



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on December 1, 2015

Race and Politics? Chicago Police Union Defends Officer Van Dyke

Race and politics are dividing factors in far too many issues that are not primarily about race or politics. Police shootings are no exception. In fact — as the Chicago police shooting of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald shows — police shootings are prime examples of race and politics being used to divide communities and blur the lines of truth that would otherwise be clear.



As far as race is concerned, Chicago is a city long known for racial tensions. Those tensions were fueled by the 400 days it took for Cook County prosecutor Anita Alvarez to charge Officer Jason Van Dyke (shown) in the shooting. Dion Trotter is the president of the Cook County chapter of the National Black Police Association. [Reuters](#) quoted him as saying, “Those kinds of things begin to break down the trust between police and community.”

The report by Reuters also said:

One concern among black city council members is the frequent use of lethal force by Chicago cops. In the seven years between 2008-2014, 74 percent of people shot by police in Chicago were black. Chicago police shot an average of 50 people a year in that period, against 31 a year for Los Angeles, 27 in New York City, and 14 in Houston. To be sure, though, Chicago’s murder rate — at 17 per 100,000 people — is significantly higher than the other cities over the same period.

Rather than focusing on the fact that Chicago is a warzone with almost 500 homicides so far this year — and more than 400 of those from shootings despite the fact that Chicago has some of the most stringent anti-gun laws in the nation — these council members focus on the supposed racism of police shootings. The question they should be asking is, “Is this a consequence of our gun laws?” But given the choice between accepting responsibility and purging their nonsensical laws and the one hand and blaming racism on the other hand, it appears they choose to place blame.

If race is a factor, it may not be one these council members want to consider. *Ebony* magazine — which no one can accuse of having an anti-black prejudice — [reported](#) that between 1991 and 2011 blacks accounted for “76 percent of the known offenders” in homicides in Chicago. So, while 74 percent of the people Chicago police officers shoot are black, 76 percent of the known killers in Chicago are, too.

Involvement by black civil rights leaders, such as the “Reverend” Jesse Jackson, have helped fan the flames of racial tension as well. As *The New American* said [previously](#):



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Jackson and others have cast the shooting in terms of a racial issue: White cop shoots black teen; Racism must be at the root. While it may yet turn out that this is the case, nothing that is known so far supports jumping to that conclusion.

What is known so far is that statements made by police about what happened do not jibe with what is shown in [the dashcam video released last week](#). The video has caused many — including this writer — to ask why non-lethal force, such as a Taser, pepper spray, or a K-9 was not used to neutralize whatever threat McDonald may have posed. Other officers — when faced with armed suspects — have been able to disarm those suspects without emptying their weapon’s magazine.

One such officer is Ben Sauriol in the small town of Winneconne, Wisconsin, about 200 miles north of Chicago. This writer [interviewed](#) Sauriol for *The New American’s* “Police Under Fire” special report. He recounted the story of the time he was dispatched to check on the welfare of a former soldier suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The man had been drinking and was “quite upset about a few things and his parents couldn’t calm him down. They called the police because they were concerned for his safety,” Sauriol said. Before it was over the man had produced a handgun case and was reaching to open it. Officer Sauriol used his Taser to neutralize the threat. When the PTSD-fueled former soldier fell, he dropped the case. A .45-caliber handgun fell out. When the handgun was examined, it was found to be fully loaded with a round already chambered.

This writer asked Sauriol why he used his Taser instead of his sidearm. He said:

Because I didn’t see the gun in there and until you see an actual weapon — now granted, I knew there was most likely a gun in there — but until you see it, you can’t assume. Imagine if I would have shot him, and then there was not a gun in there. What would that have looked like? So you have to show great restraint until you actually have a situation where you are in great danger of death or serious bodily harm.

Granted, there is a big difference between Winneconne and Chicago, but the level of danger Officer Sauriol faced — alone with an armed, disturbed man bent on doing himself or Sauriol (or both) harm — is certainly no greater than that which Officer Van Dyke faced from a young man — armed with a knife — walking away from him while surrounded by officers who had been on the scene much longer and had not used lethal force.

While all of that adds up to an officer who appears to have used the very definition of “excessive force,” it does not necessarily equate to a racially motivated shooting just because the officer was white and the suspect was black. That fact seems lost, though, on those who are determined to see race as *the* defining issue in the Chicago shooting.

On the political front, the Chicago lodge of the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) is coming under fire for its support of Van Dyke. According to Reuters, “The main Chicago police union is standing behind the white officer who was charged this week with first-degree murder for gunning down a black teenager. It is facing a backlash from leaders of the city’s black community as a result.”

Some of those “leaders of the city’s black community” include a group of aldermen in Chicago. Reuters quoted Alderman Pat Dowell as saying, “Our caucus has vowed to work with other caucuses and other of our colleagues to review the FOP contract to make sure there are tougher policies and sanctions against police officers who do egregious or illegal acts.” The FOP contract comes up for renewal in 2017 and will be heavily scrutinized.

Reuters also reported that “Dean Angelo, president of the local lodge of the FOP, dismissed criticism



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from lawmakers who he noted had unanimously approved the FOP contract. 'Now, because it's advantageous to their political career, the FOP contract needs to go.'

Angelo has a point. What some of the "leaders of the city's black community" seem to be overlooking is that it is the FOP's *job* to support officers who are charged with crimes while in the performance of their duties. All the Chicago FOP is doing is what it is contractually obligated to do. Even Dion Trotter, president of the Cook County chapter of the National Black Police Association, recognizes that fact and doesn't seem bothered by it. "It's the FOP's job to support him," he said, according to Reuters.

Part of the terms of the FOP contract stipulate that any officer under investigation, but not yet charged with a crime, is to be placed on administrative duty and continue to be paid. Both Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Police Chief Garry McCarthy have blamed the FOP contract for both the delay in charging Van Dyke and for not releasing the video sooner. What neither of them can answer, though, is why Van Dyke was charged hours before the video was released as a result of a court order.

Based on "email and phone interviews Reuters conducted with a number of white and black active-duty and retired cops, as well as union and black police association officials," Reuters says. "They stopped short of defending Van Dyke's actions — which were caught in a graphic video made public this week — but did say it was important to place them in the context of a racially divided city beset by violence."

Reuters continued:

Some of the officers say they are concerned the city's police force has become a political football and is not getting enough support from Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and police chief Garry McCarthy. These officers also say the decision by Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez to charge Van Dyke with first-degree murder, rather than the lesser charge of second-degree murder, was a politically motivated effort to head off outrage about the video.

Alvarez seems to have seen this coming. As a [CNN report](#) we cited in a previous article said:

Alvarez said the deadline moved up the timing of her announcement but did not dictate her decision to charge the officer with first-degree murder. She also defended the time it took her office to investigate by saying the case is complicated.

"Maintaining public safety is my No. 1 job, and I do not want the public to view this video without knowing this very important context that with these charges we are bringing a full measure of justice that this demands," she said.

One can see why — after waiting 400 days and without citing any new evidence — her bringing first-degree murder charges hours before the video was released would cause some to accuse her of having political motivations. It seems a reasonable conclusion considering that she said she did not "want the public to view this video without knowing ... that with these charges we are bringing a full measure of justice that this demands." She was, after all, in possession of the video within days of the shooting.

One officer interviewed by Reuters said most people viewing the video would not understand the pressures police officers face as they have to make split-second decisions. "A police officer sees that video and has a different mindset than the rest of the people out there. It could be one of us," the officer said. But was there a need for a "split-second" decision?

Officer Sauriol has seen the dashcam video of the Chicago shooting and told *The New American*:

This officer got out of the [vehicle] and opened fire right away. Not only did he open fire, he emptied his magazine while the subject was down on the ground. The subject didn't appear to be



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posing an imminent threat of deadly force to the officers or anyone else at the time of the shooting.... Using less than lethal force should have been attempted first, in my opinion. I need to stress that I'm basing my view on what I saw on the video.

Police officers are trained to use deadly force only as a last resort when someone, or the officer him or herself, is in danger of great bodily harm or death. Based on this video, it's didn't appear that was the case.

So, while some want the events shown on the video to be seen "in the context of a racially divided city beset by violence" and others want to blame the FOP for everything from paying for Van Dyke's legal defense to keeping him on the payroll to not releasing the video sooner, what is left largely ignored is that this is a criminal case of an officer accused of illegally using lethal force where it was not warranted. The racial and political bantering back and forth serve only to cloud that issue and shift the blame.

What needs to happen, in this or any similar case, is for the legal system to ignore race and politics as it weighs only the facts of the case. A jury will decide Van Dyke's guilt or innocence. There is little doubt the video will play a major part in that decision. The color of Van Dyke's or McDonald's skin should not. Neither should the political blame game going on between the different factions in Chicago.



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