

Critics: NYPD desperately needs intensive reform

NEW YORK (AP) — For the mayor and police commissioner, the testimony of four officers against a fellow cop in the torture trial of a Haitian immigrant is proof that the "blue wall of silence" is a myth.

The guilty plea by Officer Justin Volpe after the officers' damning testimony was "very encouraging to the image of the police department," Mayor Rudolph Giuliani said.

Volpe, who is white, was accused of brutalizing Abner Louima with a broken broomstick in a Brooklyn stationhouse. Another officer was found guilty of holding down Louima and three other officers were acquitted.

Giuliani and Police Commissioner Howard Safir say things have changed mightily since the August 1997 attack. More minorities are now officers, they say, and more community outreach efforts are underway.

But critics argue changes are slow in coming. They say the rank and file — still more than two-thirds white in a city where almost two-thirds of the residents are minorities — remains under pressure to keep the city's crime rate low.

The dire need for reforms, they say, became evident again in February, when four white undercover officers shot and killed Amadou Diallo outside his apartment building. A fusillade of 41 bullets were fired at the unarmed Diallo, who was black, striking him 19 times. The officers are set to stand trial in January on second-degree murder charges.

"It's the same NYPD," said Karl Franklin, legal director of the New York City Police Watch, which monitors police brutality and misconduct. "Their image is tarnished beyond repair unless sweeping changes are implemented."

Michael Meyers, executive director of the New York Civil Rights Coalition, said several NYPD changes have been purely cosmetic. A civility program put in place two years ago after a rise in civilian complaints isn't working, Meyers said.

"That image of the police department as a brutal force still exists," he said.

Peter Ruane, a retired NYPD lieutenant, disagrees. Ruane wrote and produced the play "Behind the Blue Wall," in which actors — some of them police officers — grapple with whether to turn in a corrupt colleague.

"The blue wall has been coming down in the last 15 years at least," Ruane said. "The influx of women and minorities into the department has helped that. Certainly there's a few bricks laying around here and there, but it's pretty much gone."

Defense attorney Alan Abramson, who represents a witness in the Louima case, said the incident showed something else. "The blue wall made Justin Volpe feel secure enough to torment someone in a precinct bathroom and brag about it," he said.

Hubert Williams, president of the Police Foundation, a nonprofit research group, said that the Louima incident was the "most horrific kind of torture" he could recall in his 30-year career.

"This event was a policing earthquake that sent shock waves" throughout the country, said Williams, who once headed the Newark, N.J. force.

"One has to question how such an environment exists inside a precinct where officers can conduct themselves in that fashion," he said. "Who's accountable? An awful lot of people are waiting to see what

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Parks

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"She is the mother of the civil rights movement," said Rep. Julia Carson, D-Ind., who pushed for the legislation granting the Congressional Gold Medal to Parks, who now lives in Detroit.

"It is a celebration of the life of Rosa Parks, who is receiving the honor while she can still see it," Carson said of Mrs. Parks, who appeared frail and had to be helped to her feet from her wheelchair, sometimes steadying herself on the arm of House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill.

"I thank God that when your time came, you were not afraid," House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt, D-Mo., said at the Capitol Rotunda ceremony. "You had courage, and you sat down for all of America and all of America's freedom."

Congressional lawmakers gave Parks an artist's drawing of the medal, which is not yet finished.

"I thank you," she said in a low, halting voice, adding that she accepted the award for a "free people" and for civil rights.

The gratitude went both ways.

"I thank you for what you have done," Clinton told Parks.

"She sat, anchored to that seat, as Dr. King said, by the accumulated indignities of days gone by and the countless aspirations of generations yet unborn," the president said. "Rosa Parks said, 'I didn't get on that bus to get arrested; I got on that bus to go home.'"

The president said he was only 9 when Parks refused to stand up. He and his friends "couldn't figure out anything we could do since we couldn't even vote. So we began to sit on the back of the bus when we got on."

Mrs. Parks action cost her the seamstress job and prompted harassment and threats to her family. So she moved to Detroit in 1957. She joined the staff of Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich., in 1965 and worked there until retiring in 1988.

In 1987, Mrs. Parks co-founded a nonprofit group, the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-

Development, to help young people in Detroit.

A guest at Clinton's State of the Union address in January, Parks has received numerous awards, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

The legislation awarding her the Congressional Gold Medal was approved by the Senate without dissent April 19. The House voted 424-1 for it the next day. The only "no" vote was cast by Rep. Ron Paul, R-Texas, who said he opposes spending government money on such awards.

Lawmakers initially used the Congressional Gold Medal to honor military leaders but began using it during the 20th century to recognize excellence in a range of fields. More than 320 medals have been awarded. The first was given to George Washington in 1776 for "wise and spirited conduct" during the Revolutionary War.

Recent honorees include Frank Sinatra, Mother Teresa and South African President Nelson Mandela.

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