Canton, Ohio police, district attorney, blame victim after body camera footage confirms cop shot James Williams without warning

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9 January 2022

After a police officer murdered husband and father of six James Williams in his backyard shortly after midnight on January 1, 2022, the Canton, Ohio police department, in coordination with local media and state District Attorney David Yost, are engaged in a cover-up to obfuscate the culpability of the police and tamp down social anger.

More than a week after an officer from the Canton Police Department shot and killed Williams as he was ringing in the New Year with celebratory gunfire in his backyard, police have yet to release the name of the cop, much less file charges.

Disturbing police body camera footage released this week shows officers surrounding Williams as he is firing his AR15 rifle toward the sky. The footage confirms his widow Marquetta's account of events and her initial statements to the local press. "Out of the blue, he said he got shot," Marquetta recounted. "Nobody said anything. They didn't say, 'Police.' They didn't say, 'Freeze.' They didn't say, 'Drop your weapon.' They just shot him."

From the footage, it is clear that James is not pointing his rifle at the police; the weapon is pointed at a roughly 70 degree angle, towards the sky. While the practice of "celebratory gunfire" is illegal within Canton city limits, the tradition is generally tolerated by police departments on holidays such as New Year's Eve and the Fourth of July.

Speaking to the *Canton Repository*, Marquetta noted that celebratory gunfire was a common practice in the neighborhood and for the family: "The kids were watching the countdown and we were going outside to shoot guns like everybody else does at New Year's. ... We do this every year because it was New Year's Eve. Everybody (in the neighborhood) was shooting. It was a tradition. Everybody shoots on New Year's Eve."

Due to the height of the wooden privacy fence around the family's yard, the killer cop had no way of knowing what or who they were shooting at. This did not stop the officer from taking a "shoot first ask for compliance after" approach, unloading at least seven rounds from his service pistol through the fence, striking and killing Williams. It took less than eight seconds after Williams began firing his rifle into the air for the officer to being shooting.

From the footage it is obvious that Williams posed no threat to the officer. From the cop's angle, Williams is never observed pointing his weapon at the police. It does not appear Williams even noticed police were prowling outside his house, guns drawn. In the audio released, no cops are heard warning or giving verbal commands to Williams. It is only after the cop fired his weapon through the fence, striking and killing Williams, that he announced his presence.

Anger is brewing in Canton and throughout the US. Outraged family and community members are demanding #JusticeForJamesWilliams. This past Wednesday, a candlelight vigil was held in Canton, while on Saturday, family members and Black Lives Matter activists marched on the Canton police precinct to demand accountability for James' death and that the unidentified officer be fired.

"I want justice for my husband and I want this officer terminated. We need his badge. This is not going underneath the rug," Marquetta told the assembled crowd on Saturday.

Defending his officer's actions, Canton Police Chief Jack Angelo told the *Canton Repository*: "It's not a requirement and it's not *feasible* for an officer involved in a shooting to always be able to verbalize before they respond in a matter of milliseconds when someone is firing a gun." (emphasis added)

He continued: "So it's not always mandatory that you have to give a verbal warning, especially *when you feel* someone is pointing a gun at you and is about to shoot you or has already fired a shot or two at you" (emphasis added). As a matter of fact, there has been no evidence presented by the police that Williams ever pointed his rifle at the police or fired "a shot or two" at them.

In capitalist America, a police officer just has to claim they felt a certain type of way in order to be "justified" in carrying out an extrajudicial execution.

Supporting the "special bodies of armed men" and their inalienable right to terrorize and murder the working class with impunity, the same day the footage was released, Republican state Attorney General David Yost, in a widely disseminated interview with the *Repository*, blamed Williams for his own

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death and cautioned: “Today is not the day for judgment.”

“It’s a stupid and extraordinary dangerous thing to do to shoot a gun off in the air—and it’s a crime and it can be a serious crime depending on what the consequences of it are,” said Yost.

Discharging a firearm within Canton city limits, far from being a death sentence, is a fourth-degree misdemeanor, punishable upon conviction by a maximum sentence of 30 days in jail and $250 fine. Outside city limits, firing a gun into the air is legal under certain circumstances according to the *Repository* .

Cynically comparing the killing of a human being to a football game, Yost, one of 10 Republican attorneys general who backed the would-be dictator Trump’s attempts to overthrow the electoral college votes of Pennsylvania in the 2020 election, told the public to ignore the body camera footage, and not believe their eyes.

“How many times have we been watching a football game and we thought it was fumble and it turns out on official review that shown on another camera angle the runner was down, or the pass was incomplete, or they were out of bounds?” Yost said.

Neither the district attorney, nor the Canton Police Department, have released any additional footage since this interview.

The same article in the *Repository* featured an interview with a long-time former Akron police detective. Unsurprisingly, the former cop backed up the district attorney: “Attorney Yost is correct. Don’t let a video totally dictate what your opinion is because many times the videos don’t capture the entire story.”

That Williams’ killer remains unnamed and free while cops and district attorneys are given ample column space to blame Williams for his death, is the latest example of “class justice” in the US. There is no doubt that had someone witnessed the cop shoot Williams and decided to fire back at his killer—no doubt fearing for their life—they would have already been arrested, if not “justifiably” killed on the spot.

The fact that Williams is African American, and it appears the cop who shot him is white, is not, as racialists in the Black Lives Matter movement and Democratic Party argue, evidence of “white supremacy.” No evidence has emerged showing that the cop killed Williams because of his skin color.

As witnessed in the recent killing of 14-year-old Valentina Orellana-Peralta, shot to death by a trigger-happy Los Angeles police officer while she was shopping for her *quinceañera* outfit before Christmas at a mall in a working class district in LA, the police are trained to lethally “neutralize” whatever they perceive as a “threat,” knowing full well they have the backing of the bourgeois courts and a compliant capitalist media, regardless of skin color.

While racist attitudes are no doubt cultivated and encouraged in police departments around the country, the over 1,000 people shot and killed by police every year are of every race and ethnicity, overwhelmingly working class and poor.

While it does not appear to be the case in this incident, those suffering from an untreated mental illness overwhelmingly make up the victims of lethal police violence. A 2015 report from the Treatment Advocacy Center found that a “minimum of 1 in 4 fatal police encounters ends the life of an individual with severe mental illness. At this rate, the risk of being killed during a police incident is 16 times greater for individuals with untreated mental illness than for other civilians approached or stopped by officers.”

No matter the skin color, psychical handicaps, or mental state of those impacted by police violence, appeals to the capitalist state for justice are doomed to failure. In the vast majority of cases, calls by the victims’ families and close-knit community members for justice are met with silence from the government, and/or a cover-up.

This is the case, even when the “threat” is an unarmed young white women, as in the killing of 25-year-old Hannah Fizer last June by a sheriff’s deputy in Missouri. In that case, after months of protests by the family, a special prosecutor ruled the shooting justified and declined to press charges against the officer because there was a “reasonable belief that he (the officer) is in imminent danger of serious physical injury or death, as a result of the actions of the suspect.”

In the case of Williams, since there is no question he was firing a weapon at the time the cop killed him, there is little doubt Yost, or a Democratic prosecutor, would reach a similar conclusion.

In the final analysis, the fight to end police violence and hold to account the killers of working class victims such as Orellana-Peralta, Fizer and Williams, requires a fight to end the capitalist system the police defend.

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