



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on May 5, 2017

New Investigation May Focus on Whether Officer Threatened to Kill Alton Sterling

Even as the U.S. Department of Justice was preparing to announce that its investigation had cleared the two white police officers who fatally shot an armed black man last year in Baton Rouge, the state government of Louisiana announced its own investigation into the shooting. That investigation — announced Wednesday — will focus on whether the officers' actions violated any state laws.



As the *Wall Street Journal* [reported](#) Wednesday:

Louisiana is launching a probe into the 2016 death of an African-American man by two white Baton Rouge police officers after federal officials said [the officers wouldn't face federal civil rights charges](#).

Attorney General Jeff Landry said Wednesday that the state will investigate the incident that sparked rioting and unrest in Louisiana's capital city for possible state criminal violations. He warned that the state investigation could take "a considerable amount of time."

"This matter will be handled by the most professional and proficient law enforcement use of force team in Louisiana," Mr. Landry said in a statement.

L. Chris Stewart, an attorney representing the Sterling family said he believes the state has "a phenomenal case against these officers." Part of that "phenomenal case" is certainly the family's claim that Officer Blane Salamoni put his gun to Alton Sterling's head before the altercation became physical and threatened to kill him. But like so many other things in this case, there are discrepancies in the various stories of what happened.

An ABC affiliate for the New Orleans area, WGNO, [reported](#):

The family spokesman also said that Salamoni walked up to Sterling when he first arrived on scene, put a gun to his head and told Sterling, "I'm going to shoot you in your f***ing head."

"How can you believe the mindset of someone who walks up to someone and sticks a gun to his head?" the spokesman said.

The Advocate [reported](#):

One of the attorneys, L. Chris Stewart, who represents Sterling's oldest two children, said that federal authorities told the family that Salamoni almost immediately drew his gun and pointed it at Sterling's head, warning "I'm going to kill you, bi**h."

Well, which is it? Or, to paraphrase the unnamed "family spokesman" quoted above: How can you believe the mindset of people who can't keep the details of their stories straight?

For the record, if either version of that story is true, Officer Salamoni was out of line. It appears that the kernel of the story may come from the videos taken from the officers' bodycams. If that turns out to



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be the case, and Officer Salamoni did point his weapon at Sterling and threaten to kill him before the altercation turned physical, the officer will certainly have some hard questions to answer. Such behavior would be unprofessional and almost certainly against department policy.

Given the discrepancies between the two versions of what Officer Salamoni was supposed to have said, perhaps the best course of action would be to withhold judgment until the state's investigation confirms what happened in the moments leading up to the physical part of the altercation between Sterling and the two officers. And while two videos made with mobile phones were uploaded to the Internet, neither the security video made by a camera at the convenience store nor the videos made by the officers' bodycams have been made public. Those videos would certainly shine much more light on the events that led to Alton Sterling's physical encounter with the two officers that resulted in his death.

As the investigation moves forward, the police department should release those videos, though even videos do not always tell the whole story. As retired Sergeant John Slater, who has seen his share of the dangers of police work during his years with the Henrico County, Virginia Police Department, told *The New American*, "You have to look at the totality of the circumstances. And you're looking through a lens that is an individual police officer who is subjective given the sum of his life experiences — in particular those during his law enforcement tenure."

The experiences of an officer are part of the human element that society wants and needs in police work. Because of the subjective nature of that human element, police officers are able to make life-and-death decisions in a split second. They are able to pick up on nuances. They are able to switch gears and treat a situation differently because of subtle changes in a person's facial expressions, body language, or tone of voice.

What happened in Baton Rouge in the wee hours between July 4 and July 5 last year is no exception to that rule. The entire encounter lasted about 90 seconds — less time than it takes to heat up a cup of coffee in a microwave oven. In that time, Alton Sterling fought with officers and appears (in the videos that are available online) to reach for his gun even as the officers told him to stop or they would shoot. By the end of those 90 seconds, he was dead and the stage was set for weeks of violent riots and the death of police officers who never met Alton Sterling.

The two officers involved have already been cleared by a federal investigation that looked at all of the evidence, including the videos that have not yet been released to the public. With the state now conducting its own investigation, the question will be whether the officers violated state law. Hopefully, the outcome — either way — will not be used as a cause to renew the violence of last summer.



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