

TYRE NICHOLS'S DEATH RAISES HARD QUESTIONS ABOUT RACE AND POLICING

By Gerard Baker

It feels callous and opportunistic to turn a man's death into a moment for political and social commentary. Ghoulish pundits with tendentious takes are a staple of the 24-hour social media and cable news circus. A mother has lost a son. A young man, by all accounts, wholly innocent of any crime, has lost his life in a most degrading and brutal way. The decent, immediate human response is emotional: grief, sympathy, anger.

But just as the conscience cries out for retribution, the mind calls for some understanding, some larger meaning in the anguish. We look for cause and consequence in our wider society and legitimately ask what we can learn.

One understandable but inadequate take on the killing of Tyre Nichols is the idea that we should feel some satisfaction that justice works. Five police officers beat a young black man to a pulp, rendering him lifeless on the street and he dies three days later. The men are all quickly fired, arrested and charged with murder. Thus, the panglossian says, the majesty of the law at work. Awful as it was, there is no larger lesson here beyond man's unending capacity for inhumanity to man. A terrible crime is committed, quickly investigated and resolved, and the wheels of justice are swiftly set in motion.

There are so many things wrong with this take but worst of all is that it mistakes justice for right. Justice is only ever retrospective. It is the redress of a wrong. It can never right a wrong. Even if, as we hope, it can help deter future crime, it doesn't even purport to address the causes and conditions that lead to criminal acts. For that we have to examine individual, social and institutional characteristics—and, if we can, correct them.

From what we know already of the Nichols case, graphically and painfully underscored by the hourlong video released by the Memphis Police Department, we can say, once again, that the quality of policing in some jurisdictions in this country needs reform.

The police do a courageous and indispensable job in protecting the rest of us. They deserve our unstinting support. But we also have a right to expect accountability when things go badly wrong. In Memphis, it seems many things—police recruitment, training and supervision—may have helped to produce the grotesque outcome. Memphis is unlikely to be alone.

But of course the largest question, whenever a black man dies at the hands of law enforcement, is swirling around race.

For many conservatives, in this case it is a self-evidently absurd question. Five black cops kill a black man and the left immediately insists it is racism at work. But you don't have to believe that the black officers were somehow acting as unwitting agents of white supremacy, or subscribe to the canon of critical race theory, to ponder how the race of suspects affects how they are treated by police.

The right question to ask is: Would the Memphis officers have behaved as they did if the man they were pursuing had been white? We can't know the answer. But we can frame the question differently: Is it less probable that a confrontation between these officers and a suspect would have resulted in his violent death if he had been, let's say, a middle-aged white man rather than a 29-year-old black man? There is still much room for uncertainty but I think the answer here is clearly yes.

This, in itself, of course doesn't prove some wider social or systemic racism. The problem, as well documented in studies of police shootings, is that young black men are disproportionately more likely to be involved in serious crime— and in encounters with police—than are other demographics. This inevitably results in a greater suspicion in the minds of police officers (and the rest of us) that a young black man may pose a greater risk.

This is rational and not primal bigotry. But at what point does this rational, inference-making blur into a set of unworthy assumptions about the behavior of all young black men, even—perhaps especially—among other black men?

There's a darker question about race in this case which comes to mind as you watch the video of the assault.

The initial phase of the interaction is a depressing picture of incompetent policing. Five burly officers are unable to restrain a single unarmed, underweight man, and he somehow fleetingly escapes the onslaught of arms, fists, batons, tasers they bring to the unequal struggle.

The most disturbing part is what happens when they catch up with him.

The depravity of the cops doing the beating is hard to watch and almost impossible to fathom. Nichols is treated as an object, a punching bag. He is in this moment, dehumanized, in the way we have seen countless victims of official violence dehumanized through history. And the uncomfortable thought surfaces: Is this dehumanization something that the mind does more easily when the object is a black man?

Fixing the deep social problems that result in higher crime rates, and sometimes tragic encounters with police, among blacks is a continuing task for policy makers. But fixing in our own minds—of blacks and whites alike—lingering stereotypes of particular demographics is an urgent task for all of us.

Source: Baker, Gerard. "*Tyre Nichols's Death Raises Hard Questions About Race and Policing.*" Wall Street Journal, January 31, 2023