Florida police officer found guilty in 2015 shooting of motorist

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A Palm Beach Gardens, Florida police officer was convicted in court on Thursday on charges of manslaughter and attempted murder. The officer, Nouman Raja, faces a possible life sentence.

The charges stem from an encounter Raja had in October of 2015 with Corey Jones, a housing inspector and musician, who was returning from a late night performance at an area nightclub when his vehicle broke down and he was stranded on an off-ramp of Interstate 95.

According to prosecutors, Raja drove his unmarked vehicle up the off-ramp and parked a few feet from Jones, who was in his truck on the phone with a towing company. When Raja, who was in plain clothes at the time, approached his vehicle he did not identify himself as a police officer.

Jones remained on his phone with the towing company during the encounter and the recording of the call documents what followed.

Approaching Jones, Raja asked “You good?” to which Jones, who had now exited the vehicle, replied in the affirmative. Twice Raja is heard saying “really?” to which Jones replied “yeah.”

Suddenly, Raja is heard commanding Jones to raise his hands. Jones, likely fearing he was being robbed, shouts “hold on.”

It was then that Jones, who had a concealed weapons permit, grabbed his gun and took off running down the nearby embankment. Raja fired three shots as Jones fled, and then ten seconds later fired another three shots, shooting Jones through his heart, killing him.

Jones' gun was found 125 feet away from his body, indicating that he had thrown the weapon away as he fled. In the course of the trial, a medical examiner testified that Jones' body would have fallen near where the lethal shot hit him. Plainclothes officer Raja shot an unarmed man as he fled.

Unaware that the encounter had been recorded, Raja lied to investigators, telling them he identified himself as a police officer as he approached Jones. He claimed Jones pointed his gun at him, which caused him to fire the first three shots, and then turned and ran. Raja then claimed that as he was fleeing Jones turned and pointed his gun at him again, at which point Raja fired the fatal shots.

The 911 recording of Raja's call also indicates he was aware he had murdered an innocent man and needed to create a counter-narrative. Though Jones was already dead, lying 175 feet away, Raja is heard shouting “drop the gun” as soon as the 911 call was answered. After requesting backup and confirming he was unharmed he again shouts “drop the gun.” According to prosecutors, the 911 call was placed 33 seconds after the last shot was fired.

Raja was ultimately suspended, and later fired, from the Palm Beach Gardens police department after evidence of his deception emerged.

Raja claimed he thought Jones, who is black, had stolen the vehicle he was in. Jones had bought his gun only three days earlier because he feared someone might try to steal his drum set, which cost $10,000.

Thursday’s conviction represents an anomaly. Raja is the first police officer in the state of Florida to be convicted of a shooting since the 1989 manslaughter conviction of Miami police officer William Lozano, who shot a black motorcyclist whom he claimed tried to hit him, killing both the driver and a passenger. The killings sparked several days of protests in Miami, some which turned violent.

Lozano's conviction was later overturned and he was acquitted in a new trial.

Nationally, very few police officers are charged after

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fatal shootings, and fewer still are convicted in court. Most recently, prosecutors in California declined to pursue charges against two police officers who killed Stephon Clark in 2018. Clark was unarmed and fleeing officers in the backyard of his grandmother's home when he was killed.

Overall, there were 998 people shot and killed by police in 2018. This follows 987 killed in 2017, 963 in 2016, and 995 killed in 2015, according to the database maintained by the *Washington Post* , which only keeps track of shooting deaths.

Officers who are charged are frequently acquitted by friendly courts. Only in cases with indisputable evidence, such as the 2015 murder of Walter Scott by police officer Michael Slager, who was recorded on cell phone video shooting Scott in the back as he fled and then planting a weapon, are convictions secured on serious charges.

More often, charges are never brought. Since the 2014 police murders of Eric Garner in New York City and Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri that sparked national outrage and inspired mass protests there has been a multitude of widely covered police killings that failed to produce any criminal charges.

This includes both Garner and Brown, whose killers were never charged. The six Baltimore police officers responsible for the death of Freddie Gray after he suffered spinal cord injuries while he was being transported in a police van were either acquitted or had their charges dropped. Alton Sterling of Baton Rouge, Lousiana was shot and killed by officers as he was restrained on the ground, and yet prosecutors declined to bring charges. Philando Castille of Falcon Heights, Minnesota was shot dead by police while sitting in his car, only to have his killer later acquitted in court.

The fact that police killings have continued unimpeded in spite of mass protests and significant coverage in the media indicates that the police across the US have in fact been emboldened by the failure on the part of the courts to bring charges against officers who kill.

All of the false solutions promoted by Black Lives Matter and other middle class activist groups tied to the Democratic Party have failed to reduce police killings. Accountability boards, body cameras, the promotion of minorities to high ranking positions within various police departments, and other half measures have had no discernible impact on the police reign of terror.

Fundamentally, the leadership of these organizations understands that when all is taken into account they will need the police to protect their own class interests. They seek not to abolish the social conditions that lead to police violence, but merely to increase their own "representation" among the armed guardians of capitalism.

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