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# Philly's Cop Beating: No Rodney King

By Sean Scully/Philadelphia

In many ways, we've seen it before: caught on tape, a mob of police officers surrounding and savagely beating a seemingly subdued suspect. The officers are white. The man writhing on the ground is black. National civil rights activists then arrive seeking justice for the injured. But in many ways, the latest case — in Philadelphia on May 5 — is different.

Where similar cases, from [Rodney King in Los Angeles](#) to Sean Bell in New York, have provoked protests and even violence, the reaction in Philadelphia has been muted ever since a news helicopter caught more than a dozen white officers kicking and beating three black men who were arrested as suspects in a shooting on a city street. "This was just a very unusual situation and I think the public reacted to it as an unusual situation," says Mayor Michael Nutter, who was swift to denounce the beatings after the tape showed on local television. "It doesn't represent anywhere near the norm in Philadelphia... We acted very directly, very swiftly, we told the truth and we'll let the investigation play out and let the chips fall where they may."

Even outspoken local civil rights activists have been reluctant to raise an uproar. Philadelphia's NAACP head J. Whyatt Mondesire, not a man known to be shy about criticizing the city police, publicly dismissed [the Rev. Al Sharpton](#) when he called the case "worse than Rodney King" and came to town to visit one of the beaten suspects. "We let him know we didn't particularly like outsiders coming in and making comments about a situation he wasn't aware of," Mondesire told TIME. "But he practices his own brand of headline grabbing. So let him do his own thing."

For his part, Sharpton said he had not come to Philadelphia to provoke controversy. "Reaction to what? I didn't call for any reaction. If I had called a march or called a gathering I can see [why people would say nothing came of it]." He came to do mainly one thing: "I met with the mother." As for Mondesire's comments, Sharpton told TIME, "I guess he's into organizational competition."

What makes this incident in Philadelphia different? Mondesire said it is a combination of weariness and

hope in the minority community — weariness because they have seen Philadelphia police go unpunished in other high-profile cases dating back to the 1960s, but hope because the new mayor and his new police Commissioner Charles Ramsey, a veteran of turnaround projects at troubled departments, seem to be responding aggressively to the beating. "They jumped on it right away, they didn't hesitate," Mondesire says. "They immediately stepped into the investigation, they immediately took them off street duty, which is different" from the official response to previous brutality cases in the city, including the similar case of Thomas Jones, whose beating by city police was caught on camera in 2000.

There are several more immediate reasons why Philadelphians might be unusually willing to cut police a break, or to be less than fully sympathetic with the men who were beaten. The city has been in a grip of a wave of shootings in recent years. There were 392 homicides in 2007 and 406 the year before in a city of less than a million and a half residents. In some parts of the city, gunfire is a common sound and it's hardly unheard-of for innocent bystanders to be injured or killed. Nutter, who is black, was elected mayor last year in part on his promise to reduce the killings in a city weary of constant gunplay. "The rise in homicides makes it really clear that [the police] are operating under a level of stress," says longtime Philadelphia *Daily News* columnist Elmer Smith. "That doesn't necessarily cause the community to give them a pass, but certainly causes them to be less inclined to leap to the conclusion that they are an occupying army, that these people don't care about us. It's that dangerous out there."

The three men involved in the May 5 beating were suspects in a North Philadelphia shooting, in which someone shot into a crowded city street. Lawyers for the men have denied that their clients were involved in any gunfire and say police are covering up the real reason for the beating — that they may have mistaken one of the passengers for a man wanted in the shooting of a fellow officer. That shooting, just two days earlier, took the life of Sgt. Stephen Liczbinski. The officer had just stopped a car with three men suspected in a mid-day bank robbery when one of the men opened fire with a semi-automatic rifle, killing Liczbinski in the middle of a residential street. One suspect was arrested, another was killed in a shootout shortly thereafter, but by Monday May 5th, police had been unable to locate the third man.

Police deny that mistaken identity was behind the May 5 beatings, but nobody doubts that the killing of Liczbinski and the tense manhunt that followed had officers and residents on edge. Says Nutter, "There is no justification for what we saw on the videotape and we will deal with that during the investigatory process. I've said it many, many times — that kind of conduct is certainly unacceptable and there is no question about that." He adds, "I think people generally know we have a respectful police department and we're dealing with a lot of violence and we're trying to get thing under control. There is a general sense it's an out-of-control situation and it's a very professional department. It was a bad situation and we acknowledged it was bad from the start."

Still, despite the relatively low-key public response to the beatings, the situation could still change for the worse. The FBI and the local district attorney have said they are monitoring the department's internal investigation and could bring charges against the officers. Ramsey has been under pressure to revamp the department's policy on the use of violence in the face of 35 incidents in two years where police have killed civilians. Smith says the black

community has its eye on Nutter — one of a new, younger, and largely untested generation of African-American leaders — and expects him to live up to his promises to deal with this incident forthrightly. (After all, the Los Angeles riots began as a result of the trial of the police involved in the Rodney King beating.) "I am afraid if this arrest proves really shaky and nothing happens to these cops, that could really increase tension — summer is coming," Smith says. "But I think they're going to handle it the right way."

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