

Bhtv-2016-07-08-loury-mcwhorter

LOURY: We're on the way. Hello John McWhorter. Glenn Loury here at bloggingheads.tv.

MCWHORTER: I'm well, how are you?

LOURY: I'm getting by on a tough day John. We are talking just hours after horrible events -- the shooting deaths of two African American men at the hands of white police officers in --

MCWHORTER: Within 48 hours.

LOURY: -- in Baton Rouge Louisiana and also in suburban Saint Paul Minnesota. Video tapes anguished words from the girlfriend of the fellow, I'm sorry I forget his name... in Minnesota --

MCWHORTER: His name is... I'm embarrassed. I forget his name. I could look it up right now.

LOURY: First name -- his nickname is Phil, I know that much, but --

MCWHORTER: Yeah it's an unusual name.

LOURY: I don't remember the last name, that's awful, we're going to have to remember these names. Then there is Anton [sic] Sterling who is the young man who is tackled by two police officers and then shot on video in Baton Rouge Louisiana.

MCWHORTER: The gentleman's name was Philando Castile.

LOURY: All right, Philando Castile, indeed. Phil Castile and Anton Sterling, names that we'll be hearing a good deal more of to outrage expressions of fury and despair and concern that provoked rallies across the country in the American cities of New York City being one of them, Dallas, Texas being another, and then John literally just hours ago we just heard that a sniper, maybe with accomplices, that attacked police officers in Dallas killing five of them if I'm not mistaken, wounding seven more and wounding two civilians creating havoc on that scene. He was ultimately himself taken out by police counter actions. Other accomplices -- or alleged accomplices are now in custody. Everyone has been talking about this outbreak of violence, outbreak of racial violence and we're here to chew this over a bit. And I might just say before I give you a chance to speak, that I don't quite know what to say. I mean, I know that whatever anyone says, anyone with a public platform such as we have, is consequential. It contributes to the general tenor of the discussion of these issues. One wants to be responsible. One wants not to descend on to a kind of partisan finger pointing. One wants to be mindful of the fact that all the evidence -- all of these cases that I've mentioned is not yet in and

more is undoubtedly going to be learned in the days ahead. One is aware of the fact that people are taking sides and if you say anything critical about anything, you will appear to have been on one side or the other. And that is -- at least for me -- I don't know about you, but gives me pause. It makes me feel cautious and guarded. I mean there are thoughts in my head that I don't know if I can say them. I don't know if I should say them. I don't know if they're right, but... anyway, I don't know. What do you have to say for yourself here?

MCWHORTER: Well, I am disinclined to believe that the answer to all of this is that there is not a racial element involved.

LOURY: You're saying you don't believe that there is not a racial element. Which means there is a racial element.

MCWHORTER: These men being black does have something to do with this. I do believe that these cops are often doing things that they would be less inclined to do if dealing with a white equivalent exhibiting the same behavior. And if that weren't true I would be one of the first people to be taking my lumps by saying so, but I don't know Glenn. I'm unaware of anybody on any side of the spectrum who has presented a very simple list of white lower class men who have been, not just harassed, I've seen those lists, but

killed in their cars, running away -- these same things in this same way. It simply isn't true that there is a narrative along the lines of what's going on with these black men that's going on white men too that the media somehow suppresses if it were being asked not to pay attention to, because if that were the case, especially with the media the way it is now, we would know. And so this is something that happens to black people more and I think it is thoroughly reasonable to suppose that color has to do with these split second decisions. No, the police are not running around trying to off black men, it's not a war on black men, but there's a racial element here. The way I think of the cops is, and I've said this since I wrote my Losing the Race. The extent to which racism matters in this country I think is vastly exaggerated. The issue is not whether it exists -- the issue is whether it matters and I think that we are religiously trained to pretend that it matters more than it does and that leaves the sorts of things you and I don't like such as the over concern with things like micro-aggression, cultural-appropriation, the 'n' word. On all of that you and I are in agreement, but I've always said that the problem with the cops is like a house has burned down but the chimney is left. That's the one thing where I do see what everybody

means and I think that it stands in the way of us ever getting past race in this country because when a black person who is not like you or me says that racism is what America is all about -- they don't mean micro-aggressions or cultural appropriation. What they really mean is the cops. That's the first thing they're going to start about. I've seen that a numbing number of times. That's what this is. Now it's just chance that two of these events happened to happen in the same week, but they illustrate a real problem. Now, Mike Brown -- yes -- oddly enough that is now probably the best known case after Trayvon Martin. That did not go down the way we were told. It's quite clear, it's at the point where those who say that it did are basically as John [Ford?] sometimes did printing the legend rather than the truth, but with Alton Sterling and Phil -- what's his last name again?

LOURY: Castille.

MCWHORTER: So Phil Castille -- I don't think it's likely that when we learn the details we're going to exonerate those officers. I don't think there's anything that either one of those men could have been doing that would have justified their being (inaudible).

LOURY: Let me grant that -- what you propose there is true -
- that there is no justification in either of those cases.

I don't think we know that, but you speculate that it's so and let me grab that for the sake of argument. What has their being black got to do with it? I mean -- I don't mean that to be a silly question; I know that race matters in American society. What in those specific cases lead you -- I'm talking about in those cases, not in the generic atmosphere -- to think that the officers were racially motivated. The officers happened to have been white and those guys happened to have been black. You're basically saying what the Governor of Minnesota said which is that Anton -- not Anton Sterling -- Philando Castille would be alive if he had been white and I want to know how you and the Governor of Minnesota know that.

MCWHORTER: Very simply. Of course there is some muddy areas here and not racially motivated because the word motivated implies that these cops are actually actively seeking --

LOURY: OK --

MCWHORTER: Well all these things are things that happened in the moment.

LOURY: Just to counter factual, if the guy had been white it wouldn't have happened. How do you know that?

MCWHORTER: Where's the list of white men that this has happened to? Where's the list? Somebody would have pulled one out by now, probably a right wing person, maybe not.

Where is the list of cases like this where white guys sitting in his car and he is asked to put his hands up and instead he reaches down into his back pocket and he gets shot. Do white people not reach into their pockets occasionally rather than put their hands up? That's the evidence. It's as simple as that. And nobody has presented the list which I think is a case of negative evidence being conclusive in this case. It would be so useful, wouldn't it?

LOURY: You are aware, are you not, that amongst all persons in the United States killed by police that twice -- roughly twice as many white as blacks have been victimized.

MCWHORTER: Mm-hmm, but where's the list?

LOURY: So you're supposing -- and I'm not disputing it. I simply don't know, I want to know how you know -- you're proposing that in those cases where those many whites, not the same rate, blacks at a higher rate per person in the population, but in the absolute numbers there are twice as many, roughly, whites who are killed by police in a given year than blacks. So you're proposing that in all of those cases, where the whites are killed -- none of those provocative and disturbing in the same way -- and while I don't have a list -- you've asked for a list and I don't have a list -- I will look for it. I don't know if that's

true. Let me give you a counter argument. My counter argument would be, it's a combination of things among which race would be one. Class would be another. The local circumstances that is the kinds of neighborhoods or the nature of the climate of crime and disorder, whatever, that might condition a police officer's fears may be another. The nature of the encounters that happened between people - - I don't know if there is a difference by race in the character of those encounters. Might be another. A combination of things. I say that to say I have two sons - - three sons actually, one of them is in their 40s -- I have two young sons who are in their 20s. One lives in San Francisco and the other lives in suburban Boston. They're both black. I somehow don't think and forgive me, perhaps I'm being naïve, that they're at the same risk as would be somebody who lived in a high crime district in inner city Boston where there was gang activity, where there was a lot of dicey kind of activity going on late at night and such like that and they're driving around at midnight, one o'clock in the morning with a broken tail light and they get pulled over. That circumstance strikes me as one that is much more fraught with risk. Race might factor into it but it wouldn't be the only thing than the circumstances in which my sons would normally find themselves. While I'm

black and while I'm aware of what's going on in America -- I wonder if I wanted to have a simple racialization of these circumstances and I wonder too, and we could look into this, whether or not whites of modest, working class, lower income, living in drug troubled districts of whatever town or city they might be living in where police have encounters that sometimes turn violent -- I know this has to happen. Whether or not they're immune to this kind of police (violence)... So I'm reluctant to endorse the position that you just take although I'm prepared to credit that it's not implausible.

MCWHORTER: Well it depends on what we mean by racialization and I can come closer to you in saying this, one thing that we know -- we're not supposed to say it, but we know -- is it's already happening. Black boys in big cities all over the United States killing each other over nothing. You can read about this sort of thing happening here in New York, day after day, I don't even have to look to see what color the people are. And the simple fact is there are no agglomerations of white boys doing this or at least if there are, it's very few and it's very local. The reason you know is because you never hear about it and there's no reason the media would suppress it -- it black boards who are doing that. Now I'm saying that to say that these cops

are clearly extremely afraid of a black man shooting them. Most of these incidents involve a cop who is nervous that somebody reaches somewhere and they're going to pull out a gun and no, they're not getting that from nowhere. It could be called racialized that the black men in the front seat who reaches to get his wallet is seen as possibly reaching for a gun; where the white man would be less likely to be mistaken in that way because the cops encounter so many fewer gangs of white men with guns shooting each other. Now, is it racism that means that there are more black teenagers doing this than white teenagers? We've talked about that -- if you're going to say that's because of racism, it's so abstract that it's hard to make any really coherent case. Is a cop racist to be more afraid of a black boy with a gun than a white boy with a gun when he meets so many black boys with guns and so very many fewer white boys with guns -- that's a tough one. Nonetheless, it does mean that at the moment of these encounters the person's color matters. Now what I'm seeing from my Facebook friends, etc. makes it seem as if this fear of black men has no logical basis whatsoever and we're just talking about prejudice out of gone with the wind. Obviously it's not that simple. But, I do believe that Philando Castille would be more likely to be alive if his

name was Jessie Pinkett -- I'm making up a white name. I really do! Now is that (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) - - to get -- I don't know.

LOURY: I think your position which is very widely held is reasonable. OK. The position that racial -- let's call it implicit bias -- that's the phrase of art these days, you see the race of the person and you have to make a split second judgement and decision and you make that decision somewhat differently even if unaware of it yourself based on the racial identity of the person. I don't think that's crazy. I think that's real. There's plenty of that evidence in the experimental social psychology literatures to support that. People have done all kinds of observations and experiments finding evidence of this kind of bias. Even blacks can be subject to this kind of bias encountering other black people and so on. The question is whether or not, when events like this happen, someone gets killed by a police officer, this is a very serious matter. Someone had -- there's a volunteer community watch person, call him George Zimmermann, and there is a young man who's black and they end up in an altercation and he gets shot. There is a dispute between a young man, call him Michael Brown, and a police officer on the streets of Ferguson, they get into a conflict and the kid ends up dead. These

things that draw thousands of people into the streets and cities across the country that become fodder for a narrative that can engender a movement that causes people to become very angry. Perhaps so angry that some of them, nutty, evil, go out and take the lives of white police officers purely because they're white and they're police officers which is what seems to happen in Dallas, Texas. When we're dealing with matters like that plausible speculations about motive that involve race and the heightened -- the intensity of conflict and feed and fuel an atmosphere of fear of anger of hatred and so on. We should be slow, not quick, to reach for such formulations, albeit plausible formulations. We should try to tamp that down rather than fire it up. If Jesse Jackson goes on national television and says that a young man was a victim of a legal lynching -- this is the young man, Anton Sterling in Baton Rouge, and I saw as everyone has seen, you know the cell phone video of what is an awful event and it doesn't look like it could possibly have been justified. I don't know the facts, I wasn't there, I didn't see everything before and after and so forth. There will be an inquest and investigation, we will learn more. But it didn't look very good for the cops at all. They seemed to have been behaving very badly. But to call such a thing a

legal lynching and to repair to this idea that here we go once again in the 21st century but not that much has changed. They used to hang black people from trees and now cops gun them down in the street. I loathe to go there John. I don't think that's a responsible way of talking about these circumstances and I know I'll get myself into trouble for saying so. And I can be dead wrong. It may be proven that the cops in question had absolutely no -- there was just no other side to the story. That's certainly what it looked like on the tape. It may be proven or it may be made to be plausible that their motivations were suspicious. It may be the case that that particular police force, as the Ferguson police force did, a lot of dirt under the rug, under the carpet, which is you pull it up and look will make them look really quite bad, but may not be. I don't know that we know. I think forbearance, OK so again I'm going to sound naïve here, I'm arguing for forbearance in the face of black bodies lying all over the place. Well as a matter of fact no, black bodies are not lying all over the place. I said it! Even though these events are happening. As a matter of fact we know that more whites than blacks are killed by the police in the country every year and so on, so it's a country of 300 million people. There are hundreds of thousands of

encounters everyday between police officers and citizens. The events that quicken our attention because they become viral in our media may not be accurate representations of the actual reality. So anyway, that's my -- I don't know... I'm all wrong I know.

MCWHORTER: You're too cold a logician sometimes because you're listening to that theatrical language and you're taking it as if it's meant as analysis. When, as I've said before, really, it's a kind of liturgy. And I think you need to be a little more sympathetic to somebody like Jesse Jackson. Just think of it this way. If he didn't call it a lynching and there are all sorts of other people who have written op-eds already striking the same tone including on the pages of the New York Times, if they didn't use that language -- what else would they be? Who else would they be? Their whole identity is forged around being the person who advises America of its dastardly deeds against black people. Advises America that racism is still there. That's what they do. Now I don't mean that they're poverty pimps that they don't mean what they say, but it's their entire personhood to speak that language and to act that message. If they couldn't say that. If they're couldn't call it lynching. If they couldn't talk about the black bodies. If they couldn't make it sound like nothing

significant has happened since 1865, that would be so psychologically dislocating for them. Can you imagine somebody not feeling like you have a purpose? So, yes, they're going to put it in those ways and unfortunately it can be connected in a way to what crazy people like these snippers in Dallas would have done. The case can be made just as we associate Donald Trump with the nasty actions that individuals perhaps under his sway perform. But the people condescendingly, I know, too bad, they can't help it. And they don't mean any harm. We're going to see a lot of that language...

LOURY: But they may be doing harm. I'm going to accept what you say about, and Reverend Jesse Jackson is only one of many people that one could point to here, I don't know if you saw Michael Eric Dyson's pieces...

MCWHORTER: I was referring to it obliquely just now.

LOURY: Yes. And so on and if they didn't say this and so on but --

MCWHORTER: Who would they be?

LOURY: It's the shtick.

MCWHORTER: Not shtick. Because that makes it sound like they are...

LOURY: They're wearing it but this is who they are and that -

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MCWHORTER: Is what they do.

LOURY: Yeah, but John that's not what we need in the country at this time. I mean, look at -- I don't take any pleasure in saying this but we could be on the brink of race war in this country. There could be white vigilante nationalist skinhead biker groups right now plotting to do what Dylann Roof did in Charleston, South Carolina. Let me finish the work that Dylann started, they might be saying to one another. He wanted to provoke a race war, well, by the way did you see those cops shot down in Dallas? The race war has already started. What are we going to do wait for them to come get us? You know?

MCWHORTER: Mm-hmm.

LOURY: They could be going around planning on the next black lives matter demonstration that they're going to take some of those people out. OK? Or, knowing that when they get to Cleveland for the Republican National Convention there are going to be plenty of demonstrators and they are going to be obstructivist and that will be a good opportunity to whatever, whatever. And there are a lot of weapons out there. You know? This is a tinder box that we're sitting, it's a powder keg, that we are standing in the vicinity of and I just think we have to look for higher ground. I mean -- again, I know it sounds naïve -- I think some of these

natural reflexes and identity driven impulses to racialize every grievance need to be stifled. Even to the extent, sometimes, that stifling them may forego an opportunity to advance the conditions of black people. Because this is not just about black people, this is about the country. I'll give one more example and then I'll stop. I'm in enough trouble already I might as well just say this. President Obama said about the Trayvon Martin killing shortly after it happened but before the jury had acquitted George Zimmerman. That if he had had a son he would look like Trayvon and he was trying to tell the country, I thought, that he understood that understood the angst of some African Americans. He being an African American himself. And he knew that there was something to their complaints about the way in which black people are treated and suspected of being criminals, racially profiled and so on and so forth. I understand the impulse to show the empathy but my view -- my considered judgement is that the President made a grievous error when he uttered those words. First, because Trayvon Martin -- I mean, George Zimmermann was ultimately acquitted by a jury of his peers of the actions that he undertook on the (inaudible). It was fun that he had acted in self-defense. Now you can blow that off and say, Oh, it was a jury, it was white

people, there were Latinos, whatever, whatever. Cops are never acquitted or whatever, whatever, but when the court finds that a defendant of our liking is acquitted then we like to accept the judgement. If Hillary Clinton is found by the FBI to be innocent, everybody who is a Democrat, like me, is saying thank god, thank god. But when the Courts -- we don't have any other way of resolving these matters other than what courts do. So, first of all, the President spoke too soon. He didn't know what was going to... Secondly, he's the President of the United States. He's not supposed to be a cheerleader for any particular faction or side. The high ground there, the high, high ground, would have been to forego the impulse to explain to the country how he identified and so forth and so -- and now I was (inaudible) the fact that he did identify... I know, I know, what I'm saying is awful at some level, but I really feel this way. I think forbearance from leadership in a racially charged situation, such as we face now, is what we need more than anything else.

MCWHORTER: When you seem to be putting yourself into a corner (inaudible) because ... in any black community, generally the cops are seen as the enemy. Ordinary view, it's not just the Michael Eric Dyson in the room. It's pretty much everybody. I live in Jersey City. It's the

exact same way here. There was a guy who, how did it go? He got killed in front of a Walgreens. This was, I think, about a year ago. And it was widely covered in Jersey City. Oh yeah, he killed a cop in front of a Walgreens for no apparent reason at all and the general investigation revealed that people here in Jersey City, and not even in only the worst neighborhoods, hate the cops. They were just -- despite the fact that this one got killed, they had a basic sympathy, but there was a tiny bit you could detect in a lot of the interviews that, well OK finally they took one. They got it. Instead of us. You're saying that the people, say in Jersey City, are wrong. That it isn't racial. That they're wrong to think that the cops are bigots and I'm disinclined to think that or especially I think that those people's feelings about the cops are the main thing standing between them and seeing themselves as actual Americans and joining the society warts and all. The whole idea that America is all about racism is all about the cops and that includes that black Jersey City residents in pretty much every neighborhood but the one I live in, think of the cop as the enemy. I know from my own experiences that the white cops here in Jersey City are really mean. I have had various experiences with them that have nothing to do with me being in danger of getting shot,

but I always found myself thinking, if I were a little younger and if my voice were a little blacker and if this were about something other than me driving too fast or me going around the corner the wrong way or something like that. I can imagine one of these men getting violent. The sneers that you get from some of these people for having done nothing wrong. You're dismissing all of that it seems. We just need to be more analytic about it. Really?

LOURY: No, I'm not dismissing that. I mean -- I should have said or let me say now, policing is in deep trouble in this country and the cover has been put off for practices that are very long standing and are problematic. The police should be public servants. They need to understand themselves as basically working in cooperation with the communities to produce security and safety for people. The belligerence and instability and the violence of the police diminishes their effectiveness and also leaves us, as a citizenry, very poorly served. The police are not sufficiently well trained. They need to know how to diffuse conflict situations without resorting to Tasers and weapons and batons and so on and so forth. They need sometimes to be able to walk away from conflict situations rather than trying to resolve them by physical force, because, you know, it's simply not worth it. They need to

be more professional. They need to be more accountable. They need to be more transparent. There is a lot of reform that needs to be done to policing. I don't dispute that for a minute.

MCWHORTER: Moreover.

LOURY: The racial disparities between the composition of these police forces, and there are black police but there are not so many of them, and the communities that they're policing and the conflict written and danger infuse situations in which the police and citizens often encounter each other, because after all, the police do a job that is risky. They will have reasons under certain circumstances to be fearful and that can lead to their hair trigger response to the least provocation and so forth and so on. All this has to be grappled with. They need to be better trained. Maybe we need to look at who are these police? I've often wondered, are returning veterans from theaters of conflict from America's wars overly represented in law enforcement, because after all their relevant training and experience and so forth. Are they victims of post-traumatic stress disorder or some other kind of psychological effects that would cause them to conduct their jobs in ways that are to the detriment of the citizenry and so forth and so on. Should we have a much

higher bar for who can become a police officer? Should they -- maybe that means paying the more and trying to recruit people who have college and master's degrees and so on and so on. All of this needs to be looked at. It needs to be more than looked at. It needs to be changed. It needs to be addressed. But framing this matter as the new Jim Crow, as white hooded clansmen in blue patrolling the streets and dragooning black people and carrying them away. It's a mistake in my humble opinion and likewise, like I said before, we can marginalize and criticize our poor policing without racializing that conversation. Because white people, too, are affected by the poor policing. Even if there is an over representation, you know the rate two to one is what I hear, twice as likely that a black person than a white person, even though there are so many more whites than blacks -- twice as many were actually shot. Despite that, I think that we would be better off in the longer run if we didn't frame this as a racial conversation. As you and I -- I'll stop, I know I've been talking for a long time. As you and I -- you just said it a moment ago, we do have to think about the fact that there is a fair amount of criminal activity that is going on in some of these communities of color and are being perpetrated by people that live there. I mean the one-year

anniversary of the Michael Brown killing -- the demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri were marred by police being fired on, by gang factions shooting each other, by people running to take cover and the gun fire thing -- we saw what happened in Dallas. So there's that. I just would not pick the worst cases, racialize them, make them into a poster and then parade around the country talking about we need racial justice. We need better policing. Better policing for all of our people. I try to keep race out of it as much as I could and there you are. That's my story and I'm sticking with it.

MCWHORTER: Glenn, I have to go get my daughter because school is closing early today.

LOURY: This was a quick conversation.

MCWHORTER: We should pick this up again.

LOURY: We will.

MCWHORTER: I just want to say for myself in closing that it's these episodes that end up leading to the dialogue on race that is so frustratingly fake in so many ways. The spark of all of it is this -- if these things didn't happen, we would suddenly be in a very new territory, but I think it's interesting that it's on this that you and I seem to have a certain amount of disagreement considering

where both of us would have been about 15 years ago. We should pick this --

LOURY: Let's cut back to the short conversation and disagreement is healthy, right? So that's productive. That's how we make our arguments.

LOURY: Take care John.

MCWHORTER: You too Glenn.

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