer Kirk Randall was charged with voluntary manslaughter and released on \$50,000 bond. It is absurd that such a low bail would be placed on an officer of the law who took a life. And equally outrageous that Officer Randall is out a free man. Yet, it does reflect the low regard held for the lives of young Black men.

In the days to come we will likely hear the usual defense from the police union. It will be the same tired line we have heard in other cities such as New York, Chicago and Los Angeles and suburban outposts like Teaneck, New Jersey when young Black men have been murdered by police. Their murders are justified by suspicion; the widely held belief that all Black men are harboring criminal intent and must always be viewed as potentially dangerous. It is why off-duty Black police officers in plain clothes have been shot. The qualifying factor for deadly force by police is race, and specifically when Black men are involved in an episode regardless of the potential of his innocence. Black men are guilty by complexion, no matter class or pedigree.

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We have witnessed this phenomenon time and again. In the now infamous cases of George Zimmerman, Charles Stuart in Boston, prosecutor Sam Asbell in Camden, New Jersey, Susan Smith in South Carolina, and the Central Park rape victim and television meteorologist Heidi Jones in New York City, it was Black men who were deemed predators until it was later proved that the stories of the “victims” were fabricated or mistaken. Some will excuse away this pattern of guilty until proven innocent by pointing the finger at young Black men, blaming them for everything from their manners of dress, choice of music and gang involvement as justification for their being deemed a threat. It is the same defective and foul reasoning behind New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg’s patently racist “stop and frisk” policy for his city’s police department. Yet, no such calculation is made in reference to white males who have engaged in hate crimes, mass killings, drug use, dress counter to societal norms and listen to antisocial music, and take part in uncontrolled outbursts of violence after college football games. Young white males are given a pass, and their behavior is deemed an aberration and not ascribed to a cultural defect. The acts of killers like the Columbine murderers and Oklahoma City terrorist Timothy McVeigh are considered outliers and in no way representative of the young white male population.

What distinguishes the Charlotte incident from these other cases is that law enforcement is directly involved in the undermining of human rights. For all the talk of the professionalism and training of police, it seems that when they encounter Black men all such preparation is cast aside. The same can be said for the benefit of the doubt or the presumption of innocence of Black males by police. It is why many Black mothers have to instruct their young Black boys on survival techniques when approached by police. It is a form of psychological terrorism that breeds mistrust and anger, and likely, in some cases, fuels behavior that is counter to a respect for the law. If “the law” is acting unlawfully, why should citizens act differently?

We cannot be quiet when this sort of racial targeting exists. And that is the problem. We have offered silence when these incidents demand a deafening outcry and challenge to government authority and law enforcement. In places like New York City the treatment of Black men gets hardly a yawn from civic leaders, including African-Americans in so-called leadership positions. The mayor of the nation’s largest city so anesthetized the city with his money that the callous disregard for the civil liberties of young Black men was treated as collateral damage. So long as folks could be in the mayor’s favor and possibly the recipient of his largesse, the messiness of city sanctioned racial profiling was swept under the rug.

These incidents will persist until there is a strong, coordinated and sustained pushback from citizens, and most importantly African-Americans, to the assault on young Black men. The killings by police and others will not cease until demands and pressure is brought to bear on political leadership, police and the criminal justice system. We are witnessing a thinning of the herd.

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