



**GUARDING AGAINST THE GUARDIANS:
SEEKING SANCTUARY FROM CIVIL SERVANTS**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

The fourth police killing in four months in Inglewood brings to mind a series of sobering thoughts about the state of things concerning what is strangely, yet commonly, called “police/community relations”, but seems so often about ongoing police violence, a kind of continuous reckless and often depraved disregard for the life, rights and real concerns of the targeted communities. And, of course, this raises questions about police officers’ conception of their role and the record of their conduct in communities of color and how this recalls their image in the 60’s as an occupying army, waging wars and suppressing rather than protecting, serving and securing the peace. And I thought too, about how ever-ready, ready-made and repulsively routine the responses of the employers, handlers, investigators, evaluators and exonerators of the police, and how the larger society offers sustained support for the policies and pensions of the guardians of their property, privileged life and general interests.

And so in this context, after another unconcealable incident of police iron-fist and deadly force in the Black community and other communities of color, it goes like this. First, there is the unavoidable shock, shared grief, righteous anger and outcry against the brutal injustice of it all, and a call for accountability and justice from the family and community. Then, there comes the problematic press conferences, a media “descent” into the community, seeking persons and pockets of empathy and understanding for the hard and dangerous work officers do protecting us from the thieves, thugs and barbarians constantly “culled” from among us.

There is also the inevitable call for cool heads, calm hearts and mature minds that recognize that righteous rage must be chan-

neled into quiet negotiation, and that given the circumstance, it is better to call off the demonstrations and demands and “wisely” wait and let the system run its course. Then, comes the promise of investigations by blue-ribbon panels of multicultural members to appear post-racial or at least reduce claims of racial shielding and institutional cover-up; administrative reassignment or leaves for the involved officers with pay until resolution; drawn out investigations to demonstrate thorough study and called-for concern, and to exhaust the limited funds and initial fervor of the opposition.

There is also the watchful and worried waiting of the community with an understandable mixture of instructive memory, continuing hope and ongoing apprehension of the outcome. And finally, it comes: a “discovery” after due deliberation that in spite of how things looked in the heavy heat and deep hurt of the moment, and in spite of eye-witness verification and video evidence, prior patterns of “engagement”, histories of officer violence and a gross and growing tally of unarmed casualties, all was done according to policy, if not procedure and the officers are hereby exonerated and returned to the community to repeat the offenses.

Sometimes, however, the people win and the offending officers are sacrificed and labeled “rogue” to save the reputation of the department and to keep faith in the justice and workableness of the system. Also, sometimes, the people win civil suits for loss, damage and violations of rights. And this too becomes another recommendation for reliance on the system as it is; monetary proof it pays to remain within the proscribed path of protest, coming to one’s socially-accepted senses and committing to a winning strategy of compromise and concession.

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But four fatal shootings in four months can and should shake faith in the system as it is or at least raise questions in a minimally active mind about its nature, structure and functioning. The most recent victim, Eddie F. Franco, 50, Latino, August 31, a homeless man, did not deserve such a needless and savagely executed death in a hail of 47 rounds by seven officers. Nor did the other three victims deserve the unnecessary and avoidable deaths: Kevin Wicks, 38, African American, July 21; Ruben W. Ortega, 23, African American, July 1; and Michael Byoune, 19, African American, May 11. Three were unarmed. Mr. Wicks reportedly came to the door armed to defend against what was considered a break-in which turned out to be a “mistaken” police response to the wrong house.

The regularity of these killings in our community and our seemingly inability to do anything effective or lasting about them can over a period of time, dispirit, dull and defeat us. Moreover, to misread the real roots and widespread character of the concepts, attitudes, policies and procedures which undergird and inform police practice can lead to a communal sense of impotence, fatalistic assumptions about the power and permanence of the system as it is, and the emergence of groups and conversations organized around indicting the community as complicit in its own abuse by the police.

But if we want to break this cycle of police killing, constant grieving and an increasing sense of inevitability and impotence in the face of officially-sanctioned deadly force, then, we must as Malcolm reminds us, think clearly, critically and with a

deep and defiant commitment to self-determination. The death of each of the men and those in every city must be understood in the context of a country which is profoundly racist in spite of its self-medication on post-racial myths. The nation-wide killing with savage and excessive force against persons of color, especially Black men, is not simply the result of rogue cops who come to the community to brutalize and kill. Nor is it simply a problem of a “contagious fire” mentality that makes several policemen fire 47 or more bullets at a Black target after they hear or see a fellow officer fire. After all, even if there is “contagious” fire in the communities of color, it is clearly “quarantined” in White ones.

It is the result of a system that sanctions and supports it and must be changed. For when the police officers shoot, they sense they not only have the socially-sanctioned right, but also the responsibility to suppress and terminate these “menaces” to society. It is, then, our responsibility to resist this thinking and the practice it produces. This requires relentless self-sacrificing and sustained struggle, activist unity, political education, mobilization, organization, system confrontation and an effective civilian review board. The restraint and reorientation of the police must be achieved in struggle on several levels, including evaluation, training, investigation and punishment. But in the end it’s on us to confront the system concerning every violation of our rights to be secure from official violence and not have to seek sanctuary away from armed and hostile civil servants whose salaries we pay and whose pensions we ensure.

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