

## OUR VIEW

## Copping Out

Police have a tough job. Outside of militarily serving our country in Iraq, Afghanistan and other deadly hotspots around the globe, they might have the toughest job. Their task is to keep us safe—to serve and protect, as the motto goes. But there's always been a tenuous relationship between police and the African-American community.

Allegations of police brutality go back decades, possibly centuries. But it wasn't until motorist Rodney King's videotaped beating at the hands of Los Angeles police officers in 1992 that the world got to see what many Blacks, particularly men, have endured. It wasn't until the Rampart scandal exposed a culture of corruption in the LAPD—brutality, false arrests, cops planting drugs on and extorting suspects—that outsiders got a bird's eye view of how brutal and thuggish police can be.

In various cities, the creation of citizen and civilian review boards have improved police relations with Blacks—if only incrementally—and have forced departments to own up to mistakes, correct policies, revamp training and alter attitudes. Locally, the Metropolitan Police Department has a multiracial task force that advocates for basic rights, fair treatment and swift rebukes for mishaps. Having a transparent coroner's inquest process has also ameliorated some who distrust cops' ability to police themselves. Alas, with all these things in place, Blacks and other minorities are still dying at the hands of officers at a disproportionate rate. The question is why?

The fatal shooting of 17-year-old murder suspect Swuave Lopez is significant for a plethora of reasons. Lopez, as you may recall, was suspected of killing 18-year-old Kyle Staheli. After being arrested, handcuffed and placed in a car by cops, he slipped out of the vehicle and ran. Cops shot him in the back. Conflicting testimony was given by officers during Lopez's inquest: One cop says he was far away; another says he fired from point-blank range. That conflicting testimony alone raises eyebrows. But more head-scratching confusing is why Lopez was shot, in the back no less, when officers had other means of subduing him, such as the non-lethal shotguns (which fire bean bags) that are present in every cop car? For some, the cops' absolution has reinforced the notion of a stacked system, of an impenetrable Blue Wall of Silence that protects law enforcement.

It's cases like Lopez's—and that of deceased 23-year-old Sean Bell, who was leaving a Queens, N.Y., strip club the night before his wedding when officers fired 50 shots at him; and that of 16-year-old Brandon Burks of Detroit, shot in the back by an off-duty cop as he left a store; and of Kathryn Johnston, a 92-year-old Atlanta resident killed by return fire from cops who mistook her home for a drug den—chip away at law enforcement's credibility, especially when viewed against the backdrop rising rates of police brutality.

In a published report from the National Newspaper Publishers Association, Diop Kamau, a former Hawthorne, Calif., police detective and executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Police Complaint Center, said that between December 2005 and this December, police misconduct complaints from around the country increased 40 percent, from 239 to 336.

Lacy Davis, a retired East Orange, N.J., sergeant and founder and president of Black Cops Against Police Brutality, said in that NNPA story that he witnessed lots of brutality and plenty inaction by lawmakers to address it:

"When people talk about oversight and commissions and civilian review boards, all of that is reduced to nothing if there's no funding for it or investigators for it or if it doesn't have subpoena power," he told NNPA.

Incoming chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, which oversees criminal justice issues, Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich., has said he'll press for more police accountability. But Davis isn't optimistic: "Don't anticipate any of these officers to be found guilty of anything. The bad news is that these kinds of shootings are easily covered up. All these officers have to do is speak to what their state of mind was and they're going to be exonerated. And their state of mind was, 'I was scared.'" Now they know how we feel.



## Hastings' past haunted him

By Ron Walters  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

In a critical decision after her failure to elevate Rep. Jack Murtha (D-Penn.) of Pennsylvania to chair of the House Democratic Caucus, Nancy Pelosi has rejected Rep. Alcee Hastings of Florida to be the new chair of the House Intelligence Committee. This was a blow, not only to Hastings, but to the Congressional Black Caucus, which would have won a committee chair in the sensitive state of Florida. But it was also a blow to Black political participation.

My sources indicate that Pelosi had real difficulties inside the House of Representatives with the so-called "Blue Dogs" — the right wing of the Democratic Party. They objected strongly to the elevation of Hastings, arguing that in this climate where Pelosi had pledged to the American people to "drain the swamp" and set a new standard in ethics in the House, she could ill afford to approve Hastings for the job.

This was the same argument that caused so many of the House members to reject Jack Murtha and support Steny Hoyer of Maryland, who had a comparatively clean record and had campaigned for the job for at least



RON WALTERS

a decade. Nevertheless, the tragedy in this is that a good man has been bruised but, hopefully, not battered. But in politics, perception is often more salient than truth.

While Murtha had been brought up on ethics charges, Rep. Hastings was impeached by the Congress in 1988 and removed from his post as a federal judge in Florida on bribery charges. However, this was done after a federal court had cleared him and, as a consequence, he had not been convicted of anything. Indeed, Conservative Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah said in the impeachment hearing: "...this was the first instance in which the judge has first been acquitted by a jury in a trial based on essentially the same charges" — and where those who impeached him had the same set of facts.

One of the tragedies was that Black members, such as

John Conyers, led the charge in the House to proceed with the impeachment. But Hastings said that although the Democrats had control of the process in the House, it was demanded by conservatives. In a November 20 letter to his colleagues, he continued to charge that conservatives — led by Newt Gingrich, Sean Hannity and others — backed up conservatives of both parties in the House by saying that his selection would be the worst thing imaginable.

My concern is that if the Blue Dogs are that powerful, what else can they stop?

I have been asked by many people whether the Blacks who now hold powerful chairs in the House could bring up and fix things, such as the Katrina disaster.

Could they finally get some traction on poverty elimination? Could they finally bring up H.R. 40, which called for hearings on reparations, and get some action going on the condition of the Black male and etc.? I remain skeptical that any such agenda will find the light of day, largely, because Black folks have the wrong idea about power.

Every since the passage of the Voting Rights Act made possible the elevation of a generation of politicians to elected offices, we have believed that they could deliver essentially what we needed to become whole. The belief, also propagated by those same officials, was that they had the power to do so.

But if you take seriously the effective linkage between

(See Walters, Page 9)

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