

“They Scare Me”

From Slavery to Reconstruction to Jim Crow to Today:

Terrorizing Policing in Black America

by Teresa Ann Willis, August 2017

NOTE: The word “slave” appears in quotes throughout this document since it is a term that describes a condition, not a person. When discussing this period in American history, the terms “enslaved people,” or “enslaved Africans” are preferred over “slaves” just as “enslaver” is preferred over “master.”

He and I reached the top of the escalator almost simultaneously and we both saw the same thing: two white police officers standing about thirty feet apart and an African American teenaged boy. One officer had the teen handcuffed. The other was positioned near windows overlooking the street in the Gun Hill Road subway station in the Bronx, New York.

The officer and the handcuffed teen stood with their backs facing me and the eleven-year-old Black boy (whose age I’d later come to know) as we made our way to the subway platform to catch a Manhattan-bound number two train.

“Hello,” the boy said, directing his words to the officers— making sure to look in their direction. No response.

Again, a deliberate “Hello” with equally deliberate eye contact.

Again, no response.

The five of us were the only people in the station so his words, which carried a buoyant yet slightly desperate undertone, flowed unimpeded through the early morning quiet.

I had slowed my roll as I usually do when I come upon the police and Black boys. Black men. Brown boys. Brown men. To observe. To bear witness. To make sure... (Rarely in New York City have I come upon street level detentions of the police and white boys. White men.)

It didn’t appear as if anything nefarious was about to happen, so I continued up the second bank of

steps and caught up to the young brotha. I was struck by his insistence on speaking to the cops— on getting them to see him.

“Why did you keep saying hello to those officers,” I asked.

“Because they scare me.”

Slavery

The history of policing in Black (and Brown) America *is* a history of terror. The history of American policing overall is like a tale of two cities with one reality for Whites and a totally different reality for Blacks.

According to Gaines, Kappeler, and Vaughn (as cited in Potter, 2013), early policing in America manifested as a watch system comprising community volunteers meant to warn of impending danger alongside a system of for-hire constables tasked with actual law enforcement. These systems were predominant during the 1700s in America’s northern colonies. According to Gaines (1999) some who volunteered were actually performing what today would be called community service in response to their having violated community norms. Others were attempting to evade military service, and they were often drunk. The paid constables, in addition to law enforcement, performed additional duties including land surveying and overseeing the night watch crew (Gaines 1999).

In the southern colonies, though, “slave” patrollers were responsible for law enforcement. They were hired to scare, to intimidate, to terrorize into submission, to patrol and to control enslaved Africans. “Slave” patrols functioned to enforce and maintain the system of slavery in America (Turner, Giacomassi and Vandiver, 2006). They enforced the “Black Codes” also known as “Slave Codes” enacted to control enslaved people and protect the interests of their enslavers.

Hadden as cited in (Turner, Giacopassi and Vandiver, 2006) dates the inception of “slave” patrols to 1704 in South Carolina when white males were conscripted into the militia to fight a feared Spanish invasion. This left numerous enslaver families vulnerable to attack and insurrection by those they’d enslaved. Thus, South Carolinians determined they needed a second militia.

Free men and sometimes women, generally from lower classes, but also men from the upper classes seeking to evade military service, made up the “slave” patrols (Hadden, 2001). Indeed, in the states where slavery was practiced, *all* able-bodied men were required to serve as patrollers, and fines were imposed on those who did not (Hadden, 2001).

These patrollers had the authority to enter the homes of Blacks or Whites suspected of harboring enslaved people who were in any way violating the laws of the days (Hadden, 2001). Those violations included work stoppages, breaking agricultural tools, arson and of course, running away — all forms of resistance employed by people who were held against their will and forced to labor without compensation (Dulaney, 2015).

The illustration below appeared in an 1857 abolitionist handbook, “The Suppressed Book About Slavery,” where the authors wrote about the use of bloodhounds to hunt down Africans



running away from bondage, oppression, brutality and exploitation. The two patrollers in the foreground have their guns drawn on the man and his family as others, mounted on horseback, watch from a distance.

In 1838, the city of Boston established the first formal police department followed by New York City in 1845, Chicago in 1851, New Orleans and Cincinnati in 1853 and Philadelphia in 1855 (Gaines, 1999). According to Potter (2013), the formation of America's police force was less about policing crimes of violence, as we imagine today, and more a form of social control. It began as a system to ensure a stable and orderly workforce for the corporate elite. Law enforcement officers provided consistently orderly environments through which corporations could conduct business while transferring the cost of protection from themselves to the state (Potter, 2013). Law enforcement agents also continued to function as terrorizing agents on plantations.

Reconstruction

When slavery ended, formerly enslaved people across the United States gained legal rights as codified in the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments— also known as the Reconstruction Amendments. But getting law enforcement to uphold and protect those rights proved to be a daunting task. The thirteenth amendment (adopted in 1865) outlawed slavery or involuntary servitude except as punishment for a crime. The fourteenth amendment (1868) guaranteed citizenship rights to all persons born in the United States, regardless of race. It also guaranteed due process of law and equal protection under the law. The fifteenth amendment (1870) secured the franchise for Black men by eliminating race, color or previous condition of servitude as disqualifiers.

Two terrorizing organizations, the White League and the Ku Klux Klan, emerged to counteract newly won freedoms of formerly enslaved Americans. These groups often acted with impunity from law enforcement. The White League, a paramilitary organization working alongside the Democratic Party in the south kept Blacks from voting or coerced them into voting Democratic. Linden (1998) as cited in Facing History contends the White League meted out violence against

Black and white Republicans alike and railed against the “Africanization” of America and for the reestablishment of a “white man’s government in the city and the State.” (p. 205) The Klan, also known as night riders, rose during Reconstruction, died out by its end and subsequently rose and fell several times. At its peak in 1925, the KKK claimed some five million members (Ku Klux Klan, 2011).



The Harper’s Weekly cartoon (right), published in October 1874, depicts the White League and the Ku Klux Klan working to turn back the clock on Black citizenship rights. The words, “the union as it was,” state, unequivocally, the wishes of those participating in both terror groups — a return to white supremacist rule and domination. In this cartoon, the publishers sought to denounce these organizations and their supporters, depicting their ideology and

terrorist practices as “worse than slavery.”

Jim Crow

Though the Reconstruction Amendments stand until today, post Reconstruction segregation and Jim Crow laws severely restricted the rights and freedoms of African Americans. As reported by Douglas Blackmon in his book, *Slavery by Another Name*, police officers, sheriffs and constables arrested and jailed African Americans on trumped-up charges including

loitering and vagrancy violations then leased them out to corporations and plantation owners to labor without pay. This profit-making system, known as convict leasing, was run by law enforcement personnel and endured in the American south until the 1940s (Dulaney, 2011).

Juvenile convicts at work in the fields in a Southern chain gang. Southern jails made money leasing convicts for forced labor in the Jim Crow South. In addition to being an extremely cheap form of labor, convict leasing functioned to keep Blacks subservient. Circa. 1903 Contributor: Everett Collection Inc



Throughout America’s history, the belief in white supremacy coupled with its institutionalization in all public social and economic systems resulted in a police force poised to uphold it. Writing in 2015, Dulaney notes: “In addition to enforcing a race-based criminal justice system, the police also enforced segregation laws with impunity. Moreover, the police undertook this task with such zeal in both the North and the South that African Americans always knew that they could expect little sympathy or support from police officers. Instead, they expected the police to be brutal. They expected the police to be disinterested in crimes in which they were victims. They expected the police to be disrespectful. They also expected the police to be what they were: the powerful symbols of white supremacy and oppression.”

In the photo below, smiling Chicago police officers remove the body of Black Panther Party Leader, Rainbow Coalition unifier and husband, Fred Hampton after he'd been murdered in his sleep in a pre-dawn raid.

On December 4, 1969, Chicago police raided Black Panther Party headquarters, fired



nearly 100 shots, murdered chapter leaders Hampton and Mark Clarke and wounded several others (Taylor, 2016). Just shy of 10 years later in a civil trial, a Federal Appeals Court concluded there was serious evidence leading to the conclusion of a conspiracy between the FBI, the

State's Attorney General and the Chicago police in planning and executing the raid specifically to subvert and eliminate the Black Panther Party and its members. The court also found evidence of a cover-up, harassment of the raid's survivors and actions meant to prohibit survivors from seeking redress for the murders and the cover-up (Taylor, 2016).

Between 1968 and 1971, more than 20 Panthers were killed by law enforcement personnel, and more than 1,000 were arrested and jailed.

But not only were self-help self-defense organizations like the Panthers targeted by Federal, state and local law enforcement agencies, Blacks organizing for voting rights were also targets.

Civil rights worker, Monroe Sharp was among 111 people arrested on Freedom Day, July 16, 1964 for handing out leaflets urging residents to vote. Writing about that day, organizer Wallace Roberts recalls amassing with protesters at the Cleveland, Mississippi courthouse and being surrounded by a phalanx of white men in khaki pants and white helmets. “They just watched. They were there to intimidate us. It was a way to instill fear,” Roberts said. (Berry, 2014)



Today

Today, in 2017, many in Black communities live under a cloud of fear when encountering the police. The names of Black women and girls killed by police, Alberta Spruill, Rekia Boyd, Shantel Davis, Shelley Frey, Kayla Moore, Kyam Livingston, Miriam Carey, Michelle Cusseaux and Tanisha Anderson are far less familiar but no less haunting than the names of Black men and boys killed by police: Michael Brown, Trayvon, Martin, Philando Castile, Eric Garner, Akai Gurley, Tony Robinson, Walter Scott, Richard Chamberlain, Sr., and Freddie Gray.

The 2015 photo (left) captures, Cpl. Eric Casebolt, using excessive force to detain 15-year-old Dajerria Becton who was attending a neighborhood pool party.



Photo by Brandon E

At one point, Casebolt drew his gun on unarmed teenagers who'd moved in to help Becton. His actions, though praised by white community residents, were condemned even by some in law enforcement. McKinney Texas police chief, Greg Conley, called Casebolt's actions indefensible, and Casebolt later resigned.

Brandon Brooks, the 15-year-old who videotaped the encounter was one of a few white teens attending the party. He was free to videotape because, as he told a Washington Post reporter, everyone who was ordered on the ground was Black, Mexican or Arabic. Brooks said Casebolt never looked at him adding, "It was kinda like I was invisible." (Holley, 2015).

Hall, Hall and Perry (2016), in their article titled Black and Blue: Exploring Racial Bias and Law Enforcement in the Killings of Unarmed Black Male Civilians, detail the white supremacist attitudes and biases, implicit and explicit, that result in police abuses in Black communities. They cite common stereotypes including notions of Black people as both sub- and super-human; black boys and girls as adult-like and older than they really are; and Black people as violent criminals (Hall, 2016).

These stereotypes and ones like them trace their origins to slavery. Today's extrajudicial killings are rooted in Reconstruction. Modern day patrollers routinely profile, criminalize and

hunt down Black people they view as violent thugs— Black people they say they fear. George Zimmerman, though not a police officer, was on “slave” patrol in February 2012 when he surveilled, questioned and, subsequently, shot and killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin.

In 1968, the findings of the now famous Kerner Commission Report on the causes for rebellion and civil unrest in Black communities in the ‘60s, though illuminating to some, were well known in Black America:

White racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mixture which has been accumulating in our cities since the end of World War II. ... To some Negroes police have come to symbolize white power, white racism and white repression. And the fact is that many police do reflect and express these white attitudes. (p. 19-25)

Today, cell phone footage of police brutality and extrajudicial killings obviate the need for an official study of policing in African American communities. The Movement for Black Lives, a collective of more than 50 organizations representing thousands of Black people has demanded an end to the centuries-old criminalization, incarceration, and killing of Black people. Their 10-point platform (2016) lists demands for reparations and calls for an end to the criminalization and dehumanization of Black youth; an end to mandatory fines, fees, court surcharges and defendant funded court proceedings; an end to the mass surveillance of Black communities; an immediate end to the privatization of police, prisons, jails, probation, parole, food, phone and all other criminal justice related services; and the demilitarization of law enforcement including law enforcement in schools and on college campuses.

Sadly, the work of coalitions like the Movement for Black Lives and the mass resistance and revolutionary fervor evidenced in the photo to the right cannot negate the all-too-real question underneath the maneuvers of an 11-year-old boy: *Am I next?*



Source Unknown

Please record your answers to the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

- Record one lingering question you have after reading the paper.
- What new information have you learned about the history of policing in America?
- Have your thoughts about policing changed after learning about the history of policing? How?

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