

COMMENTARY

Are many black cops under fire?

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Summary: Many black police officers are fearful of being harassed by white police officers. Here's what black officers say can be done to end that threat.

The year after the shooting of black Orange County Sheriff's Deputy, Darryn Leroy Robbins by his white training partner in December, 1993, Adrienne Cureton was also on the receiving end of police violence. While investigating a missing child case, the six-year veteran of the Philadelphia police department was accosted and savagely beaten by a half dozen white officers. The beating continued even after she shouted that she was a police officer. The officers stopped only when a black officer intervened. A badly shaken Cureton said: "It was like Rodney King." No legal action was taken against the officers.

According to the National Black Police Association, the Cureton beating was the third attack on black officers by white police in one month. Following the Robbins shooting and the Cureton beating, the Association and the New York Grand Council of Guardians, a black

fraternal organization that represents 11,000 black law enforcement officers, demanded that Janet Reno and the Justice Department investigate the "continuing trend" of attacks nationally on black officers.

When black officers are attacked by white officers is it a case of racism, job stress, or mistaken identity? Ira Harris, former deputy superintendent of the Chicago Police Department, and executive director of the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Officials, insists that fear and prejudice may push many white officers over the racial edge. "No matter how much training an officer gets, how he reacts in a situation on the streets depends on his own apprehensions and prejudices."

Jerome Skolnick, a criminologist and expert on police practices, says that many white police officers come from conservative working-class backgrounds and have had little contact with blacks. Once assigned to a high crime neighborhood many tend to regard all blacks or Latinos as criminals. "Police work tends to aggravate whatever prejudice one has. It's very easy for police to generalize," he said.

Harris doesn't attribute every attack on a black officer to racism, and notes that the reported incidents of white on black officer violence have declined in recent years. Yet, he cautions that many black officers still fear that they could be victims of an attack by white police.

It's that fear that causes Jimmy L. Brown to always carry his police I.D. wherever he goes. Brown, who is chief of services for Miami's Metro Dade Police Department, recalls being confronted by a white state trooper while working undercover during one of Miami's periodic racial blow-ups. "I showed him my badge and he said 'I still don't care'." Brown says that he has been stopped at night by officers while driving his unmarked police car and questioned about the use of the car. He explains why police officials ignored his complaints of harassment, "It's so much easier for them to cover up incidents."

When black officers come under fire, many feel angered that the force has betrayed them. They charge that some police officials under intense pressure from the mostly white police unions refuse to firmly

discipline white officers accused of misconduct. In 1996, before the shooting of off-duty LAPD officer Kevin Gaines by a white LAPD officer during a traffic confrontation, Leonard Ross, president of the Oscar Joel Bryant Foundation, a group that represents black LAPD officers, branded the Los Angeles Police Protective League, "the gatekeepers of oppression and racism."

The black officers sued the League for using union dues to defend officers Stacey Koon and Laurence Powell, charged with beating Rodney King and excluding black officers from its board of directors. The tendency of union and police officials to protect white officers accused of brutality is the "foundation" of the "them versus us" police culture, says Ron Hampton, executive director of the National Black Police Officers Association.

Though Hubert Williams, former Newark police chief and president of the Police Foundation, thinks that things have gotten better, "the trend within police departments is no longer to unquestioningly protect corrupt or brutal police officers." He warns that police departments still have a long

way to go to break their siege mentality. James Fyfe, criminologist and former New York police officer goes further, "You have to change the culture so certain things are not tolerated."

But how? More sensitivity and cultural diversity training, the hiring and promotion of more black police officers, and more diverse assignments for black officers have helped reduce the violence against black officers. But police officials delude themselves if they think this is enough. Many white officers harbor deep racial biases that are compounded by the stress of police work. And while their prejudices can't be completely rooted out, Harris believes that front line supervisors can play a crucial role in insuring that these attitudes don't translate into abusive actions on the streets. "They must continually remind officers in meetings and during daily roll calls that all blacks and minorities aren't criminals and those officers that harass or abuse anyone will be immediately disciplined."

Hampton, however, contends that supervisors are often part of the problem and instinctively cover-up and make excuses for officer abuse. "What

we label the 'police culture' or 'police mentality' reflects the racism in society. Officers must be taught in the Academy and reinforced repeatedly while on-duty that law enforcement is race neutral and a shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later policy will not be condoned when dealing with minorities." The Association supported the recent National Emergency Conference on Police Brutality and distributes a "Ten Step Strategy to stop police misconduct and brutality" to community organizations and police agencies.

Hampton also blames many black officers for being complicit in perpetuating or ignoring abuse even when they're the targets. "Black officers don't speak out and even commit brutal acts out of fear of not being seen as a team player or that protesting abuse will damage their career."

Many black officers that have been shot, beaten, or harassed by white officers consider themselves team players and are praised as "good cops," yet are still treated as criminals. That won't change until police officials make it clear that black officers are not "gangstas" but officers too.

A VOICE FROM THE HILL

A good government job?

By George Wilson
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For many African-Americans there was a time when a "good government job" meant a reasonably comfortable ride on the road to success.

The trip was fairly smooth until some of us wanted promotions. This desire to climb the ladder was met with a concerted effort on the part of some to remove the ladder's rungs.

Now, this issue is being addressed by Congressman Albert Wynn (D-Md), who was joined by members of the Congressional Black Caucus and others in launching a crusade to end racial discrimination in the federal workforce.

Wynn represents more federal employees than any other member of Congress; 72,000 federal government workers live in his district.

These days just having the job is not enough, Cong. Wynn said. "People want to move forward. They want to move up into management. They are not just satisfied with a 'good government job,'" Wynn said.

If one needs proof that "Jim Crow" is alive and quite well in the federal workforce, consider several points. 1) Senior management positions (GS 13, 14, 15 and Senior Executive Service), in the government are sorely lacking minority participation. 2) According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), all minorities comprise just 13 percent of GS 15's.

For example, the Department of Agriculture has 1,159 GS 15 employees with just 38 African-Americans holding those positions. Incidentally, the EEOC currently has a 100,000 case backlog in discrimination cases.

The Department of Agriculture has over 1,400 complaints pending. The Interior Department has 774 complaints and the Department of Transportation has 663 complaints. These agencies show a real disdain for African-American

employees and seem to be sending a clear signal that "if you work here, it's going to be a bumpy ride."

Finally, the Library of Congress employs approximately 2,000 African-Americans who have been locked in a bitter struggle with its management over hiring and promotion practices. Things became so bad that African-American employees filed a class action suit against the Library.

On the surface, it appeared that blacks won the lawsuit, however, the Library has virtually ignored a court order to stop discriminating. In fact, the employees have filed another suit challenging the way that the Library selects employees. One of the ways, through interviews, have been used to blatantly discriminate, blacks say.

Joyce Thorpe, an attorney employed by the Library of Congress employees, notes that some interviewees are asked questions that others are not. "When you go in there for a job interview, you should be asked the same question as the person who went in before you. That interview protocol makes everything objective.

The questions should be related to whether or not you can perform the job that you are applying for. You should not be asked if you have a Masters in Spanish or a Ph.D. in engineering if you are applying to be a file clerk in English at the Library of Congress," Thorpe said.

The situation at the Library is indicative of a problem that pervades the federal government. African-Americans are the last hired and the first fired or downsized. Besides, if you are able to keep your job, you might be supervised by someone less qualified than yourself.

It appears that the "good government job" has gone the way of the dinosaur.

George Wilson is a 16-year Capitol Hill correspondent for the American Urban Radio Network.

Carl Rowan's Commentary

America: Expect deepening political quagmire this year

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Say farewell to a year marked by some of the most crippling political warfare this town has known.

Say hello to an even worse year that will be dominated by a war over the control of both houses of Congress and efforts to seize the early advantages in the race to replace Bill Clinton in the White House.

A wide chasm exists between the views and goals of Clinton and Vice President Al Gore and those of House Speaker Newt Gingrich, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott and others in the Republican hierarchy.

Their partisan bickering will reflect negatively upon our courthouses and our schoolhouses, our daycare centers and children's hospitals. It will throw race relations into a dangerous funk as the war over affirmative action is intensified.

President Clinton will pursue an agenda that is doomed to failure if the Republicans retain control of Congress through his last three years in office.

The current GOP lawmakers will go to unbelievable extremes to deny confirmation to all key appointees who seem to share Clinton's views. So ambassadors' chairs will be empty in many embassies and benches will remain vacant in many federal courtrooms.

Republicans began their widespread abuse of the confirmation process long before Bill Lann Lee was rejected by Sen. Orrin Hatch and



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his Senate Judiciary Committee, but they will use Lee to head the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department to justify the rejection of judicial, diplomatic and other appointments.

To enhance their chances of retaking the presidency in 2000, Republicans must

overcome the Democrats' advantage of "good times." All the "pocketbook" issues make Clinton look great, with Gore getting rub-off advantages. So 1998 will be full of efforts to make Americans believe that Clinton, Gore and almost everyone around them are either of tarnished character or even crooks.

Paula Jones' sexual charges against Clinton and the fund-raising charges against him and Gore will be trumpeted day and night.

On issues like healthcare — especially for children — and education, the Democrats will assail Republicans as greedy, cold-hearted people who want to spend only when it fattens their bank accounts.

There will be bruising battles over whether to spend any surplus dollars on education and day care or give a tax cut to the affluent.

It will get so nasty that the venom will overflow our borders and affect U.S. policies regarding Bosnia, Haiti, China and a lot of other places.

That means I'd better switch to the stock market, or anything besides politics, to have a real reason for saying HAPPY NEW YEAR!