

# **The Consequences of No Accountability**

**By Dr. Ronald Harris Parker**

On May 4<sup>th</sup> 1970 I was a student at Kent State University. That day I was an eyewitness to twenty-eight National Guard soldiers firing approximately 67 rounds of M-1 rifle ammunition into a crowd of unarmed peaceful students over a period of 13 seconds. The end result was the killing of four students and wounding of nine others.

In the aftermath, the President's Commission on Campus Unrest concluded "the indiscriminate firing of rifles into a crowd of students and the deaths that followed were "unnecessary, unwarranted and inexcusable."

Yet no one in the National Guard was held accountable.

That was 1970, could it happen nowadays?

The answer to that question becomes one of practices. Does the National Guard have the proper practices in place to hold soldiers accountable for their actions? Then the next more significant question becomes whether or not the National Guard, with proper practices in place, will in fact hold soldiers accountable for their behaviors?

This situation is very similar to the challenges faced by law enforcement agencies today. Unless practices of a police department reflect their policies, their policies are of no avail. Said differently, a police department can have multiple policies addressing various infractions, but if the infractions bear no consequence, then the policy has no effect.

Many police officers today have a history of complaints lodged against them by the general public. The sheer number of police officers needed to protect our community means that bad cops are a statistical certainty. They survive because the case against them was closed with "no discipline" or if there was a ruling, it was a written reprimand. Written reprimands for the most part bear no significant consequence. Thus chances are the behavior will be repeated.

The upshot of this is that many police officers operate in an environment where there are no significant consequences for their borderline behaviors. The effect of this situation is that these same police officers will have a license to continue to overestimate the severity of the crime at issue. They will continue to misinterpret whether the suspect is an immediate threat to them or others. They will continue to overstate whether an individual is actively resisting arrest or attempting to evade arrest by flight. In essence, they have a license to engage in logic that is neither linear nor rational.

I have a good opinion of law enforcement. I feel the world of policing in 2022 is that police can do 1,000 things right, and when one officer does something wrong, the media blankets all of law enforcement with this adverse event. We rarely hear of law enforcement's achievements.

I also think most officers adhere to their department's policies and procedures. These are the same people that will tell you they joined the department to serve and protect the community. The prominent corner office, the big car, the vacation home were not their goals. They leave their homes each day and hear their companion tell them, "Have a good day and be safe." They know they may witness horrific personal crimes and have exposure to death. They know they may have to make immediate decisions of criminality based upon interpretation of ambiguous behaviors. They know that the abnormal will become routine and that "not all squirrels live in the woods."

Yet their job remains to serve, protect and care for the citizenry's general well being.

If someone would ask me what I thought was the most essential service that law enforcement provides to a community, I would say protection. I want the police to protect me and my family from "harm's way." I want to be able to dial 911 and know protection and assistance are coming as soon as possible. I want to sleep at night knowing the police are awake.

However for many communities throughout the country this logic is counterintuitive. For these communities, the police themselves create the element of danger and represent "harm's way." These same people possess a conditioned reflex of suspicion and fear associated with interaction with law enforcement. Quite simply, many cannot trust the police. They feel safer when the police are not around.

When attempting to address these issues with law enforcement agencies I am amazed at how many people tell me, "We don't have those problems in our department." I remember thinking this is a tricky world I was entering into not because I am right or wrong but because there are people out there who oppose any discussion of the issue and immediately shut the conversation down. I've always rationalized this reaction as simply a built in allergy to unpleasant or disturbing information. Or perhaps they are engaging in escapism or insulation from their realities. Bottom line is that some people simply hear what they want to hear.

I try to live in reality and I also attempt to listen in a different way. Based on what I see and hear and based on my experience at Kent State University on May 4<sup>th</sup> 1970, I understand that there are individuals capable of shooting and killing other individuals without provocation. I also know that in many cases in the end, there will be no accountability for those involved. Not a lot of progress in fifty-two years. We appear to still be challenged by the notion that power that isn't watched tends to get abused.

I wish Police Reform efforts the best of luck and I hope things will change.

Bio

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