When Tragedy Leaves Divide
Fractured Relations Between the Police and City Hall Can Take Years to Recover

By ASHBY JONES
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The current tension between New York Mayor Bill de Blasio and the police department follows in a long line of conflicts between law enforcement’s rank-and-file and city officials in New York and elsewhere.

It is a lineage that runs through other tragedies with racial overtones, including the Rodney King incident in Los Angeles and the Crown Heights riots in Brooklyn, N.Y., both in the 1990s.

“These conflicts arise in cities periodically, and it takes both time and a lot of hard work for cities to put things back together,” said Laurie Levenson, a criminal-law expert at Loyola Law School in Los Angeles.

Tension between Mr. de Blasio and the city’s biggest police union ramped up after the killings of two police officers, Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu, who were gunned down as they sat inside a marked police car in Brooklyn on Saturday.

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Police union leaders jumped on Mr. de Blasio, who had earlier expressed sympathy with protesters after a grand jury declined earlier this month to indict an officer involved in the death of an unarmed black man.

**In the Line of Duty**

Number of U.S. law enforcement officers killed as a result of felonious acts

75

![Bar chart showing the number of U.S. law enforcement officers killed as a result of felonious acts from 2005 to 2013.](chart)

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation

The Wall Street Journal

"That blood on the hands starts on the steps of City Hall in the office of the mayor," said Patrick Lynch, head of the Patrolman's Benevolent Association, at a news conference. Other police officials urged Mr. de Blasio to resign.

The mayor's aides said the mayor had been supportive of police officers and only called for demonstrators to be peaceful.

Cities and towns elsewhere in the U.S. in recent years have dealt with similar situations, triggered typically by an incident that divided a police force from the community it serves.

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Most recently, riots broke out in Ferguson, Mo., first after an unarmed black man was killed by a police officer in August and last month after a grand jury declined to bring criminal charges against the officer. In November’s incidents, a group of rioters attacked a police car and threw objects at police. Officers responded with smoke canisters and later tear gas.

Relations between police and the community have been strained in Oakland, Calif., since the 2009 fatal shooting of an unarmed black man, Oscar Grant III, by a white transit officer. Although Bay Area Rapid Transit officer Johannes Mehserle said he meant to use a Taser instead of the handgun that killed Mr. Grant on a train platform in the city on New Year’s Day that year, months of protests, sometimes violent, ensued.

Mr. Mehserle was later convicted of involuntary manslaughter.

Anti-police activists have continued demonstrations on a regular basis against that and what they call other instances of police abuse against blacks and other minorities in Oakland.

In Los Angeles, tensions between City Hall and the city’s police department thickened in 1992, after four police officers were acquitted of assault in the videotaped beating of Mr. King.
At the time, the city's mayor, Tom Bradley, assailed the verdict. "The jury's verdict will never blind us to what we saw on that videotape," said Mr. Bradley during a 1992 news conference.

"The men who beat Rodney King do not deserve to wear the uniform of the LAPD."

The chill between the mayor's office and the LAPD that resulted took years to thaw, even after Mr. Bradley left office in 1993.

"The police unions were very tough on us," recalled Richard Riordan, who succeeded Mr. Bradley as mayor. "You had to learn to both stand up to the police unions—and make friends with them. It was the only way to move forward."

In the summer of 1991, a race riot broke out in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn after a car in a motorcade carrying the Lubavitch grand rabbi struck and killed a 7-year old black boy. Residents took to the streets in protest, and stabbed and killed a 29-year old Hasidic, Yankel Rosenbaum.

New York City Mayor David Dinkins was widely criticized at the time for failing to mobilize the police more quickly to break up the violence. The following year, thousands of off-duty police officers angrily rallied to protest Mr. Dinkins's proposal to create a civilian board to investigate claims of police misconduct. The officers ignored barricades and blocked traffic on the Brooklyn Bridge.
Law-enforcement experts largely agreed that such incidents typically can have long-lasting effects, largely because they sow distrust among all the constituencies.

David Thomas, a senior research fellow with the Police Foundation, a Washington, D.C.,-based law-enforcement research organization, said the latest New York City incident will exacerbate tension between the protesters and law enforcement, as well as impact the public perception of the protesters.

People will be more likely to see the killing of the officers as an “extension” of the protests, Mr. Thomas said.

William Terrill, a criminal justice professor at Michigan State University said the New York shooting will likely cause police to intensify use of force rather than re-examine it.

“I fear the police will become even more suspicious and see everyone as a danger and that us versus them will continue to embed itself within the culture,” Mr. Terrill said.

“This is a real setback in my mind. It is going to energize law enforcement to say, yeah, we need to be suspicious of folks and use force in the manner we do.”

That renewed emphasis will mean more use of force in questionable situations, followed by public anger. “It turns into a cycle,” he said.

—Gary Fields and Jim Carlton contributed to this article.

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