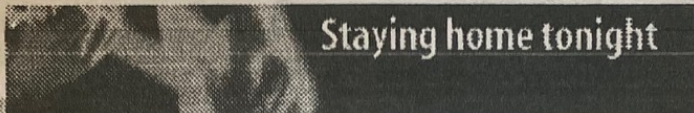


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Nelson E. Linder

Countering fatal effects of institutional racism

NAACP
Thursday, July 31, 2003

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I easily could begin this piece with "here we go again," the famous words used by former President Ronald Reagan when berating a political opponent. In this case, those words are deadly serious.

In the past 14 months in Austin, three African Americans have been killed by law enforcement personnel. In each case, the similarities are analogous and deadly. In each case, the African American community has been told that three Anglo law enforcement officials -- John Coffey, Scott Glasgow and Gregory Truitt -- felt their lives or the lives of other people were threatened. As a result of their decisions, Sophia King, Jessie Lee Owens and Lennon Johnson are dead. The constant in all three incidents is the ethnicity of the deceased and of the law enforcement personnel. The officers are white, and the victims are black.

City officials are quick to point out that if an officer's life or the public is threatened, deadly force is an option. What they never address or explain is that there are cases all over Austin involving white perpetrators and white law enforcement officials in which deadly force is not employed. The city's silence on this issue is conspicuous. Officials know that this policy is obviously discretionary, except when African Americans are involved.

African American law enforcement officials are not employing deadly force against white or black offenders. This is a reality no one can ignore. The rights of victims do not dissipate because of criminal activity, nor does this society have the right to choose who lives or dies.

It's clear that before we can curtail this problem, as a society, we must fully understand its origins and nature. Wole Soyinka, the first African to receive a Nobel Prize in Literature, had this observation: "In an endemically racist society, the criminality of law enforcers is underpinned by a code of race solidarity among the supposed protectors of society and upholders of it laws, fostering a culture of impunity that covers their conduct toward those they believe to be either inferior or, worse still, appear to be against their natural social status. It's unfortunate that the United States society, in main, still fails to relate such conduct against African Americans to a historic lynch culture. The demise of the once-popular lynch party may mean that it has been driven underground, where it is channeled into new undertows of surrogate gratification."

It's important to remember that Johnson and Owens did not have weapons. Had they utilized weapons, the officers involved would have probably sustained serious injury. King is alleged to have held a knife, but accounts of the incident vary.

To eradicate this problem, we must focus our energy toward the institutions that allow this behavior to continue. We have the means and methods economically, politically and socially to halt this social contagion. We welcome the community's participation in this struggle.

Linder is president of the Austin branch of the NAACP.



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