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The Police Must Finally Step Up

Brandon del Pozo

ON Friday night, I watched television footage of police cars burning in Brooklyn and read the news that protesters tried to storm the 88th Precinct station house. An officer I knew was struck in the head with a brick and ended up in surgery. The department is now working under an emergency schedule first used during civil unrest in the fall of 1969.

I called up my friends on the force. They were shaken; they sensed a hostility that was beyond anything they had felt before. It seemed woven into the city itself. What had happened to George Floyd was a brutal crime, and the officer's action supported the murder charge, but New York police were powerless to disentangle themselves from the wider web of anger toward their profession.

This has been a long time coming, and there have been signs. At a speech to the police on Long Island in 2017, President Trump made a joke about banging an arrested person's head against a police car, and the audience of officers laughed approvingly. When he spoke at an annual conference of police chiefs in Orlando, Fla., in 2018, Mr. Trump was greeted with a standing ovation. He shut down the Justice Department's efforts to reform police departments with consent decrees.

He has supported our police openly and uncritically, but by accepting this support, police have aligned themselves with the president's flagrant racism and callous disregard for the nation's people of color. This alliance has made them a surrogate for the fury so many Americans feel toward the White House and portrays them as the president's accomplices.

Then there is the inertia. When it comes to reform, America's police leaders have long been content to kick the can down the road because making real change is so hard. In most cities, chiefs of police are hired for their ability to communicate with the public, to reassure people and to know what to say to skeptics. These are important skills, but they do not equal an ability to reach deep into an organization that has an entrenched culture and a reactionary union and bend it toward modernity.

And the odds were in their favor, so it paid for police leaders to roll the dice. If you add up all the police killings that have shocked us — even if you add up all of the police killings that happen every year — the chance that one of them will happen in any particular police department is very small. There are nearly 18,000 law enforcement agencies in the nation, with roughly 700,000 police officers, but the incidents that convulse us as a nation are a handful. Nearly all officers spend their careers without so much as firing a shot. Most chiefs are a product

of the very labor unions they need to fight and are lifelong friends with the cops they need to reform. Rolling the dice keeps a department on an even keel; reform is a constant aggravation in comparison.

A year ago, when I was a chief of police in Vermont, I sent a group of officers to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Ala. It is a testament to the nation's history of racial terror: it has hundreds of metal boxes suspended from the memorial's roof, meant

The killing of George Floyd is a collective failure of law enforcement.

to evoke the thousands of black Americans murdered by lynching as whites stood by and did nothing — or helped, including the police. I wanted to show my officers the legacy a citizen might have in mind during an encounter with them. With the recent killing of Mr. Floyd, and of Ahmaud Arbery, a shooting involving a retired police officer, it seems like the present, and not like history at all.

Many of my officers were skeptical. Some of them hated it. They thought that it was a waste of money better spent on tactical training, that it amounted to a publicity stunt to satisfy the politically

correct needs of the liberal city where Bernie Sanders lives and was once mayor. They said nobody had ever been lynched in Vermont and there hadn't been a lynching anywhere in the nation in decades. Our department hadn't killed unarmed citizens. Why was it their fault if a citizen feared the police?

Because justice is about more than actuarial probability. A series of shootings by the police have accumulated into a national nightmare. They betray a profound vacancy of values, and the profession hasn't been able to prove that they are just aberrations. Jordan Edwards, a boy of 15, was shot in the head in Balch Springs, Tex., as a passenger in a car leaving a party. Walter Scott was shot in the back as he fled a South Carolina traffic stop on foot, and the cop planted a Taser next to his dead body. Philando Castile was shot in front of his girlfriend and her young daughter in a suburb of St. Paul, Minn., as he reached for his identification after telling the officer who pulled his car over for a broken taillight that he had a licensed handgun in the car. Atiatiana Jefferson was shot to death through the window of her Fort Worth home for apparently no reason at all.

The entire profession needs to take responsibility for these acts. I always told my family that no matter where we were driving, if I ever saw an officer struggling with someone at the roadside, I would have to stop and help him. But every officer should also promise to help anyone struggling under the knee of a brutal officer.

The nation's police need to start acting and speaking in unison in ways that bring people together. They have to unite in taking responsibility for the flaws in the profession and adopt a set of standards and values that may well mean treating a colleague, rather than a suspect, as the greater threat to public safety. Especially one who puts his knee on a handcuffed man's neck until he dies.

After years of suffering under threat of violence and indignity, Americans will no longer tolerate not knowing who will be next, worrying that it could happen anywhere and thinking it will happen at the hands of officers who adore their president. This is more than about the killings. If you listen to the stories people tell, the killings are simply the worst outcomes of persistent patterns of mistreatment and bias.

America's cities are burning because the police are the mirror of our flawed nation. Their work forces everyone to see where citizens truly stand in relation to one another. It reflects our values and prejudices, our glories and sins, our successes and failures. The police are called to respond to the crises in our broken communities, but their reactions often embody the very things that broke them in the first place. Some people get so disgusted with what they see in the mirror that they decide to smash it.

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