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Opinion

Waiting While Black in Philadelphia Can Get You Arrested

Late last week, two Black men in Philadelphia were doing what people do every day in this city — they waited in a coffee shop to meet an associate. While they were engaged in this mundane activity, they were removed from the Starbucks cafe at 18th and Spruce Streets in handcuffs by Philadelphia police officers.

This is another example of the kind of daily indignities that African-Americans face every day in Philadelphia and around the country. We can't even wait in a coffee shop for a friend without the possibility that someone will call the police. Two days after the news broke of the incident, I'm angrier now than I was when I first heard about it.

The neighborhood where this incident occurred is known as Rittenhouse Square. For those not familiar with Philadelphia, it's a tony neighborhood of beautiful townhouses and high-end apartment buildings.

It's also the neighborhood with the highest rates of racial disparities in stops and frisks by police in all of Philadelphia. In 2010, the ACLU of Pennsylvania sued the city because the Philadelphia Police Department's use of stop-and-frisk was discriminatory. Our data showed that



Reggie Shuford

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African-Americans were far more likely to be stopped and frisked than their white counterparts. Making matters worse, those stops were often without any justifiable cause.

A year later, the city agreed to a consent decree to settle the case. That agreement requires the city to collect data on the PPD's use of stop-and-frisk — including the demographic information of people who are stopped and the reasons why they were stopped — as well as to train officers to eliminate bias-based policing.

The police service area where the Starbucks is located has a Black population of just 3 percent. But 67 percent of the stops that occurred there in the first half of 2017 were of African-Americans. The two other police service areas in this district — known as District 9 — show similar lopsided disparities. In one of the bordering police service areas, a whopping 84 percent of pedestrians stopped were African-Americans in a neighborhood with a Black

population of 16 percent.

Seven years after the city agreed to do better, we still see consistent racial disparities in stops and frisks. Yet, in a video statement in response to the incident, Philadelphia Police Commissioner Richard Ross had the nerve to say that his officers "did absolutely nothing wrong."

“Black people, men in particular, are not allowed the full range of emotional expression in public spaces

His statement, the data the city has collected on stops, and this incident all lead me to wonder if Ross and his department leaders in this district and this police service area, Capt. Danielle Vales and Lt. Jeffrey Rabinovitch, are serious about ending racial profiling in this neighborhood and throughout the city.

There was no need for a Starbucks employee to call 911 because two men were waiting for an associate in their store. And even after the police were called, the police

did not have to end the situation by arresting these men. If Commissioner Ross is right that these officers followed policy, then the policy needs to change. Starbucks may be able to decide who sits in its store, but only the police could decide to arrest these men.

Racial bias and discrimination are so steeped in American culture that those of us who experience it on a regular basis have learned to live as second-class citizens in the country of our birth. Many folks have expressed pride or relief because the two men remained calm. I get that. I am glad, too. We have seen far too many incidents that have quickly spiraled out of control.

But there is an ugly side to that as well. Black people, men in particular, are not allowed the full range of emotional expression in public spaces. Even when an emotion other than being calm is warranted, we have been taught and have learned to police our emotions. No matter how badly we are being treated or how much our dignity is being assailed, we have to be the ones maintaining control and being responsible for de-escalating these situations.

Read the rest of this commentary at
TheSkanner.com

No Need to Look Farr for Racism in Trump Court Nominees

Our decision to protest President Trump's visit to the opening of the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum wasn't simply about the insult of his presence to the legacy of civil rights, it was also about his ongoing war to recreate the barriers and protections so many gave their lives to tear down.

We began to understand the challenges that the civil rights community would face under the Trump Administration after he nominated U.S. Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.) to head the Department of Justice. Within a few weeks of becoming attorney general, Sessions would engage in a strategic undermining of civil rights laws and enforcement, including backing away from the enforcement of consent decrees as a verifiable means to reign in police brutality and renege on its previous support in key legal battles against racially-targeted voter suppression in Texas.

Through his refusal to condemn white supremacy and his policies to dilute the voting strength and political power of the poor, the middle class and communities of color, Trump has frightened civil rights communities in ways they have not felt in a long time. It is with this same fear and dread that we look upon his current nominations to



Derrick Johnson

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the federal courts.

To our dismay, Thomas Farr, a nominee with ties to segregation and voter suppression, eased his way through the Senate Judiciary Committee on a vote along party lines

“...the campaign mailed 125,000 postcards, mostly to black voters, suggesting they were ineligible to vote

and now stands a Senate vote away from a lifetime judicial appointment to the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of North Carolina.

Despite the Eastern District being composed of numerous counties located in what many consider North Carolina's "Black Belt," this federal court has never once had a black judge. President Obama

twice tried to desegregate the court by nominating two African American women with stellar credentials, but they were not confirmed due in part to the state's Republican U.S. senators, Thom Tillis and Richard Burr, both of whom backed Farr's nomination.

In a September letter to the Senate Judiciary Committee, Rev. William Barber II, then NAACP's North Carolina State Conference president, said: "The North Carolina NAACP takes serious exception to this nomination and to the efforts by Senators Tillis and Burr to advance the nomination of an individual who has repeatedly demonstrated open hostility to the protection of the constitutional and civil rights of African Americans, Latinos and the poor in this state."

Rev. Barber's letter failed to derail Farr, whose long career has continually found him on the opposite side of the civil rights community. In 1984 and 1990, Farr served as the legal counsel for the U.S. Senate campaigns of Republican Jesse Helms, a staunch segregationist. They ran notorious political campaigns that sought to suppress black political participation. The Justice Department under President George H.W. Bush filed voting-rights charges when the campaign mailed

125,000 postcards, mostly to black voters, suggesting they were ineligible to vote and threatening jail time.

Farr also played a key role in developing and defending what the North Carolina NAACP called a "monster" voter suppression law. According to the federal appellate court which blocked the law after the NAACP challenged it in court, the law had targeted "African Americans with almost surgical precision," and was "the most restrictive voting law North Carolina has seen since the era of Jim Crow."

We are not alone in our condemnation of Farr, whom the Congressional Black Caucus places "at the forefront of an extended fight to disenfranchise African American voters in North Carolina."

In 1930, the NAACP opposed the U.S. Supreme Court nomination of John J. Parker, a federal appellate judge from North Carolina, and won. Parker believed black people had no role in our democratic process. NAACP leader Walter White testified against Parker at his hearing, and the organization mobilized its branches and members to urge Senators to vote against the nominee.

Read the rest of this commentary at
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