

DAILY NEWS

# Malcolm Sparrow: The ever-swinging police-community pendulum

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It's not binary (STEPHANIE KEITH/STEPHANIE KEITH FOR THE NEW YORK)

The week's events, sadly, typify and may exacerbate the clash of views over policing in America.

First, two more black men shot dead by police. Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, La., who, as revealed in bystander videos, was already pinned down by officers when he was killed. Then Philando Castile, shot dead during a traffic stop for a broken tail-light in St. Paul, Minn., while reaching, according to his girlfriend, for his driving license.

Both were armed, but the video evidence made public suggests these killings were nevertheless entirely preventable, regardless of whether investigations deem them "justifiable" under current legal doctrine.

Then, of course, came Thursday's events in Dallas, where a sniper shot dead five officers and wounded nine others at the end of an otherwise peaceful demonstration. In negotiations with police before he was killed, the shooter said he wanted to kill police officers, especially white ones.

This stings especially because the Dallas Police Department prides itself on its commitment to community policing and the strong emphasis it has placed on de-escalation skills for officers.

I'm a former cop, and I noticed the volatility even in my own reaction to these events: appalled and disgusted with police on Wednesday, then supportive and empathetic towards them on Thursday. Chances are the nation swings similarly from one set of sympathies to the other. That seems natural enough.

But it is not helpful and makes no sense to lurch from anti-cop to pro-cop and then back again based on the events of one day. Nor does it make any sense to be anti-cop or pro-cop in general, given the vast spectrum of competence, professionalism, decency and integrity to be found across the profession and within different departments.

Are we asked to be pro-teacher or anti-teacher? Pro-nurse or anti-nurse? It depends, of course, on the character and the competence of each teacher or nurse.

Yet this volatility in levels of support for police, based on who was killed last, makes it impossible to set a clear course for improvement, as we're not entirely sure on any given day which way we're facing or what the priorities are.

To make any progress, we need clear expectations on both sides.

First, we need concerted action to reduce the extraordinary levels of police violence, which put American police off the charts when compared with their first-world counterparts. As the Guardian newspaper notes based on their own efforts to collate and catalogue police killings in the U.S. and elsewhere, "America is not an outlier . . . it is the outlier."

Meanwhile, no national statistics are collected on police shootings or killings in the U.S., a situation that FBI Director James Comey has described as "embarrassing and ridiculous." Without that data, we can't even do the analysis to find the flaws in policy, procedures and training.

Second, we need to be clear about what kind of police services we expect. Citizens of a mature democracy should demand policing that is responsive to their needs, tolerant of diversity and skillful in tackling crime and other community problems.

That's quite different from being so stridently anti-crime, pro-cop, that we end up indulging the police, excusing them for some level of brutality and corruption on the basis that they're doing society's dirty work for us.

We should expect officers to be decent, courteous, humane, sparing and skillful in the use of force, respectful of citizens' rights, disciplined and professional.

Cops like that deserve a great deal of respect and support from the community. Whenever uniformed military are invited to board the plane first, I find myself thinking, "Why not police too?"

*Sparrow, formerly a detective chief inspector with the British Police, is now a professor of public management at Harvard's Kennedy School. His recent book is "Handcuffed: What Holds Policing Back, and the Keys to Reform."*