

# Black Customs Service agents: African-Americans targeted

By Linn Washington Jr.  
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Although Jamaican singer Peter Jackson is a non-smoker and non-drinker, U.S. Customs agents automatically targeted him as a potential drug smuggler when he came to America last fall for a promotional tour.

White Customs agents at the Baltimore-Washington Airport subjected Jackson, 27, to a harrowing interrogation and strip search before hauling him to a hospital in handcuffs where an X-ray finally confirmed Jackson's pleas of having no drugs.

"They terrorized Peter Jackson ... treating him as you would treat an ax murderer," said attorney Marvin Ellin, who is preparing a lawsuit against the U.S. Customs Service for Jackson. "They made up their minds when he got off the plane from Jamaica that he must have drugs."

The U.S. Customs Service's practice of disproportionately targeting Blacks and other non-

Whites for drug searches at international airports is a nationwide controversy, sparking fierce criticism from U.S. Senators, a probe by the U.S. Treasury Department and numerous lawsuits.

Customs Service spokespersons deny unfairly targeting Blacks, defending intrusive searches as both legal and an unfortunate consequence of the "war on drugs."

Agents searched Peter Jackson, spokespersons say, because Customs considers Jamaica a drug source country and not because of his skin color.

However, Customs Service claims of non-discriminatory drug searches clash with disturbing evidence of racism.

"They absolutely pick out people based on race," charges attorney Ed Fox who filed a class-action lawsuit in June alleging Black women are unlawfully targeted by Customs for drug searches at Chicago's O'Hare Airport.

Customs agents found no drugs after searching the women

represented by Fox, who are predominately professionals with no criminal records.

"One of my clients is a lawyer and an actress who was returning from Germany with Germans and Asians. This Black woman gets picked out for a search," Fox noted. "What factor is unique to her except her race?"

Black women comprised 45 percent of the 104 strip searches conducted by Customs at O'Hare last year yet women accounted for only half of the 27 strip searches where Customs found drugs according to records obtained by Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill.

"Outrageous" is how Durbin described the O'Hare statistics.

Chicago businessman Eugene Morris is sure racism is why Customs agents targeted him and his wife for a humiliating drug search while returning from Montreal in May.

"My wife and I happened to be the only African-American people in the entire customs area, and out

of close to 200 people, we were the ones they stopped 'randomly' and detained for almost an hour and subjected to this meticulous search," Morris stated in a June letter to U.S. Senator Carol Moseley-Braun, D-Ill., a critic of Customs' searches.

"We are both hardworking, law-abiding citizens," continues Morris' letter. "We resent being singled out for harassment by government officials who relate African-Americans with dishonesty, criminality and drug dealing."

Customs Service spokesman Pat Jones says while many people are randomly chosen for drug searches, race is not a reason for their selection.

"Ethnicity, race and religion play no role in our determining who should be examined more thoroughly," Jones said.

Jones, calling strip-searches a "very sensitive" subject for Customs, said, "This is not something we like to do. The problem is these drug dealers who have three pounds of heroin in their

gut inside condoms."

Contradicting Jones, Black Customs Service employees say many White agents do selectively target African-Americans and other non-Whites for drug searches.

"White agents do target Black travelers more than Whites," said a Black Customs employee in Baltimore, who did not want to be named. "They tell us not to target, but it is in their minds. They feel Blacks must be doing something wrong. It is bold, blatant and wrong."

The three worst entry airports for Black travelers are Atlanta, Baltimore and Chicago, according to Black Customs employees.

In Atlanta, for example, an all-White team determines which travelers to target for drug searches. "Last year one of the few top Black Special Agents in Customs was stopped and searched here in Atlanta," said a veteran Black employee in Atlanta. "Customs has a broad search and seizure policy. They don't have to have a reason. That's why they get away with it."

## Tyson

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the statement. "Let this young man earn a living. Give him a chance to redeem himself in the ring."

In the end, the commission did just that, voting quickly after the three hours' of testimony to restore the license that was revoked after Tyson shocked the world by biting Holyfield's ears during their June 28, 1997, heavyweight title fight.

"Mike, you have made a lot of mistakes in your life," said commission chairman Dr. Elias Ghanem. "I know that sometimes you think you're a victim. But let me tell you, that most of your problems are of your own making. You and you alone have to take responsibility for your life."

Tyson, dressed in a dark sports coat and dress shirt, drew laughter from a crowd of a few hundred people at times with his statements as he pleaded to be allowed to fight again.

"You gentlemen have no idea what it's like to be myself, no idea what it's like," Tyson said. "I'm not interested in being humiliated anymore."

At only one point did Tyson appear to be losing his temper, when he was questioned by commissioner James Nave, who cast the only dissenting vote. His wife tapped him on the leg to try to keep him from talking further as he sparred verbally with Nave.

"I'm at your mercy,"

*"I know that sometimes you think you're a victim. But let me tell you, that most of your problems are of your own making. You and you alone have to take responsibility for your life."*

— Dr. Elias Ghanem, chairman Nevada Athletic Commission

Tyson told Nave. "Please don't torture me any longer, sir."

For half of the meeting, five doctors from Massachusetts General Hospital gave their evaluation of Tyson, who underwent five days of psychological testing there last month.

The lead doctor, Ronald Schouten, testified that Tyson is "a very complex individual with strengths not always apparent and weaknesses that are sometimes too apparent."

Schouten said Tyson is in need of extensive psychotherapy and needs to learn how to control his emotions and anger.

Tyson is also depressed and might have to take medication for that if the therapy doesn't work, the doctor said.

Still, Schouten said, he doesn't believe Tyson will snap again in the ring.

"The sanction of losing his license has been devastating," Schouten said. "I think that gets through and it has with Mr. Tyson. He wants his job back."

Monica Tyson described her husband as "funny, smart and kind" and said he "has the biggest heart of anyone

I've met."

Tyson's wife admitted that her husband can lose his temper and said he did just that when the two were involved in a minor traffic accident in Maryland on Aug. 31. But she said she never saw Tyson attack the two men, as they have claimed.

Tyson also answered questions about the fender-bender, which he said happened after he and his wife worked out at a local gym and were on their way to look at a motorcycle Tyson wanted to buy. "Trust me, I didn't really hit anybody," Tyson said. "If he said I did, I was unconscious and I'll say I'm sorry."

Tyson faces misdemeanor charges at a Dec. 1 trial, although Jimmerson said settlement talks are still under way.

Tyson said he met with the two men and hugged them last week and, "It's almost like we're best friends now."

"I just wanted to be the man in that spot and defend my husbandhood," he said.

Tyson said he did a lot of yelling and screaming at the people involved in the accident, but never meant to harm them.

"I curse and yell and use bad language sometimes," he said. "That's just who I am. I'm not going to kill anybody. I'm not a mass murderer. I just live my life."

Johnson, who said he has been Tyson's friend for 10 years, said the boxer needs mentors in his life, and real friends. Tyson's wife said her husband had "very few"

friends who weren't on his payroll. "I've been really trying to be his friend, and as his wife alluded to earlier, he doesn't have many of those," Johnson told the commission.

## TRANSPORTATION FAIR NOTICE Resort Corridor Environmental Impact Study

### Purpose of the Fair:

The Regional Transportation Commission will discuss the recent findings on the alternatives for the proposed Resort Corridor fixed guideway system. Four elements will be featured including: a fixed guideway system of approximately five to eighteen miles in length, expanded bus service, a transportation demand management element and a street and highway project element. Information will be provided by the RTC staff and their consultant team. Each fair will be conducted in an "open house" format.

### Study Area:

The Resort Corridor is generally described as the area bounded by Valley View Boulevard on the west, Maryland Parkway (and Eastern Avenue at some points) on the east, Washington Avenue on the north and Windmill Lane on the south.

### When and Where:

Saturday, October 24 and Sunday, October 25 at The Fashion Show Mall, 3200 Las Vegas Blvd. So., Macy's west entrance, first floor near food court; Saturday from 10am - 7pm and Sunday from Noon - 6pm.

### Where You Come In:

The transportation fairs are held to present current study findings and to accept comments from individuals, organizations and agencies. Input is especially needed from the area's residents and businesses, and from individuals who regularly travel in the Resort Corridor.

### For Additional Information:

Call the Resort Corridor EIS staff at 455-4481

A Spanish language interpreter will be on-site for each fair. A sign language interpreter can be made available by contacting 455-4481 or TDD 455-5997, no later than five days before the fair. The fair locations are serviced by CAT. Call CAT-RIDE (228-7433) for route and schedule information.



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