

Black **H**istory **M**onth

BY JEWELLE TAYLOR GIBBS PH.D.

As we enter the 21st century, despite more than 50 years of economic and social progress, civil rights legislation and Supreme Court decisions to guarantee equal protection of the laws to African-Americans and other minority groups, the criminal justice system in the United States still reflects systematic biases and persistent inequities in its treatment of people of color, as well as deeply rooted resistance to meaningful institutional reform.

As the nation celebrates the first Black History month of the New Millennium, it also confronts two of the worse police scandals in recent history: excessive force or brutality toward two black immigrants in New York City and a widening scandal of police misconduct in Los Angeles. Within the last year white police officers in New York have been defendants in two trials accusing them of brutality in sexually assaulting Abner Louima, a Haitian immigrant, and of wrongfully killing Amadou Diallo, an immigrant from Guinea. In the current investigation of police misconduct in Los Angeles, District Attorney Gil Garcetti had thrown out over 40 wrongful convictions by mid-February and his office is expected to investigate over 3,000 cases, involving 70 or more police officers, to determine if there is widespread evidence of wrongful arrests, deliberate planting of evidence, coerced testimony, or other forms of unlawful police behavior.

These police scandals in New York and Los Angeles are only the latest incidents of pervasive and persistent police misconduct and abuse that have characterized many urban and rural police departments for decades. In the research for my book *Race and Justice: Rodney King and O.J. Simpson in a House Divided* (1966), I interviewed 144 young people, ages 15-30, and 67 African American, Latino, Asian and white community leaders serving the South Central area of Los Angeles, and found nearly unanimous agreement that the Los Angeles police officers frequently used excessive force, intimidated witnesses, manufactured false evidence and harassed minority youth in their community with threats of arrest and derogatory

racial epithets.

Unfortunately, these shocking incidents of misconduct and brutality are not new in the annals of the Los Angeles Police Department, which has a shameful history of seven decades of violating the civil rights of people of color, dating back to the "dragnet" tactics of Chief James Davis from 1933-1938.

Police Abuse and Misconduct

In 1991, when the nation's senses and sensibilities were shocked by viewing the videotape of the police beating of Rodney King, many white Americans believed that this brutality was an aberration, not typical police behavior, while most African Americans felt vindicated in their knowledge that this was standard operating procedure not only in the Los Angeles Police Department, but in police departments throughout the nation. In fact, after more than three months of public hearings and an extensive investigation of L.A.P.D., the report of the Christopher Commission (1991) characterized the Los Angeles Police Department as steeped in a "culture of violence." The report documented a pattern of police misconduct, harassment, and brutality that was extensive and pervasive, permeating all levels of the department. The Christopher Commission's findings reaffirmed the critical conclusions of the earlier McCone Commission report after the Watts Riot in 1965. After 26 years, the LAPD was still uncontrollable and unaccountable.

However, the Los Angeles Police Department does not stand alone in its culture of violence against minorities, for this is a pervasive and systemic pattern in police organizations, both urban and rural, throughout the United States. Since the early 1990's there have been major police scandals in Philadelphia, where six officers were convicted of

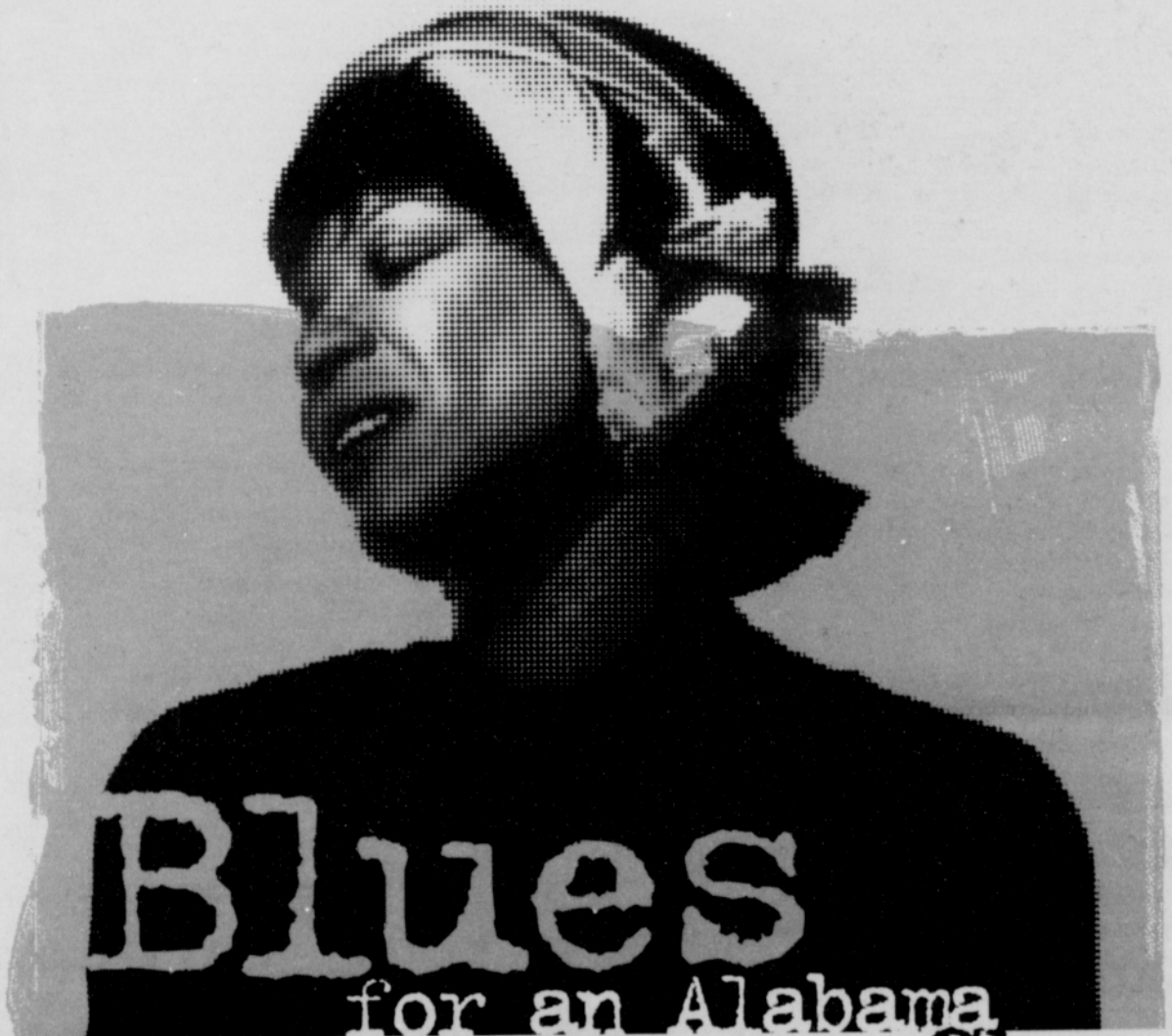
Race and Justice:

planting false evidence and conspiring to deprive blacks of their civil rights in numerous cases; in New York, where the Mollen Commission identified extensive corruption and misconduct against minorities in at least three precinct

stations; in New Orleans, where police officers have been so routinely involved in criminal activities and abusive treatment of minorities and the poor that *The New York Times* has called it "one of the worst police forces in the

nation."

"Racial profiling," the practice of police stopping, arresting or harassing minority males while driving, has been highlighted in recent media accounts of high-profile cases. Frequently these



by Pearl Cleage

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