

As Texas Officials Release Violent Arrest Video, Death of Sandra Bland Being “Treated Like a Murder Investigation”

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Waller County District Attorney Elton Mathis said Monday that the death of Sandra Bland was being “treated like a murder investigation,” amid a string of revelations casting doubt on police claims that Bland’s death was a suicide. Bland, an outspoken opponent of police violence, was found hanged in her jail cell only three days after her July 10 arrest following a supposedly routine traffic stop.

“It is very much too early to make any kind of determination that this was a suicide or a murder because the investigations are not complete,” Mathis said.

Mathis conceded that Bland had little reason to commit suicide, saying “There are too many questions that still need to be resolved. Ms. Bland’s family does make valid points that she did have a lot of things going on in her life that were good.”

The initial autopsy report determined that Bland died from asphyxiation, but her family has sought a second autopsy, contending that Bland had no reason to harm herself. Sharon Cooper, one of Bland’s sisters, declared that “Based on the Sandy I knew, this is unfathomable to me.”

Bland’s friend LaVaughn Mosley spoke with her on Friday following her arrest, and told a local news station that “Although she was incarcerated, she was in good spirits. She was looking forward to posting bond Saturday and getting out. So you don’t go from that to hanging yourself.”

On Tuesday, the Texas Department of Public Safety released dash-cam footage of the arrest of Bland. The video shows Bland being verbally harassed, threatened and physically assaulted by state trooper Brian Encinia.

Encinia pulls Bland over for failing to signal while changing lanes, and quickly initiates a confrontation with her. Encinia soon opens her door, aggressively demanding that Bland “Step out of the car,” to which she refuses, rightly asserting, “You do not have the right to do that.”

When Bland says “Don’t touch me, I’m not under arrest,” Encinia aims his Taser at her and screams, “Get out of the car! I will light you up! Get out! Now! Get out of the car!”

The dash-cam footage does not show the subsequent handcuffing and arrest, but bystander footage shows Bland pinned to the ground by another officer who is seen arriving as backup in the dash cam footage. Encinia sees the bystander filming and repeatedly tells them, “you need to leave.”

In both videos, Bland can be heard saying “You just slammed my head into the ground, do you not even care about that? I can’t even hear!”

Last Friday, the Texas Department of Public Safety said that Bland’s arrest “violated the department’s procedures regarding traffic stops and the department’s courtesy policy,” and that Encinia has been put on desk duty during the investigations.

The subsequent death of Bland remains entirely unresolved and highly suspicious. In addition to the ongoing Texas Rangers and FBI investigations, Texas Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee has called for a Justice Department civil rights investigation.

In a news conference Monday evening, the Waller County Sheriff’s Office released surveillance video from a hallway outside Bland’s jail cell. The footage spans a three-hour period before Bland’s death, although her cell and cell door are not actually seen. There is a 90-minute period of inactivity, until a deputy passes the cell and rushes to notify others.

MSNBC filmed the inside of Bland’s prison cell in a special report Tuesday. They showed the pole from which Bland supposedly hung herself, a bathroom partition less than 6 feet off the ground.

Capt. Brian Cantrell, the head of the sheriff’s department criminal investigation division, has declined to describe Bland’s death in detail, but claims that she was found with her feet touching the ground.

Cantrell also acknowledged that guards communicated with Bland via intercom in the hours immediately before her death. This was a violation of state rules regarding the monitoring of inmates, which mandate that guards address prisoners’ concerns in person.

After announcing that Bland’s death will be treated like a murder investigation, Mathis went on to slander Bland and attempted to carry out a character assassination, saying: “Sandra Bland was very combative. It was not a model traffic stop...and it was not a model person that was stopped on a traffic stop.”

He concluded these inflammatory remarks by declaring, “the public can make its own determinations as to the behaviors that are seen in the video.”

Cantrell has already drawn his own conclusions, declaring that Bland’s death “was a tragic incident, not one of criminal intent or a criminal act.”

The history of Waller County’s police, in particular that of Waller County’s sheriff, Glenn Smith, casts additional suspicion on police claims that her death was a suicide. Smith previously served as police chief of Hempstead, the county seat of Waller County. In 2007, he was suspended for two weeks and placed on probation for six months due to a racist incident in which he swore at and manhandled a black suspect during an arrest.

In 2008, Smith was fired due to further allegations of racism after he carried out multiple humiliating strip-searches of black youth. That same year, he was elected as Waller

County's sheriff. In 2012, under Smith's watch, James Howell, a white prisoner, was found hanging in a cell at the Waller County jail, another alleged suicide similar to Bland's.

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