

Videotaped police beating in New Orleans

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When New Orleans resident Robert Davis returned to the city last week to check on some homes damaged by Hurricane Katrina, the devastation inflicted by the storm to his family's property was not the only shock awaiting him. Davis, a 64-year-old retired school teacher, would become the victim of a brutal beating by New Orleans police officers that was videotaped and broadcast both across the US and worldwide.

Last Saturday evening at about 8 p.m. Davis, who is black, was walking on Bourbon Street in the New Orleans French Quarter. He approached an officer on horseback to inquire about the city's curfew. "I'm talking in a nice, cordial way to a black officer on a horse," David told the press on Tuesday. He said another officer on foot then "interfered and I said he shouldn't."

As he crossed the street, Davis said, "All of a sudden, the white officer hit me in the eye and dazed me and threw me up against the wall." A cop yelled, "I'm going to kick your ass," Davis recounted. He was then hit and pummeled to the ground, face down, suffering fractures to his cheek and eye socket. Two white officers were involved in the beating.

A crew from Associated Press Television News (APTN) was on the scene, taping the confrontation. A third cop shouted out to the APTN crew, "I've been here for six [expletive] weeks trying to keep [expletive] alive ... Go home!" This officer is accused of then grabbing and shoving APTN producer Rich Matthews.

Two volunteer relief workers from Florida witnessed the assault on Davis and approached and told a cop that they wanted to give a statement about what they saw. One of the volunteers, Calvin Briles, said a man in an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) vest grabbed him, threw him against a car and told him, "It's none of your business." The two were then handcuffed and held facedown on the pavement until they were released.

The cops involved in beating Robert Davis claimed he had been drinking. Davis, who maintains he hasn't had a drink in 25 years, pleaded not guilty on Wednesday

morning to charges of public intoxication and resisting arrest. He was released on bond and a January 18 trial date has been set.

The three police officers were suspended without pay. They have pleaded not guilty to battery charges and will stand trial at the beginning of January. The US Justice Department opened an investigation into the beating on Monday.

Had the assault on Robert Davis and the news producer not been captured on videotape, the incident would have received little if any coverage in the mass media. Without this visual record, the vicious beating would have taken its place alongside similar instances of police brutality that are all-too-common, occurring on virtually a daily basis—whether in Los Angeles, Chicago, Atlanta, Boston or another US city.

But the videotaped police beating, and subsequent interviews with its battered victim, put a face on one of the most barbaric aspects of contemporary life in America—the pervasiveness of police brutality and intimidation meted out against the working class, young people and the most oppressed sections of society.

The beating of Robert Davis at the hands of the New Orleans Police Department takes on a particularly insidious significance in light of the suffering city residents—overwhelmingly black and poor—have endured in the Hurricane Katrina disaster and its aftermath.

There was no practical plan in place to evacuate New Orleans in the event of a category 4 or 5 hurricane, despite the fact that much of the city lies below sea level. When the levees broke and flooded large parts of New Orleans—including the Ninth Ward, where Mr. Davis's family lived—hundreds of people who had not been evacuated perished in the floodwaters.

Those who had managed to evacuate were crammed into shelters without adequate food, water, sanitation or privacy. Lurid press accounts, promoted by the media and police authorities, depicted Katrina's victims as looters, killers and rapists. These reports were later refuted as fabrications.

The Bush administration's immediate response to the disaster was to flood the stricken region with National Guard and army troops as well as police from throughout the country. The atmosphere in the devastated city was one of military occupation, epitomized by the brutal treatment given to some of the residents—in some cases elderly and disoriented—who were forcibly evacuated from their homes.

Many who have lost their homes, like Robert Davis, are only now being allowed back into their neighborhoods to “look and leave”—to survey the damage to their property and then depart once again. The treatment he received last Saturday evening is an ominous indication that the working and poor residents displaced by Hurricane Katrina are not welcome in the “New” New Orleans envisioned by the city’s rich and powerful.

The law-and-order frenzy whipped up in the wake of the Katrina disaster has served to encourage the most backward and sadistic elements within the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD), a force notorious for decades for violence against its citizens. A 1999 study by Human Rights Watch found that the NOPD led the nation not only in brutality, but in corruption and incompetence as well.

A series of scandals rocked the New Orleans police force in the 1990s, a decade when police were arrested for crimes ranging from shoplifting and bribery to bank robbery, drug dealing, rape and homicide. Two former cops are on death row—one for the 1994 murder of a woman who had filed a complaint against him, one for a triple-murder committed in the course of a restaurant holdup in 1995.

This past March 19, complaints were lodged after police roughed up the annual St. Joseph’s night assembly of Mardi Gras Indians, when black residents dress up in elaborate costumes. Participants said that police drove at high speeds on crowded streets, used foul language and manhandled revelers, inflicting numerous bodily injuries.

An investigation is also under way into allegations that in early August two officers beat a man before dropping him off at a hospital.

As stories of mass looting by evacuees were manufactured and circulated in the days after Katrina hit, New Orleans police officers were involved in driving away as many as 200 luxury vehicles from a Cadillac dealership. A probe is currently ongoing into the apparent theft.

Approximately 250 police officers, or nearly 15 percent of the department, are presently being investigated on

charges that they deserted when Hurricane Katrina struck. On September 27, Police Chief Eddie Compass abruptly quit his post, giving no reason for his departure.

The majority of the approximately 1,450 New Orleans cops remaining on the force are being housed on a cruise ship and are working 12- to 14-hour days. Eighty percent of them have lost their homes. For officers trained in the backward police culture, the anger and resentment generated by these conditions find a reactionary expression. This provides some insight into the factors contributing to the violent assault last Saturday night.

However, the police union lawyer representing the three indicted cops insisted at a press conference Wednesday that stress had nothing to do with the incident, and that the three were merely following standard police procedures. “They didn’t do anything wrong,” said the attorney.

The lawyer also claimed that two FBI agents were involved in the attack on Davis, having come over to “assist in the arrest.”

The cops patrolling Bourbon Street in post-Katrina New Orleans sense that they have a free hand. Two cops summarily assault a black man asking a question about the city’s curfew. A news crew seeking to film the incident is viciously attacked by another, while witnesses are assaulted, handcuffed and intimidated. As far as the police are concerned, none of them have any rights whatsoever.

While such behavior may find a particularly sharp manifestation in New Orleans, it is indicative of the repressive and violent response of the ruling elite and its police agencies to the growing social polarization gripping the entire country. Like many of the developments witnessed since Hurricane Katrina made landfall August 29, it has further exposed the rot at the core of American society.



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