

James Buford's Column

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What is the value of a black man's life to this community which has a population that is 52% African American? What if this man is a local pastor, husband, father and friend who has a clean police record? Many of us would say that this man, Rev. Nathaniel Cole's life was invaluable. But to the St. Louis City police officers who were involved in the high speed chase that took his life and the police chief that stood by their decision, his life was worth a forged temporary license tag.

Now, I do realize that there are many facts in this case that will never be known about what happened that day. The driver, Robert E. Smith, definitely holds part of the responsibility for initiating the deadly car crash. But there is also no doubt that the police played their part as well. Lately, it seems that the St. Louis Police Department has escalated an aggressive pursuit mentality that has gone unchecked by the St. Louis Police Board and their own Internal Affairs department. In this case, the police claim that the inhabitants inside the getaway car waved a gun at the police and even fired a shot at them. Who's to say that these statements are true if there is no objective party to investigate them?

Then there's the case of the police beating a suspected car thief after a lengthy car chase across St. Louis County and City jurisdictions. Because the beating was caught on tape it was obvious that the cops were unjustly abusing the suspect. What has happened to proper police procedure? In this day and age, the police are acting as judge, jury and executioner on the streets. A morning radio talk show host even recommended that police beatings after a car chase be made legal to teach criminals a lesson. If we allow rogue cops and criminals to take over, the future of this city will be a police state that no one will want to reside, work or visit. Who would want to drive to work in a city that is known for police chases and deadly car crashes which kill innocent victims?

I'm not advocating for criminals and people who drive away from and threaten police. I am, however, advocating for equal rights and treatment under the law, I am advocating for due process and I am advocating for an independent civilian review board. For many years, I have spoke of the need for an independent civilian review board to investigate police abuse cases as they arise. Despite this the powers-that-be have refused to institute this policy.

My question is, how many innocent people have to die, how many suspects have to be prematurely stripped of their constitutional rights and how many businesses and people have to leave the city, before an independent civilian review board is established?