

Firehouse Dispute Raises Racial Tension in St. Louis

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American firefighter's complaint that he found a stuffed monkey hanging by its neck in his firehouse last month has become a stark reminder of this city's troubled racial legacy.



Sherman George, the former chief of the St. Louis Fire Department, was demoted this fall after a standoff with the mayor over promoting a group of mainly white firefighters. With tension from that dispute still fresh, an inquiry into the meaning behind a toy monkey found hanging by its neck in a firehouse has pitted black firefighters against their white colleagues.

Although the [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#) recently ruled out a hate crime in its inquiry into the complaint, the incident has pitted many of the city's black firefighters, who say the toy was meant to evoke a lynching, against their white colleagues, who say the monkey was simply hung up to dry after being found at a fire scene.

That explanation has not satisfied Capt. Addington Stewart, chairman of the Firefighter's Institute for Racial Equality, a fraternal organization that represents all but a few of the department's more than 300 black employees. "What I know is what I saw," Captain Stewart said, describing a strap wrapped around the neck of a stuffed monkey dangling from a coat hanger. "I take that to be unconscionable."

The episode might have remained an internal squabble were it not for the recent demotion of the city's first African-American fire chief, Sherman George, which came after Mr. George publicly refused demands by Mayor Francis G. Slay to promote a group of mainly

white firefighters. Many of the city's black leaders have lined up behind the former chief, who resigned soon after being demoted.

In demoting Mr. George, some of those leaders said, Mr. Slay brought St. Louis race relations to a new low. Some started a petition drive in support of a mayoral recall.

“Sherman George was an African-American in one of the highest positions in the mayor's administration — he was an icon,” said Alderman Terry Kennedy, chairman of the Aldermanic Black Caucus. “To push him out like that? You're not doing anything but causing trouble.”

The current controversy has its roots in a lawsuit filed in 2004 by a group of black firefighters who raised accusations of racial bias in the promotion examinations for firefighters.

Mr. George, 63, was not a party to the lawsuit. But after a federal judge ruled last spring that the exams were valid, Mr. George declined to promote 28 firefighters — 4 of whom were black — to the rank of captain, and five captains, two of whom were black, to the rank of battalion chief.

“I never said anything about black and white,” said Mr. George, who had advocated for an alternate testing system. “I don't believe that the tests gave the applicants an opportunity to demonstrate the skills and abilities necessary to be an officer in the St. Louis Fire Department.”

In what became a months-long public showdown, Mr. George declined repeated calls from Mayor Slay to promote the firefighters. The chief cited a 2005 ruling by the state appellate court giving him sole discretion over promotions in the department.

But when Mr. George missed the mayor's Sept. 14 deadline to make the promotions, City Hall demoted him to deputy chief.

He retired from the department on Oct. 12, and has filed a complaint with the federal [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission](#).

“They placed me in an untenable situation,” said Mr. George, who says his demotion came with a \$20,000 pay cut that reduced his pension. “They knew I wouldn’t work under those conditions — I couldn’t work under those conditions.”

Mr. Slay said he was sensitive to the racial politics of demoting Mr. George, who as a child picked cotton and rose to become a popular symbol of African-American success in a city where many black residents, who make up more than 50 percent of the population, are mired in poverty and crime.

“The bottom line is that he failed to comply with a direct order,” said Mr. Slay, a Democrat. “We tried to be very respectful of the situation, but when it came down to it, we had a court decision, and we had people on these lists, real people with families that were forgoing a lot of money. It created a tremendous morale problem.”

Many black firefighters criticized Mr. George’s removal, but members of Local 73 of the International Association of Fire Fighters, which represents nearly all of the department’s roughly 400 white members, applauded the move.

“The department was not at all harmonious under Sherman George,” said the president of the local, Chris Molitor. “A test was given. We wanted promotions to be made.”

The political crisis deepened in November, when the mayor’s office named a white battalion chief as Mr. George’s successor instead of a higher-ranking African-American candidate.

“The mayor has stabbed the black community in the heart,” said the Rev. Douglas Parham, president of the Clergy Coalition of Metropolitan St. Louis, a group of more than 60 African-American ministers, and the leader of an effort to recall the mayor. “This tells

me that the mayor of St. Louis sees the chief of the fire department as a white man's job.”



Mayor Francis G. Slay says he was forced to deal with “a tremendous morale problem.”

In an editorial last month in *The St. Louis American*, the city's largest black newspaper, James H. Buford, president of the Urban League of St. Louis, wrote, “Racially, the St. Louis community has been mortally wounded by the turn of events.”

The renewed strain on race relations comes as the city, after years of stagnation, is making economic strides. The downtown area has received roughly \$4.5 billion in public and private investment since 1999, Mr. Slay said, and is home to many newly renovated lofts and more than 80 new restaurants and retail shops.

“Downtown is going great,” Mr. Slay said. “We've got more invested in neighborhoods all over the city, including predominantly African-American neighborhoods. I'm also talking with a lot of leaders in the black community about what we need to do to bring this city together.”

But Mr. George's demotion, coupled with downtown's revival and a public school system that recently lost its accreditation when it was taken over by the state, has some politicians from the city's poorer North Side voicing fresh accusations of mayoral neglect.

“There's no development in North St. Louis,” said State Representative Jamilah Nasheed, a Democrat who represents the city's predominantly black 60th District and has called for Mr. Slay's removal. “You cannot develop downtown St. Louis and leave North St. Louis looking like a shack.”

Not all black leaders view Mr. George's ouster exclusively through the lens of race, and some say he presented the mayor with a serious insubordination problem. But those who support Mr. Slay note that given the city's troubled racial past, the mayor handled an impossible situation poorly.

"People have the notion that St. Louis is in the Midwest, but it's one of the few Midwestern cities that had slavery," said Alderman Kennedy, whose black caucus has not taken a position on the recall effort. "Many of us have raised the issue of the racial divide, but I don't think it's been heard. So when it comes to important issues that may be complicated, it tends to fall on racial lines.

"So, is this a racial issue? Yes it is. Why is it a racial issue? Based upon the history of the city of St. Louis."