

Law Enforcement Officers and Directed Violence

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Law enforcement officers and others around the world mourn the police officers and civilians killed during several recent terrorist events. Some of these events, involving nothing less than the premeditated assassination of police officers, are indicative of the tragic state of affairs confronting modern society.

What kind of person is capable of carrying out such violent acts? What mental states could drive a person to target police officers or to engage in the random killing of persons unknown to them? The answers to these questions are complex, multifaceted, group influenced, and may be unique to any individual perpetrator.

In the United States we have recently experienced extreme violence that can be categorized as (1) terrorism associated with a radical cause driven by a radical belief agenda, and (2) violence directed at law enforcement officers by persons seeking revenge for what is perceived as unjustified white-officer utilization of deadly force against black persons.

Terrorism associated with a radical cause and a radical belief-system agenda.

It is an unfortunate fact that nearly everyone in most parts of the world is now too familiar with the horrendous acts of radical-agenda terrorists. Persons involved in the implementation of radical-agenda-driven violence not only seek to kill others, they often seek to kill as many others as possible. These persons are indiscriminate in their killing. Their acts of violence include bombing, shooting, stabbing, vehicular homicide, and other means to achieve their goal of killing.

While it is sometimes difficult to understand the appeal of belief systems that advocate the ruthless killing of others, there is no doubt that there are persons ready and willing to follow the direction of leaders espousing violence to achieve their radical-agenda goals. The perpetrators of this kind of violence willingly engage in murderous acts, sometime sacrificing themselves, in the name of agenda-driven personal or systemic beliefs. This is nothing new. Human beings have died and have killed in the name of their beliefs since recorded history. What is new is the effect that modern technology and social media has had and continues to have on the publicity and implementation of violent acts and violent radical agendas.

Human beings are creatures of cognition, emotion, and behavior. We perceive, think, reason, interpret, feel, and act. We are self-aware and view ourselves and the world in a myriad of ways. There are many theories about how we come to see ourselves and the world as we do. The ways in which we view ourselves and the world can be a source of conflict with others that do not see themselves and the world similarly. In fact, human history is characterized by such conflict. It takes only a cursory examination of human history to become aware of the long-standing nature of

disparate-belief human conflict. But human beings are complex. Therefore, it is no surprise that there is also historical record of remarkable peace and harmony among persons of differing views. Whether the views of different persons, groups, or societies create conflict or encourage toleration and harmony seems to depend upon the views themselves.

Views involve beliefs. So, to view the world as unsafe is simply another way of saying “I believe that the world is unsafe.” The belief that the world is unsafe will influence a person’s feelings and behavior. Therefore, if you believe that the world is unsafe you will likely experience anxiety, be suspicious, increase awareness of your surroundings, maybe arm yourself, and limit travel. Of course, the belief that the world is unsafe is an over-generalized belief. Few persons would argue against the idea that some parts of the world seem safe, or at minimum, are safer than others. The relevant idea here is that beliefs (thoughts) cause or at least influence feelings. Together, beliefs and feelings drive behavior...*any* behavior. The behavior that beliefs can drive includes the public beheading of innocent persons, all while the act is being broadcast worldwide via social media. If we did not understand the power of belief and associated emotion, such acts would be as incomprehensible as they are abhorrent.

When are beliefs translated into behavior? Practically all the time. Human conduct typically reflects the core beliefs that underlie individual behavior. This is true despite the fact that humans are capable of acting contrary to their beliefs.

When are radical violent beliefs translated into radical violent behavior? When they reach a subjective belief-to-action threshold.

Predicting radical-belief-based violent behavior

Accurately predicting radical-belief-based violence has proved challenging. This is largely because many indicators or “warning signs” of radical-belief-based violence are observed in persons that do not engage in such violence. This diminishes the predictive value of these indicators, even if they are commonly observed in radical-belief-based violent behavior.

Detection of imminent planned violence

Detecting imminent planned violence is also challenging. Like all radical-belief-based violence, there are few definitive indicators. To increase the probability of imminent planned violence detection, law enforcement officers should remain alert to persons that are in restricted or unusual locations, are in places during an unusual time of day, are avoidant or attempt to conceal themselves upon being seen by officers, are acting oddly within the social context, seem unduly nervous or stressed, are carrying backpacks or bags in conjunction with seeming nervous or stressed, and are dressed in clothing that appears inappropriate for weather conditions, such as wearing concealing jackets on hot days.

Indicators or warning signs of radical-belief-based violence

Indicators of radical-belief-based violence are cumulative. The more present, the greater the probability of violent behavior. Keep in mind that for some persons there may be no outward indicators of such violence, and even when present, many indicators are not easily observed.

Circumstances that increase the probability of radical-belief-based violence include:

1. A history of violence and antisocial behavior
2. Personal identification with a perceived persecuted group
3. A narrowing perception or tunnel-thinking about group ideology
4. An increasing sense of group member persecution
5. Open communication about wrongs perpetuated upon group members
6. Perceived attacks against strongly held beliefs and group ideology
7. Association with persons known to hold radical and use-of-violence beliefs
8. Talk of violence against perceived persecutors or symbolic representatives
9. Talk of needing to respond to a “call to arms” or violence issued by leaders
10. Attempts to solicit others to engage in radical-agenda violence
11. Growing acceptability of harming or killing others to further the group agenda
12. Conviction of mandate by higher power to kill non-believers or non-followers
13. Withdrawal from persons that do not hold similar radical and violent beliefs
14. Increased amount of time viewing radical agenda websites and newsfeeds
15. Increased participation in organized radical-belief group activities or rituals
16. Increased agitation and frustration with the status quo; increasing indignation
17. Frequent unwarranted visits to “soft” or known potential extremist targets
18. Checking and “testing” potential-target security personnel
19. Checking potential-target camera and surveillance systems
20. Past or recent travel to countries or locations known to train extremists
21. Prior arrests or imprisonment for radical-agenda behavior
22. The occurrence of a perceived trigger or “last-straw” event
23. Searching social media for bomb-making or weapon construction information
24. Acquisition of or attempts to acquire firearms, explosives, or other weapons
25. Creating a plan for violence; may range from simple to complex

World leaders, politicians and governments, law enforcement agencies, national militaries, and every responsible citizen must come together to combat radical-belief-based violence. This includes opposing any political or belief-system agenda that advocates the murder and extinction of others simply because they embrace different beliefs.

Violence directed at law enforcement officers by persons seeking revenge for what is perceived as unjustified white-officer utilization of deadly force against black persons.

There has been a recent (or resurgent) addition to the dangers regularly confronted by law enforcement officers. This additional danger consists of the planned killing of law enforcement officers by persons that are seeking retribution against the police for what they view as the unjustified killing of black persons by white officers. The very sad and tragic events that unfolded in Dallas and Baton Rouge are examples of this danger. In Dallas, five officers were killed and several more were wounded. In Baton Rouge, three officers were killed. In both incidents, police officers were targeted, and at least in the Dallas case, white police officers were specifically targeted. The shooters in both of these cases were black men, military veterans, angry at the police for what they viewed as unjustified white-officer shootings of black men.

Social media is replete with accounts of “white-officer verses black-person” bias. Is there such a bias in American policing? Considering the number of white law enforcement officers in America, it is not difficult to imagine that at least *some* of these officers might maintain a bias against black persons. Would such a bias result in differential white-officer/black-person treatment? Again, it is not difficult to imagine that at least *some* of the white officers that maintain a bias against black persons would engage in differential treatment. But “differential treatment” is not an all or nothing proposition. It is a complex personal and social construct that has wide behavioral variability over time and circumstances. This variability complicates the understanding of any white-officer bias toward black persons. (Utilizing the same rationale, it is not difficult to imagine that there also exists, at least for some black officers, a bias against white persons. However, our discussion here is limited to the current social perspective of white-officer/black person bias.)

Like all human beings, law enforcement officers are subject to bias. This notwithstanding, most officers manage their personal biases and avoid engaging in meaningful differential treatment.

In the most recent highly-publicized cases of white officers killing black persons in the line of duty, the primary explicit or implied question is, “Would these white officers have fired their weapon under the same circumstances if the person involved was white instead of black?” Some black advocates say “no”, some white officers say “yes.” Is there a way to retrospectively and objectively answer this question? No.

Officers (white and black) insist that decisions to use deadly force are based upon perceived level of threat. Officers are trained to respond to perceived threat. The threat does not have to be real...it only has to be perceived as real. Perceived deadly threats justify deadly force.

Some black advocates insist that white-officers are too quick to use deadly force against black persons and that this “quickness” is not seen when white officers are

interacting with white persons. In the most recent cases of white officers shooting black men, those critical of the officers' decision to shoot cite the idea that the bias of white officers against black persons causes the officers to view black people, especially black men, as more of a threat than white people. This, some advocates claim, results in white officers shooting black men under circumstances wherein they would not shoot a white man.

The situation is not helped by those that comprise special interest groups with a predetermined agenda. Such groups show little interest in facts and often move beyond equal-treatment-for-all advocacy. Instead, they seek to sensationalize, too frequently promote false narratives, present inaccurate information as factual, and prey upon the emotion of others to advance their cause. These groups, and spokespersons for these groups, would achieve more positive outcomes for everyone if they advocated for peace and patience until the facts of any white officer/black person shooting incident are known. A common retort to this proposal is that investigating officers, especially if white, will not fairly investigate the incident. There is the enduring idea that the police will protect their own...even in cases where involved officers acted inappropriately. This suspicion sometimes moves beyond the police investigation to include the actions of grand juries, independent investigators, and civilian review boards. On the other side, some police officers and social scientists maintain that black politicians, black advocacy groups, and black community leaders do not do enough to address the anti-police "thug culture" present in troubled black communities. They go on to say that participation in the thug culture makes black men more dangerous to police officers, thereby facilitating at least some white-officer bias toward black persons, especially black males. No matter how it is expressed, there is little doubt that any culture or sub-culture that views the police as the enemy increases the danger to all officers, black and white. Such are the difficulties confronting America today.

A great deal has been made of white officers shooting unarmed black men. Is this criticism warranted? Perhaps in some cases, but the truth is that most police officers make appropriate decisions about the use of deadly force, regardless of race. Officers are acutely aware that their actions in any shooting will be scrutinized and that they will be held accountable for what they did or did not do. In shooting incidents, most officers desire only to have their account heard before a false, or at the least, incomplete interpretation of events emerges.

No one should assume that because a person was "unarmed" in the traditional sense (not in possession of a gun, knife, or other deadly object) that he or she does not and cannot represent a deadly threat to police officers. Even unarmed persons are capable of harming or killing officers with their hands, fists, feet, nails, and teeth. Additionally, if a person is willing to physically attack an officer, the officer's firearm and other police equipment is always in the mix. Over the years too many officers have been killed or wounded by persons that have assaulted officers, managed to obtain the officer's gun, and used it against the officer. The issue of police officers shooting unarmed persons would be better addressed if race was taken out of the

equation. Instead, the actual circumstances of any particular “unarmed” shooting incident should be thoroughly investigated, including the behavior of the person within the context it occurred. Only then can the justification of deadly force be appropriately assessed by the proper authorities.

In an article on police-officer/black-person shootings titled “Police kill more whites than blacks, but minority deaths generate more outrage,” Valerie Richardson reported, “Meanwhile, the deaths of whites at the hands of law enforcement typically receive less attention, even when the case is shrouded in controversy. For example, Gilbert Collar, an 18-year-old white student at the University of South Alabama, was shot and killed while naked, unarmed and under the influence of drugs by a black police officer. The officer, Trevis Austin, was cleared of wrongdoing in 2013 by a Mobile County grand jury in a case that received little media coverage outside Alabama. Mr. Collar’s parents filed a federal lawsuit last year against the officer” (Washington Times, April 21, 2015).

To improve the current situation, everyone must make an effort. Political leaders, law enforcement officers, advocacy group leaders, and citizens must come together so that a more positive police and community relationship can be established or restored in troubled areas.

Police administrators must procure the funding to appropriately train and equip officers...not an easy task for most law enforcement agencies. Officers must be well-trained in not only how to use their firearms but also when to use them. Unfortunately, in many cases, officers do not have much time to observe, interpret, decide, and act when it comes to defending themselves or others with deadly force.

There is little doubt that the lives of many police officers and others have been saved by officers making split-second decisions to shoot. Due to the nature of policing, which too often involves confronting persons willing to harm or kill police officers, officers must be permitted to defend themselves. Officers cannot be asked by society or any segment of society to bet their lives on the unknown intentions or capabilities of those that are perceived as a deadly threat. Conversely, officers must remain mindful of the awesome responsibility they assume when they are sworn in as law enforcement officers. They must continually strive to interact with all persons in a fair and equitable manner, despite any personal bias. “Serve and Protect” and similar police maxims should never be mentally relegated to a catchy phrase painted on police vehicles. “Serve and protect” is and should remain a policing philosophy.

There certainly is some divide between whites and blacks in America. Surely not in all places at all times with all people, but it would be naïve to think that there is not a racial disconnect in this country. When it comes to the current issue of (1) white police officers interacting with black persons, and (2) respect for law enforcement officers, Michael Jordan, former basketball star and current owner of the Charlotte Hornets, put it succinctly, “We need to find solutions that ensure people of color receive fair and equal treatment AND that police officers — who put their lives on the line every day to

protect us all — are respected and supported.” (from a post titled “I Can No Longer Stay Silent,” July 25, 2016). To this end, he pledged to contribute one million dollars to the International Association of Chiefs of Police Institute for Community-Police Relations and one million dollars to the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.

We know where we need to go. We just need to figure out how to get there. In the meantime there are a few things we can do...

Law enforcement officers:

1. Remain true to the ideals of fair and equitable law enforcement and protection for all persons. Do not forget why you do what you do.
2. Keep in mind that many persons do not understand what it is like to be a law enforcement officer. They will never understand what it feels like to work in an “assumption of possible threat” environment that includes coming into contact with persons who would intentionally harm police officers. Therefore, many people will only be capable of second guessing officer actions. They will be unable to understand why officers sometimes act as they do.
3. Consider that many persons asking for greater police accountability are not necessarily anti-police. There is common ground for police/community relationship improvement where it is needed.
4. Become part of the solution. Create, influence, and energize positive interactions within your community. Work to positively change the organizational climate of your agency if needed. Recall and reclaim the values that first brought you to policing.
5. Do not forget that there is a great deal of positive support for law enforcement throughout the country...from people of all races, backgrounds, and beliefs.
6. Remain alert. This is a trying time for law enforcement officers in America and throughout the world. Conscientiousness is the first line of defense against those who might look to harm or kill police officers. Policing has never been risk free. Use your training, tactics, and technology to increase your officer safety margin.
7. Avoid shutting out concerned spouses and family members. Talk to them about the challenges and dangers currently facing law enforcement officers. Include discussion of how you and your department are managing these dangers.

Law enforcement spouses and other family members:

1. Talk to your officer about your views, fears, and any other concerns. Avoid suppressing your feelings. You do not have cope with your feelings alone.
2. Arrange for “check in” calls or texts from your officer during the officer’s shift if needed to manage your anxiety, Make the arrangement flexible as officer’s work demands are variable. This makes strict check-in routines impractical.
3. Keep in mind that officers know the risks of the job. They accept the risks and are trained to manage them.
4. Trust your law enforcement officer to keep himself or herself safe.

Parents:

1. Talk to your children about the importance of education, avoiding drug use and gang involvement, peer pressure, appropriate social behavior, and respecting others...including the police. Make it safe for your children to talk to you.
2. Maintain high expectations. Many children will live up to the positive or negative expectations of their parents. Be reasonable. Do not make expectations so demanding that your children cannot meet them.
3. Teach a value system. Many parents seldom talk to their children about personal values. Include a discussion of work ethic. Much of what can be achieved is related to how hard a person of any age is willing to work for it.
4. Do not overwhelm young children with information they are not yet capable of processing or understanding. This is especially true for children that have been frightened by reports of terrorism and other violence. If they fear for the safety of their police-officer parent, discuss their fears and provide reassurance in an age appropriate manner.
5. Most importantly, model the behavior that you wish from your children.