

Shootings in Dallas: Violence, Police Authority and Black Lives Matter

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“When we include, we find ourselves.” — USC President Max Nikias, 2016 Annual State of the University Address

Dallas has been known for its notorious shootings in the past. In 1963, its claim to the books of murderous posterity was affirmed by the shooting of President John F. Kennedy. On July 7, it became even more notorious, this time for the slaying of five police officers by gun suspect Micah Johnson. Dallas bore witness to the closure of a good deal of the downtown area to Dealey Plaza, where Kennedy had been shot.

A degree of background filling is necessary for the scene. There were two recent fatal shootings that had taken place prior to these onslaught in Dallas, that of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling. Both deaths had registered emotions and stirred protests, one of which was the gathering in question in Dallas on Thursday.

Trigger happy policing has become something of a modus operandi in the frontier mentality of law enforcement. Bullets come before negotiation; arrests are inconveniences of afterthought. In 2015, 1000 people were slain in police operations, a third of them black.

In Baton Rouge, Sterling was shot in ghoulish circumstances, lying on the ground before the authorities trained their guns on him. Gov. John Bel Edwards had a rather feeble observation, thinking that the shooting should be a basis for revised law enforcement training. “That’s one way we are going to come out of this tragedy better than we were before.”[1]

Such comments make the assumption that the nasty streak in a culture can be neatly amputated. In terms of an institutional culture, police officers know how far they can go. “Use of force” complaints previously lodged against two white police officers connected with Sterling’s killing suggest a familiar pattern.

Castile was shot in Minnesota by Jeronimo Yanez. Since that shooting, attempts have been made to excuse the killing on the basis that it was not motivated by race but by “the presence of that gun and the display of that gun”. Not that it makes much of a consequential difference: one is either shot by a racially fearful police officer, or an incompetently crazed one.

The circumstances remain sketchy, and do nothing to alleviate the sense that the use of the gun remains a default position in the highly militarised police forces of the United States. According to Castile’s girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, Castile was shot several times after

explaining to the officer that he had a gun, with a legal permit, and was again shot on reaching for his wallet.[2]

A response to such killings has been the Black Lives Matter movement, one initiated in 2013 by Alicia Garza who used Facebook to say that, “Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter.”

This has been said to be, potentially, the next civil rights movement in the United States, though no revolutionary movement was ever effectively launched on a hashtag. The movement has also been seen as outside the bounds of respectability, employing “disruptive, discomfiting tactics” that upset “established black leaders”.[3]

Johnson was said initially to be one of a few enterprising snipers, and was eventually killed by an explosive robotic device after hours of negotiations proved fruitless. Johnson, it was said, was taunting and teasing his targets.

According to Dallas police chief David Brown, “The suspect said he was upset about Black Lives Matter. He said he was upset about the recent shootings, he was upset at white people.” One guiding principle captivated him. “The suspect said he wanted to kill white people especially white officers.”

Ideology and causes are often only deemed respectable if they stick to the realms of adjusted decency. If change is to be affected, neither boat nor cradle shall be rocked. Such a view fails to match the expectations of historical change.

Changes in society are affected according to several jolts, some comprising of hefty violence, some of the more reformist tendencies. The United States itself is not alien to such shocks of violence, be it the Civil War for the sanctity of the Union, the campaigns against slavery and Jim Crow, and gun culture itself. Some also come from servants disenchanted with the US project; the Dallas shooter was himself a military veteran, and one deeply affected by that experience.

A storm has been unleashed with these killings. A very polarised state is fracturing further, with remarks being made by former Representative Joe Walsh that the shootings of police officers could be laid straight at the feet President Barack Obama. This suggestion is as absurd as any other, given that Obama himself has been criticised as being all too lenient in the face of police brutality.

“Cops trying to do their job are killed in the streets,” tweeted Walsh on July 8. “Narrative turns to action. This is a dangerous time.”[4] In the social media flurry, Walsh insisted that “BLM should be categorised as a hate group.” (Do not hate those who shoot you; hate those who protest at being shot at.)

While the police have been dishing it out extensively for years to the black community, often with murderous effect, retaliation was bound to come. A movement scolded for being narky and lacking respect became a sounding board for some who felt that violence was merely logical, the last refuge for the desperate. This is hardly an excuse, but it constitutes some explanation. The motor of revenge tends to be a hungry, and not always rational one.

Walsh, in his blood curdling talk, may well have been correct about one aspect of his tirade: this was war, though the ones with the weapons for too long have been the supposed protectors of the public welfare. Fittingly, in a country where the gun is a fetishized saint,

deliverance tends to come full circle. The calculus of violence has a certain grim smoothness to it.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/07/07/485168247/at-prayer-vigil-baton-rouge-mourns-death-of-alton-sterling>

[2] <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2016/07/09/lawyer-minnesota-cop-reacted-gun-not-race/86894752/>

[3] <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/black-lives-matter-higher-learning/#!>

[4] https://twitter.com/WalshFreedom/status/751240993035386881?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw

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