
By Leonard Pitts Jr., Tribune Content Agency

We've seen this movie 100 times

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Maybe we should just skip to the end.

Is that sacrilege? Is it too cynical by half? After all, this is the part where we're supposed to be waiting for answers and pretending to believe justice might be done.

But if you've seen a movie a hundred times, it is difficult not to mouth the dialogue ahead of time. Similarly, it is pretty hard not to have a strong sense of where this latest police shooting of an unarmed black man is, barring the unexpected, likely heading.

The district attorney will decline to seek an indictment. Or the grand jury will refuse to hand one down. Or the case will go to trial and a jury will purport to sift through the evidence, and then return an acquittal.

And the family of Stephon Clark, killed in a volley of 20 gunshots by two Sacramento police officers while standing in his own backyard armed with nothing more menacing than a smartphone, will be asked to stand before a microphone, put aside their grief and betrayal and save the city's collective backside. They will face a restive crowd, every person in it thinking how easily Stephon could have been Tony, could have been Ted, could have been Tanya, could have been me, and they will plead for calm.

Maybe they'll get it and the California capital will sleep in peace. Or maybe they won't, and the city will burn.

If that's pessimistic, it is a pessimism well earned. In the movies, James Bond has a license to kill. In America, police have what amounts to the same thing.

Yes, that's a hard judgment likely to jolt and offend many observers, legions of good and conscientious cops among them. But can it really be argued? After Philando, after Tamir, after John, after Sean, after Eric, after Michael, after Darrius, after Sam, after Freddie, after Alton, after Terence, after Amadou, how can anyone really dispute the point?

It is understandable that jurors and police officials are loath to second-guess an officer who,

in less than the time it takes to blink, makes a bad decision in good faith. But once that willingness to accord the benefit of the doubt when sometimes warranted hardens into a reflexive refusal to hold accountable any officer in any circumstance ever, it becomes very hard to trust justice.

Consider that jurors in South Carolina saw video of Charleston police officer Michael Slager pumping bullets into the back of Walter Scott, who was running away, yet still could not bring themselves to convict him. Slager ended up accepting a plea deal to avoid retrial.

If you're African American, what is that supposed to make you think? You come to regard justice as a fairy tale for the very naive. You conclude that black lives actually don't matter. Not to, or in, America.

But then, Caroline Small's life didn't matter much, either, and she was white. The unarmed mother of two was executed by two officers in 2010 in a small town in Georgia. An investigation found that police tampered with the crime scene and manufactured misleading evidence, yet her killers never stood trial.

It calls to mind a truth Martin Luther King once spoke: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." So a nation that routinely excuses police killings of unarmed black people is a nation where all of us are ultimately at risk. Unfortunately, America has never quite comprehended that truth, nor really wanted to.

So the ritual of yet another black man's useless death plays itself out in speeches, promises, recriminations. And many of us just watch and wait and pretend to believe. But it gets harder every time.

We've seen this movie too often. And we know every line by heart.

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