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COMMENTARY

Pitts: Many live and die with injustice

Leonard Pitts Jr., THE MIAMI HERALD

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I asked you a question.

Two weeks ago, I asked how, given its documented biases against black people, I can trust the justice system.

Hundreds of responses came in, many of them quite thoughtful, some, less so. But there were a few that struck me. They proffered a line of thinking that went as follows:

"You're right. The justice system is biased against black people at every level. You'll just have to live with it."

That's exactly how one person put it: Live with it.

As it happens, a video surfaced a few days later showing over a dozen Philadelphia police officers chasing down three black men, pulling them from their car and, without pretense or preamble, stomping, kicking and beating them. Lawyers for the three victims say police thought — wrongly — one of them was a wanted cop killer. Police say the three were actually arrested for an unrelated shooting observed by officers on stakeout, though there are supposedly witnesses who say the men were elsewhere when that shooting began.

Let me be as plain as I can: I don't care.

It would not matter to me if it were Charles Manson, Timothy McVeigh and Osama bin Laden who were pulled from that car. You do not, as a trained and duly sworn officer of the law, kick, punch and stomp a man who lies prone and unresisting.

That is not police work. It's gang-banging. And it throws into harsh relief the advice my correspondents offer. Live with it, they say.

A 2000 Justice Department study finds the justice system to be racially biased.

Live with it.

Scandal erupts when L.A. police plant evidence on black and Latino suspects.

Live with it.

Police in New York sodomize a black man named Abner Louima with a broom handle.

Live with it.

A racist cop in Tulia lies three dozen people, most of them black, into prison.

Live with it.

An 18-year-old black kid in Atlanta gets 15 years for having sex with a white girl.

Live with it.

More than a dozen Philadelphia cops beat the stuffing out of three unresisting black men.

Live with it.

And the sad thing is, I don't even believe there was malice in those words. I believe this was advice honestly meant to be helpful.

Accept it. You can't change it. Live with it.

Still, how easy that is to say when it is not your brothers, sons and fathers who stand at risk from the jittery cop who looks at a wallet and sees a gun or the judge who never finds anything worth salvaging in certain defendants or the culture that believes criminality can be inferred from skin tone.

One is reminded of the old Richard Pryor line about the white couple that sees black people doing drugs in the ghetto and says, tsk, tsk. Then they find their son strung out at home. "Oh my God," they say, "it's an epidemic."

"Epidemic" means it's happening to you. So blacks see an epidemic of injustice where many whites see nothing. Small wonder. While they are not immune to occasional mistreatment by the justice system, they do not have the unfortunate distinction of having had that system used as a tool for their suppression.

But this was its explicit mission in the days when the sheriff doubled as head of the KKK. The statistics suggest the mission has changed little in the years since.


Live with it, they say. And you wonder, what do they think you've been doing? When we teach our children to announce loudly their every gesture when confronted by a cop, when kindergartners think everybody gets arrested eventually, when your son asks how he can make them stop harassing him and you have no answer, that's us living with it. We live with it every day.

We die with it, too.

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