

Black and Blue

Why does America's richest black suburb have some of the country's most brutal cops?

BY TA-NEHISI COATES

NONE HAD TO WARN PRINCE JONES about the police department in Prince George's County. The cops in Maryland's second most populous county had a reputation for turning routine traffic stops into Rodney King incidents sans video camera. Jones had told friends about his fear of the PG. County police, and, according to them, Jones had even been pulled over and searched for drugs once before by a PG. cop (who found none).

Jones' fear of police didn't match his profile. He was a Howard University student, a father, and a man of faith who never hesitated to dispense a religious aphorism to friends. He was also a fitness freak and personal trainer at Bally's Total Fitness. After leaving Howard, Jones became engaged to the mother of his child and planned to join the Navy. The son of a radiologist, he could have been a poster boy for middle-class black America.

So for the past few months, Jones' family and friends have been asking how he ended up slumped over the steering wheel of his Jeep Cherokee, a few blocks from his fiancée's home in Virginia, with four bullets in his back courtesy of a PG. County police officer.

The official police account is that the shooting was a surveillance operation gone bad. In the early morning of Sept. 1, thinking they were trailing a suspect in a theft of an officer's gun, undercover narcotics detective Carlton Jones (unrelated) and a superior trailed Jones 15 miles from PG. County, where he lived, through Washington, DC, and finally into Fairfax, Va., where the two officers separated. Both officers were in plain clothes and unmarked cars. As Carlton Jones tells the story, Prince Jones, apparently discovering he was being followed, rammed the detective's car three times, forc-

ing the officer to open fire in fear for his life.

But for those close to Prince Jones, the police account is simply an attempt to cover up a cold-blooded murder. Though it is within protocol for police to operate outside of their jurisdiction, a mistaken identity shooting is not. Neither is claiming to be a cop while raising a gun without a badge, which Carlton Jones did by his own admission. Perhaps most troubling is the profile of the suspect police claimed to be looking for—a stocky, 5-foot-6-inch man with dreadlocks. Jones was 6-foot-4-inches and slender, sporting closely cropped hair.

In over 30 years as Commonwealth attorney for Fairfax County, Robert Horan had never charged a police officer with a crime. After investigating Jones' death, he declined to break with tradition. Jones' death, which is still under internal investigation by the Prince George's County Police Department, sparked a minor furor at Howard University. Students marched on the Justice Department to demand a federal investigation. The controversial shooting rang out nationally as Al Sharpton promised to lead a march on PG. County. *The Washington Post* weighed in with an editorial asserting that "the ultimate wrong was done to an innocent man." Even presidential candidate Al Gore dedicated a moment of silence to Jones.

For those who'd followed the news in the county over the past few years, Jones' killing was only the latest in a string of suspicious shootings, murders, and beatings that had occurred at the hands of PG. County police officers. Jones was the 12th person shot over a 14-month period in the county. Five of those 12 died. Two other men, who were not shot, died in police custody.

The violence perpetrated by the PG. cops is a curious development. Usually, police brutality is framed as a racial issue: Rodney King suffering at the hands of a racist white Los Angeles Police Department or more recently, an unarmed Timothy Thomas, gunned down

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by a white Cincinnati cop. But in more and more communities, the police doing the brutalizing are African Americans, supervised by African-American police chiefs, and answerable to African-American mayors and city councils. In the case of PG. County, the brutality is cast against the backdrop of black America's power base, the largest concentration of the black middle class in the country.

A bedroom community of the nation's capital, Prince George's county is the only suburban county ever to become richer as it became blacker. According

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Famous Blue Beatdowns

In the folklore of urban black communities, tragic encounters with the police assume mythic proportions. For Detroit, there's Malice Green; in New York there's Abner Louima. Jones is the closest PG. County has to a police-brutality martyr. But even before his death, the county could boast a healthy cross-section of shootings, maimings, and thrashings that would easily make the Blue Beatdowns Hall of Fame.

Police department officials assert that much of the controversy is the result of media hype. They say complaints against the department hit a 16-year low in 2000. In that same year, the department had only five shootings, a figure which compares

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to the Census Bureau, the county, which is 63 percent black, had a median income of \$47,000 in 1997, more than double the median income for African Americans and almost \$10,000 more than the median income for whites.

Beyond economics, PG. County's African-American residents boast a formidable amount of political power. The county executive, the state's attorney, and the chairman of the county council are all black, as are 41 percent of the police officers, including the one who killed Prince Jones. With political and economic clout have come all the trappings of opulence once denied African Americans. And in some ways, Prince George's shows integration taken to its most extreme, perhaps perverted, end—black people with the inalienable right to drive the same luxury cars, buy the same sprawling houses, and be just as apathetic as America's white elite.

Even with the death of Prince Jones, a native son of the black bourgeoisie, there has been very little outcry from the county's leadership. "I have yet to be contacted by any constituent who had anything to say about [Prince Jones' death]," County Councilmember Walter H. Maloney (D-Beltsville) told *The Washington Post* shortly after Jones' shooting.

Police brutality may help Al Sharpton garner a spot on "Rivera Live," but the black uppercrust sees little point in putting the police on trial here in Prince George's County, or anywhere else in the nation for that matter. Like their white counterparts, African-Americans will countenance a few police thrashings if

well with neighboring Montgomery County's five police shootings and Washington D.C.'s seven, and is a 15-year low for PG. county.

Still, neither of its neighboring jurisdictions has strung together so many questionable incidents the way Prince George's County has in recent years. It's hard to ignore the stories of people like Elmer Clayton Newman, who died last year after suffering two cracked ribs and a broken neck while, or after, being arrested. The officers who took custody of Newman, who was high on cocaine at the time, claimed Newman injured himself by repeatedly banging his head into a wall. No officer was charged in the case.

There's also 19-year-old Gary Albert Hopkins Jr., an unarmed college student, who was shot in 1999 by Officer Brian C. Catlett at a fire station. The police contend that Hopkins was reaching for another officer's gun when Catlett fired to stop him. After eight witnesses testifying before a grand jury directly contradicted the police version, Catlett made history by becoming the first police officer ever indicted in the county. Yet the parade of witnesses was ultimately not enough—Catlett was acquitted in February of this year.

Or again, there's Freddie McCollum, who in 1997 was stomped, beaten, and had a police dog unleashed on him in his own home. McCollum lost his right eye as a result of the drubbing. Police claimed his injuries were the result of his tumbling eight feet with two officers when the floor collapsed. Only McCollum, however, was injured. A jury didn't buy that explanation, and

McCollum won a \$4 million judgement against the county.

This litany of brutalities reads like a Quentin Tarantino interpretation of the Keystone Kops. And despite the lack of criminal prosecutions of cops—PG. County has never convicted a police officer in a brutality case—the county's dark comedy has cost its taxpayers plenty. As of the end of last year, the county had been hit for no less than \$6 million in damages for police misconduct. The trend was serious enough to draw federal attention. In November, the Justice Department decided to investigate the police department for patterns of brutality and misconduct.

Despite trouble serious enough to bring in the Justice Department's big guns, the county elite has treated the issue with indifference. "I think a lot of the citizens would like to not have to come out and deal with this," says Edythe Flemings Hall, president of the local NAACP chapter. "Although it's very clear that there are people with great individual wealth, we aren't ready to marshal our social capital to get into a big dog fight. Many of those in Prince George's County really are living pretty comfortable."

Rich, Black, and Apathetic

When I came to Washington, D.C., to attend college, one of my first lessons came from a couple of local cats who warned me about the cops. They weren't talking about Washington's blue, but Prince George's County's. I was told that if I wanted to be famous, I should go to Prince George's County and run a few red lights.

The reputation of Prince George's cops has changed little over the past 20 years, even as the county's demographics have shifted dramatically. During the days when Prince George's County was lily-white and voted George Wallace for president, Prince George's cops were well known as thugs. "The force was known as a bunch of cowboys who rode roughshod over citizens," says the NAACP's Hall.

Commander, Bureau of Patrol Gerald M. Wilson asserts that the department has exorcised its old demons, but that years ago its reputation bordered on Third-World. "Basically my recollection is that people said 'PG cops, don't mess with them,'" recalls Wilson. "You wanted to avoid them at all costs. [If stopped] you would just stick your license through the window."

Perhaps the closest the county has come to community mobilization over police conduct was in the case of Terrance Johnson. In 1978, the 15-year-old Johnson and his older brother, Melvin, were taken into custody by Prince George's County police. At the station,

Johnson alleged that he was beaten by a police officer, at which point he snatched the officer's gun and shot him and another officer as he attempted to flee.

Johnson did 17 years for murdering police officers James Brian Swart and Albert M. Claggett IV. The case polarized Prince George's black and white communities. In 1995, Johnson was paroled to much fanfare in the black community, which had sympathized with and even lionized him for defending himself against what they perceived as corrupt and brutal police. (The cheers fell silent when Johnson later shot himself after a failed robbery attempt in Hartford County, Md.)

In hindsight, the complexity of Johnson's case did not make him the best face for a campaign against police brutality. Perhaps this explains why the county's fledgling black bourgeoisie wanted little part of the controversy. The same year that Johnson killed two cops, the NAACP attempted to march on the county seat, claiming that they would draw 1,000 protesters. but gathered only 60, much to the dismay of then-chapter president Sylvester Vaughns. "Expecting a thousand people is not a hell of an objective," demurred Vaughns.

But apparently it is in Prince George's County, where at times the community seems to have felt more ire against the activists than the police. The county's NAACP has been the most consistent force in opposing police brutality, and yet it has frequently been dissed and dismissed as irrelevant. Some of this reflects broader problems for the organization on the national level, as well as internal strife within the local chapter. But a large part of it seemed to be that Prince George's black community was demonstrating the complexities of that very integration which the NAACP had for so long championed. As the community's affluence grew, its political agenda changed.

Prince George's County's black elite had for the most part attained their goals of becoming property owners with the same rights as all Americans. The fact that they were black was, at most, a minor inconvenience.

Black Power Outage

Prince George's County may have virtually no appetite for protest, but this isn't especially unusual among the nation's black elite. A few years ago, *The Washington Post* ran a Pulitzer-prize winning series which revealed that the District of Columbia's Metropolitan Police Department had shot more people than any other big-city department in the country.

In consequence, the police made substantive changes, with the help of the Justice Department. The

city has implemented non-lethal-force technologies, such as pepper spray, which it says will help reduce the number of fatal interactions between police and community members.

The changes seem to have worked. Since these new strategies were implemented, shootings resulting in death or injuries have dropped by 78 percent over two years, according to the department, with the number of deaths dropping from 12 to one. The number of times officers have fired their weapons, either accidentally or intentionally, has declined by 48 percent. And the crime rate has not risen under this lighter touch.

The clear beneficiaries of these improvements were the city's black citizens—most of those shot had been black. But in a city where the mayor and much of the city council is black, and which houses one of the most storied enclaves of old black money, most of the outrage that helped spur these changes came from a small group of activists—not from political leadership. Even *The Washington Post* was surprised by the lack of letters to the editor. Of course the District is not unique in this regard.

In New York, too, the high-profile murder of Amadou Diallo and the subsequent acquittal of the officers involved has evoked little more than angry

Who's Who

BY SUSAN THREADGILL

Republicans are starting to whisper that Treasury Secretary **Paul O'Neill** might be on the way out in another year or so, perhaps to be replaced by **Larry Lindsey**, currently chairman of the National Economic Council. O'Neill has publicly expressed doubt that big tax cuts will stimulate the economy and forestall a recession. Lindsey, on the other hand, is an abiding believer in the gospel of supply-side economics.

Secretary of Defense **Donald Rumsfeld** has been known as a ruthlessly skilled bureaucrat since the Gerald Ford administration, when he killed off one of **Henry Kissinger's** arms control treaties. But his management style seems to be rubbing people the wrong way these days. It was widely noted in the Pentagon, for instance, that when a Navy submarine commanded by **Scott Waddle** inadvertently sank a Japanese fishing vessel in February, Rumsfeld didn't go before the press to

accept the tough questioning. When the White House and Capitol Hill reacted angrily to a Pentagon order halting all military-to-military contact with the Chinese, Rumsfeld again skirted blame and claimed his orders had been misinterpreted by **Christopher Williams**, the aide who wrote the memo.

His most damaging subterfuge has been keeping Congress uninformed about the progress of his "top-to-bottom" Pentagon strategy review. Senate Republicans, including Majority Leader **Trent Lott**, have shown their anger by stalling the confirmation of some of Rumsfeld's proposed aides.

It looks like former Congressman **James Rogan**, a House impeachment manager whom the DNC successfully targeted for defeat last year, has made a savvy career move. Rogan had been thinking of running for the seat that was expected to be vacated by his fellow California Republican, Rep. **Christopher Cox**, who was expecting to be nominated to the federal court of appeals. But Rogan foresaw that Cox's nomination would run into trouble because of fierce opposition from California's two Democratic Senators, **Dianne Feinstein** and **Barbara**

Boxer. And indeed Cox's name was conspicuously absent from the list of 10 court nominees the White House announced in mid-May.

So instead Rogan has accepted an invitation by the Bush Administration to be Commerce Department undersecretary for patents and trademarks. It's a big job because the regulation of intellectual property is increasingly vital to high-growth sectors of the economy such as the biotechnology industry (see "Gene Blues" by **Nicholas Thompson** in our April 2001 issue). Also, a couple of years in that position and Rogan will be able to write his ticket on K Street.

Big time national Democrats have long understood that they don't have to spend time courting local Democratic leaders in the District of Columbia. District voters almost automatically support Democrats for president, and D.C. residents don't have voting representation in Congress. Why, then, was newly elected Democratic National Committee Chairman **Terry McAuliffe** eager to show up as the keynote speaker at the D.C. Democratic State Committee's recent **Kennedys-King** awards dinner? Two probable reasons. First, the DNC just launched its new Voting Rights Insti-