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OPINION

Tragedy of Mixing Guns and Racism

Needless confrontations destroy all trust

BY ROBERT C. KOEHLER

In Illinois, as in all the rest of the states, it's legal to carry a concealed handgun, unless you're at a ballgame or in the library or a number of other designated public places. But one of those places is not the corner of 71st Street and Jeffery Boulevard, in Chicago's South Shore neighborhood.

You mix guns with racism, and stir in some law and order, and it gets very confusing.

The one thing that's not confusing is that Harith Augustus, a 37-year-old barber, father of a little girl, who lived and worked within a few blocks of that corner, is dead, shot by a police officer in the midst of a needless confrontation — and in utter violation of the Chicago Police Department's own alleged policy: to respect the "sanctity of human life."

Police shoot another black man, spark community rage, further destroy all trust and continue to behave not as protectors but as an occupying army. God bless America.

What happened was that Augustus was standing at the corner, minding his own business, on Saturday afternoon, July 14, when officers confronted him and a scuffle ensued. A department spokesper-

son later cited the official reason for the confrontation: Augustus was "exhibiting characteristics of an armed person."

Uh, he was standing there, being part of the community.

Yes, there was a bulge at his waistline, indicating the possibility that he was carrying a gun. But this is where it gets confusing. This is Illinois, a concealed-carry state. Why did that fact alone set a police confrontation in motion?



The U.S. legal system has always been at least partially in the control of racists, who are incapable of defining order as anything but us vs. them.

And yes, it turns out he was armed. It also turns out the gun was legally purchased. But apparently Augustus lacked a concealed-carry permit, which of course the police had no way of knowing in the moment.

I am not defending the fact that he was carrying a handgun, or suggesting that someone "exhibiting characteristics of an armed person" might not seem to be a threat to public safety. Certainly I am not defending the omnipresence and easy availability of guns in American culture, the lack of legal controls over their possession or the

unshakeable belief among many Americans that guns are necessary for self-protection. I'm just stuck on the obvious racism of the matter: Harith Augustus committed the offense of carrying a gun while black, and that reason alone is why the police confronted them.

And he received the death sentence. As he struggled with the officers and tried — unwisely — to flee, he was shot multiple times.

As Mary Mitchell wrote the next day in the Chicago Sun-Times: "... this shooting once again raises questions about how

Why do they act as though their mission is to intimidate rather than to serve and protect? Why are there so many police shootings of black men, women and children?

The answer is obvious. This is the way it has always been in the United States of America. Officer Friendly's clientele are white people. People of color ... well, initially, of course, they were slaves or "savages." This hideous stigma never quite went away. The U.S. legal system has always been at least partially in the control of racists, who are incapable of defining

showed a lack of respect for black lives, particularly when choosing whether or not to use force."

As a result of the task force findings, and the eventual involvement of the U.S. Department of Justice, the Chicago Police Department announced that it would update its "use of force" policy so that didn't disregard the "sanctity of life."

How nice. And how meaningless. The police video of the Harith Augustus shooting shows lots of authoritative contempt and fear present during in the encounter — lots of business as usual — but no evidence of anything resembling respect for Augustus's life. Apparently this is not something that can be instituted by bureaucratic decree.

In the wake of the tragedy, Chicago Police Chief Eddie Johnson defended his officers, noting: "These things happen at a split second and officers have to make decisions quickly. They don't have the luxury of looking at video later."

I have no doubt that this is true, and do not blame the officers for their action. I blame a closed-in, us-vs.-them job description. They came into South Shore much the same way U.S. troops enter Iraq: armed and fearful, not part of the community but "in control" of it.

When you mix guns and racism, tragedy is inevitable. Public safety begins only when you're free of both.

Robert Koehler, syndicated by PeaceVoice, is a Chicago award-winning journalist and editor.

Why I Got Arrested (and You Should, Too)

Standing up for democracy

BY SAURAV SARKAR

In his famous essay "On Civil Disobedience," Henry David Thoreau explained why he went to jail in 1846. He said he re-

fused to pay taxes to a government that was pursuing the extension of slavery. To support such a government, Thoreau argued, was to be complicit in its worst deeds.

With this essay, Thoreau helped inspire the modern tradition of civil disobedience, his footsteps followed by Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and many others.

This summer, I joined that tradition by getting arrested for



demonstrating without a permit at the United States Capitol — along with about 100 others from the Poor People's Campaign, including Reverend William J. Barber II. The arrests were part of a larger wave of nonviolent civil disobedience over six weeks that resulted in about 2,500 arrests of clergy, activists, and poor people across 40 states and Washington, DC.

As we marched up to the Capitol to face a line of police officers, we chanted and sang songs about our intentions: "Everybody's got a right to live." "I went down to the Capitol and took back my dignity." "Before this campaign fails, we'll all go down to jail."

The chants and songs helped

us stay connected and calm in an anxiety-inducing situation. I met marchers from Maine and Washington State as we shared cigarettes and stories of our backgrounds amid the mild tension.

The campaign's goal is to draw attention to the voices and situations of the 140 million poor and low-income people who make up 43 percent of the U.S. population. Almost half us! We're hoping that the arrests and other actions will help begin a mass movement.

The truth is, our political, economic, and social systems are broken — and most Americans know it.

Three individual people have as much wealth as the bottom half of the country, and most of the latter can't withstand a \$400 emergency without going under. The police are

shooting black people like Antwon Rose with abandon, and getting away with it. The president is hell-bent on incarcerating families in camps at the border, including young children, and the U.S. is sleepwalking through wars in at least seven mostly Muslim countries.

Oh, and climate change is about to literally destroy human civilization.

Without intervention from the American people, our government is going to drive us off a cliff. And so people are taking action.

Of course, getting arrested isn't right or safe for everyone. But you don't have to get arrested to make change. All over, people are taking action in other creative ways.

For example, members of the Democratic Socialists of America publicly shamed Homeland Secu-

rity Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen in Washington, DC while she was eating at a Mexican restaurant. The Red Hen, a Virginia restaurant, refused to serve White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders. Both of these tactics generated widespread discussion, all without a single person getting arrested.

Whatever it is, we've all got to do something, or else we're going to be in a lot more trouble than a \$50 fine and an arrest record (which is what I got).

So what are you waiting for? Check out poorpeoplescampaign.org and take action.

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