

New York City mayor seeks to quell outrage over police slaying

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In the five days since New York City police shot and killed 23 year-old Sean Bell and wounded two others in the predominantly working-class borough of Queens, the city's media and political elite have sought to blunt any mass protest and obscure the circumstances and root causes of the murder.

The killing occurred early Saturday morning shortly after Bell and two friends, Joseph Guzman, 31, and Trent Benefield, 23, left the Club Kalua where they had celebrated a bachelor party for Bell, who was to be married later in the day.

As the three men left the establishment, they were followed by an undercover police officer who was a member of a team investigating prostitution and narcotics there. The detective apparently retrieved his gun from a car where two other detectives were sitting and confronted Bell and his passengers with it. The police claim that he identified himself as a police officer, although witnesses deny this.

An unmarked police minivan came around a corner in an attempt to prevent Bell's car from leaving. Panicking, Bell stuck the officer and the van with his car, a Nissan Altima. The first detective fired 11 shots at the car. Another detective fired 31 shots. Three other police also fired their weapons for a total of 50 shots.

Bell died at the scene of the shooting; Guzman was shot 11 times and Benefield 3 times. They both remain in the hospital. Guzman is still in critical condition, and his sister, Yolanda Guzman, has refused to let him be interviewed by the police, "certain that they meant him harm," according to the *New York Times*.

Even by police standards, the shooting was highly irregular. It would have been more normal for the detective inside the club to contact members of his team and have them make an arrest. Furthermore, the NYPD Patrol Guide specifically prohibits police from

firing at a moving vehicle, even when it is being used as a weapon.

In attempting to quell popular anger at the shooting, New York's Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a member of the super-rich layer that dominates the city's economic and political life, publicly declared yesterday that the police fusillade of 50 shots at three unarmed men was "unacceptable" and "disproportionate."

The statements elicited an outcry from the right-wing media and police establishment, who reject any restriction on the past or future actions of the cops. The Murdoch-owned *New York Post* published a lead article on Wednesday condemning Bloomberg's remarks and reprimanding him for suggesting that a trial of the officers involved in the incident might be held at all or that it might take place in Queens, where their chances of conviction would ostensibly be greater.

The *New York Sun* carried a front-page editorial claiming that "thousands" of New Yorkers were dismayed at the Mayor's remarks. The *Sun* asserted that a jury had acquitted the police who unleashed 41 bullets at West African immigrant Amadou Diallo in 1999, "which was, arguably, much less frightening a situation to the police than what happened over the weekend."

Predictably, the *Post* quoted Patrick Lynch of the Patrolman's Benevolent Association, who said that "Premature statements made without benefit of all the facts only serve to inflame the situation... [I]n this particular situation, the amount of shots were not excessive." Michael Palladino of the Detectives' Endowment Association said that the police "were having deadly physical force used against them."

The *Post* repeated police allegations that a fourth man had left the scene before the shooting started and may

have thrown down a gun. *Newsday* printed a two-page photograph of police officers looking for a discarded weapon.

While the tabloid media makes every effort to confuse public opinion by smearing the victims and placing the responsibility for this horrific act of police violence on them, Bloomberg works on another front, attempting to diffuse the anger of the community directly involved. Thus, he met for an hour with Bell's family and fiancée. "I tried to express my deepest sympathies for their loss," the mayor said.

Bloomberg then met with 50 leading local Democratic politicians and clergy in Queens, including Al Sharpton, the former 2004 contender for the Democratic Party presidential nomination. Press reports indicate that the meeting sought to achieve a consensus on how to handle the shooting.

The *Post* noted "By meeting with community leaders and criticizing the cops Bloomberg has avoided the criticism that dogged then-mayor Rudi Giuliani during the Louima and Diallo cases." The newspaper was referring to two of the most notorious cases of police abuse in recent years, the torture of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima in 1997 and the shooting of Diallo in 1999.

It is not, however, simply a matter of Bloomberg's immediate political survival. The city's ruling elite faces an explosive situation. Increasing poverty, a lack of decent housing and health care, a general deterioration in conditions of life, compounded by a hated war in Iraq, have produced a profound alienation within the city's population.

To this end, the Republican mayor has sought the assistance of charlatans such as Sharpton, in hopes that the latter can be a safety valve, harmlessly releasing the anger that millions of New Yorkers feel at the record of police murder, abuse and harassment.

On Wednesday, Sharpton and the Reverend Jesse Jackson visited the site of the murder. Jackson told reporters "God has the power to take evil and turn it into good." *Newsday* reported that Sharpton said, "We believe a crime was committed against Sean. We believe a crime was committed against the other two."

Posted around them in the neighborhood were much angrier, handmade signs reading, "Death to Police Brutality and Murder," and "Off the Pigs Who Shoot Our Kids."

The situation is precarious. After Bloomberg's meeting with the Queens officials, City Councilman James Saunders said that because of the killing, "the temperature on the streets has increased. While we are sitting in these meetings, a lot of people are out on the streets and they don't see and hear these things."

Robert A.U. Hogan, president of the tenants' association in the Bailey Park housing projects in Queens, noted the bitter feelings that young people in particular have about the police. "No one in that room," he said referring to the officially sponsored meeting, "is going through what the young people are going through in this community."

On Tuesday, the *Times* quoted Bishop Lester Williams, who was to have performed the marriage ceremony for Bell and his fiancée, as saying that there "had been no improvement in police-community relations since the height of tensions under Mr. Giuliani. 'It's Little Iraq, I'm sorry, especially toward the blacks in the community...we don't feel protected.'"

In the final analysis, the brutal killing of Bell expresses the extremely tense and fragile state of class relations in America. Beneath the official surface of bipartisanship and consensus politics, practiced by the two major parties, lies a reality of a socially divided nation, with vast wealth piled up at one pole and increasing misery at the other.



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