

Time for tough review of Cincinnati police force

By Marc H. Morial
Special to Sentinel-Voice

"There is too much crime and too little justice in the lives of Black Americans today. But while the problem of crime is widely shared in the United States, the problem of injustice is not."

So wrote Christopher E. Stone, director of the Vera Institute for Justice in an essay in the 1996 volume of the National Urban League's *The State of Black America*.

Stone went on to declare, "It is a paradox that Black Americans, who suffer from crime disproportionately, have mixed feelings, at best, regarding its support of and confidence in the criminal justice system as it operates today."

The national survey of African-Americans the Urban League published in its 2001 edition of the *The State of Black America* quantified that sentiment when it found

that 73 percent of those surveyed said that the police were biased against Blacks; just 15 percent said they were fair to Blacks.

That distrust has once again been on dramatic display in a controversial, high profile case during the past two weeks.

The cause this time was the caught-on-tape police beating on November 30 in Cincinnati, Ohio of Nathaniel Jones, an unarmed Black man.

Jones, 41, who weighed 342 pounds, died after a three-minute struggle with six officers — five white, one African-American — in a restaurant parking lot.

Jones' death comes two years after Cincinnati was rocked by three days of violent disturbances after a 19-year-old unarmed Black man was shot to death while running away from a white police officer. The victim,

To Be Equal

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Timothy Thomas, was the subject of 14 outstanding warrants — 12 of which were for minor traffic offenses, and two of which were for running from the police to escape arrest for those violations.

Thomas' death made him the fifteenth Black man to be killed by Cincinnati police officers under controversial circumstances in recent years, and brought to a boil the simmering distrust many Black Cincinnati's had toward the police.

Despite several substan-

tive reforms of police practices undertaken in that incident's aftermath, and city officials' efforts to redress other grievances many Black residents express, it's clear that longstanding distrust has not disappeared.

That backdrop is an additional reason why the investigation into Nathaniel Jones' death must proceed with as much public openness as possible.

A videotape of the confrontation, recorded by the camera of one of the police cruisers that responded to the scene, shows an officer stepping back from Jones and warning him to "back away," according to local news accounts.

Then, in succession, it shows Jones lunging toward the officer, and for the next several minutes officers raining repeated blows to Jones' legs and torso with their nightsticks, spraying him with a chemical irritant and wres-

ting him into handcuffs and a facedown position in the parking lot.

The cruiser's tape was rolling as it arrived at the restaurant, but then went blank for about a minute and a half before capturing six minutes of the confrontation.

Cincinnati Police Chief Thomas Streicher, Jr. said the tape went blank because the officer turned off the cruiser — thus shutting off power to the camera — but then turned the camera back on by remote control, according to a news story in the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, because "he knew he was going to make the right decisions."

The coroner for Hamilton County, whose jurisdiction includes Cincinnati, has ruled the death a homicide brought on by the stress of the struggle.

However, he said that the finding does not mean the officers used excessive force and does not imply wrongdoing.

He said drug use as well as Jones' enlarged, hypertensive heart and his obesity contributed to his death.

Cincinnati city officials said Jones, a father of two who recently lost his job as a night resident as a group home, had used cocaine, PCP and methanol within hours of his death.

The case is being investigated by several city agencies. In addition, the U.S. Department of Justice has opened a preliminary inquiry in order to determine whether a full-scale civil rights investigation is warranted.

We had urged that such federal action be taken, particularly in light of the statements Cincinnati Mayor Charlie Luken and Police Chief Steicher made immediately after the incident occurred that the videotape proved the officers were only defending themselves.

Their rush to exonerate the officers, prior to even the completion of an autopsy, made clear that an independent federal civil rights investigation was essential.

We also support the call of our local affiliate, the Urban League of Greater Cincinnati, for a re-evaluation of the training methods of Cincinnati police.

For the death of Nathaniel Jones has rekindled the belief among many African-Americans, within and outside Cincinnati, that too many police officers still consider the rights and the very lives of Black males expendable.

That belief is a terrible burden for both black America and America's supposedly fair criminal justice system as a whole.

Beating

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shot by police while fleeing arrest on a series of minor charges. The Jones case also reminds television audiences of the 1991 videotaped police beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles.

But, the Jones tape could be heard.

"All through the melee, one or more officers was screaming 'put your hands behind your back,' but how could he put his hands behind his back when officers had him down on his side, back and face while punching jabbing and beating continued until the victim died within minutes of this brutality?" asked Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth

at a press conference to protest Jones beating.

"There was not a pause at any time to see if Mr. Jones would acquiesce to the commands of the police officers."

A simple police investigation would be a mistake, the Urban League's Morial said: "To commit the investigation to the very group the community believes to be at fault will lead to a complete loss of faith in our justice system and further increase existing tensions between the police and the African-American community."

Tiana A. Rollinson writes for *The Cincinnati Herald*.

Overstreet

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CCSD property is occurring at a rate of millions of dollars a year. The last data I saw indicted the amount being stolen on an annual basis was enough to build a new elementary school every three years.

The very simple solution to the problems CCSD is facing is to elect people who know something about managing a multi-billion annual budget and hold them accountable for

hiring competent administrators and staff.

I must warn you. If the Urban Chamber, WAAK-UP and the Rainbow/PUSH interest group do not receive help for what they are trying to accomplish, then look for news coming out of CCSD to remain mostly negative. The school district needs to be held accountable for its actions. Results for a growing number of students will most likely remain the same.

Waters

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with hundreds of people, I was the only Black person. It's like that in almost any upscale venues I have visited in Brazil and in other countries.

These meetings help to provide a legitimacy for the Black leaders of these countries to raise the issue of racism and propose measures against it, a necessary act because their governments also do not see race and are often antagonistic toward anyone who brings it up.

For example, one delegate told me that a Black member of his Parliament, his driver and secretary, were killed — gunned down just outside of the building. In other

words, the decision to raise the race question in some countries can be dangerous to your health.

Even so, as we debated familiar issues such as affirmative action, the criminalization of Black people, the killing and abuse of children, the double oppression of Black women, the racial distribution of funds, lack of the return of funds to Black communities from trade deals, reparations for slavery, and other issues, I sensed that a new day had arrived. Very often I said to myself, "They get it."

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Clingman

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donations from across this country by December 31, 2003? In other words, I am asking you to do this right now; don't wait, send in your \$5 — or more — as soon as you finish reading this.

I know I sound like a Johnny-Come-Lately to all of those fine organizations and individuals who have already given so generously to Piney Woods, but I ask you to attribute my effort in organizing this campaign to the same kind of enthusiasm that caused you to want to help this school.

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So please send at least \$5 to Piney Woods School, U.S. Highway 49 South, Piney Woods, Mississippi, 39148. Also, plan to make a visit to the campus and see what I mean when I say, "It was a blessing to be there." Support Piney Woods School, as it changes America, "one student at a time."

For more information see www.pineywoods.org or call 601-845-2214.

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Curry

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equal footing with a marriage between a man and a woman. The Bible is clear on what unions the Creator has blessed and approved. And those unions do not include men marrying men or women marrying women.

This debate has political implications as well. The progressive movement in this country, which has taken a political drubbing in recent years, stands to lose more of its political clout if it continues to take up every hack-eyed cause deemed to be politically correct. I am not saying they should try to emulate the Christian Right (or more accurately, the Christian Wrong), but I am saying that moral issues

are important to many voters in this country and if Democrats in particular continue to be perceived, correctly or not, as advocates for deviant or immoral behavior, the Party is in for many more devastating defeats. This issue looms larger than progressives realize. I suspect that many people share my misgivings about supporting same-sex marriages but are reluctant to speak out for fear of being labeled politically incorrect. There's no need to be fearful when you know that you've been honest with yourself.

George E. Curry is editor-in-chief of the NNPA News Service and BlackPressUSA.com.