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WORDS MATTER

In a conflicted, gun-saturated land, heated rhetoric threatens cops' effectiveness – and their lives

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. It's been another very bad summer.

On Thursday, July 7, Micah Johnson, 25, [opened fire on Dallas police](#) at the end of a demonstration by Black Lives Matter. Johnson, who was armed with an assault-style rifle, shot and killed five officers and wounded nine. He told police negotiators that he was angry about police shootings of black men and was aiming for white officers. A one-time Army private with a checkered service history, Johnson had voiced support on Facebook for the [New Black Panther Party](#), a reportedly anti-white, anti-Semitic hate group. Johnson was ultimately killed by an explosive delivered with a police robot.

Ten days later, on July 17, Gavin Long, 29, [shot and killed three Baton Rouge police officers](#) and wounded three using an assault-style rifle. A former Marine from Kansas City, [Long had posted angry online comments](#) about police shootings of black men. According to his mother, Long thought that he was being followed by the CIA. He was shot and killed by police.

Three days after that, on July 20, unknown persons drove by two NYPD officers on foot patrol, "made a statement about getting them" [and opened fire](#). Neither officer was injured. It was a far better outcome than what took place one and one-half years earlier, when Ismaaiyl Brinsley, 28, walked up to two unsuspecting NYPD officers sitting in a patrol car [and shot them dead with a pistol](#). Brinsley, a mentally troubled man with an extensive arrest record, had posted "I'm Putting Wings on Pigs Today" on Instagram and shot his girlfriend in the stomach. He ultimately committed suicide.

Three days later, on July 23, an unknown assailant walked up to an Oakland police sergeant sitting in her vehicle [and opened fire](#). A bullet struck the police vehicle but the officer was uninjured.

One day after that, on July 24, unknown persons [fired on Kansas City police officers](#) who were out of their vehicles handling an unrelated call. The officers took cover and were unhurt.

Five days later, on July 29, officers in Columbia, a small Pennsylvania town, [were fired on](#) while responding to reports of gunfire at a cemetery. Police arrested two

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cousins, Marquell Rentas, 17, and Trenton Nace, 18, for attempted murder. Rentas reportedly admitted that he tried to shoot the officers. His mother blamed it all on Black Lives Matter:

They are in jail for doing what Black Lives Matter wanted them to do: shoot at cops. The truth is that these are two punk kids following the orders of an irresponsible organization and now they're gonna pay for it.

Her husband agreed. County prosecutor Craig Steadman warned that harsh words directed against the police could encourage violence:

We as a society need to take a look at what's going on in our country. There's a lot of rhetoric demonizing police. It creates greater a chance to have individuals emboldened to take violent actions out on police.

Later that day, unknown assailants [fired on Emeryville, Calif. police officers](#) on foot patrol. One 9mm. bullet lodged in a wall but no one was injured. No arrests were immediately made.

Less than a month later, on August 27, participants in a Black Lives Matter march outside the Minnesota State Fair [chanted "pigs in a blanket, fry 'em like bacon."](#) Their lyrics drew a rebuke from a St. Paul police union official: "I don't think chanting or singing what's basically promoting killing police officers is peaceful." One of the event's organizers disagreed: "It definitely wasn't a threat. I don't know if they would have received it differently if we would have said on a stick. We're there chanting, using our voices."

That "chant" didn't take place in a vacuum. A few hours earlier Harris County, Texas deputy sheriff Darren Goforth [was shot and killed](#) while fueling his patrol vehicle at a commercial gas station. Police soon arrested Shannon Miles, 30, in what Sheriff Ron Hickman called a "calculated cold-blooded assassination." Deputy Goforth's grieving boss laid blame on out-of-control rhetoric:

We've heard Black Lives Matter, All Lives Matter. Well, cops' lives matter, too. So why don't we drop the qualifier and say lives matter. I've been in law enforcement 45 years. I don't recall another incident this cold-blooded and cowardly.

A surveillance video reportedly depicted Miles [running up to the deputy and continuing to shoot](#) even after his victim was on the ground. According to the indictment, Miles was "retaliating" against police. Goforth left behind a wife and two children.

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Intemperate comments offer a rationale for disturbed, impulsive persons with guns – of whom there are regrettably many – to act out their rage. Episodes of real and alleged police misconduct, of which we have written extensively (see related posts below) have become grist for a mill of desensitizing, anti-cop rhetoric that fuels animosity towards cops and has seemingly become a litmus test of group loyalty. How else to explain recent comments by the leader of the [African American Tobacco Control Leadership Council \(AATCLC\)](#), a public health organization, [who felt compelled to smear police officers](#) while being interviewed about a topic as far removed from police misconduct as one can imagine: a campaign to ban menthol cigarettes:

...Our children deserve protection from the police. They deserve protection from the deadly silent predator: the tobacco industry...

While the group's public letter to President Obama didn't include the "protection from" comment, it nonetheless featured an inflammatory dig against the police:

While our communities are besieged by the more immediate problems of police violence, racism, and unemployment, you can quickly direct the FDA to issue a new proposed rule...The rule will protect us from our most serious silent predator, the tobacco industry, an industry relentlessly working to seduce and addict another generation of our young people.

And the carnage continues. Late last night, Friday, September 16, a 25-year old man with a long arrest record walked up to a Philadelphia patrol car [and inexplicably opened fire](#). By the time the incident was over, two officers lay wounded and the suspect and an innocent citizen (whom the suspect shot as he fled) were dead.

At present, these incidents are, however deplorable, still anecdotes. There is simply insufficient information to tie them to a common cause. Yet there is plenty reason for concern. According to [LEOKA](#), the FBI's yearly compendium of lethal and non-lethal assaults on police, [255 officers were murdered](#) between 2010-2014, including 38 in ambushes and unprovoked attacks. During the same period [533 officers were injured with a weapon](#), 26 in ambushes and unprovoked attacks. Perhaps organizations such as Black Lives Matter and the AATCLC could mount a campaign to discourage citizens from harming police. We could then look at the numbers. Maybe rhetoric could be a force for good.

Cops and citizens have innumerable interactions every day. Most end uneventfully, if not always pleasantly for the bad guys. Labeling officers as a generic threat is a gross distortion that encourages the unhinged and interferes with the public trust and cooperation that officers need to do their job. As we've discussed in prior posts, some

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cops overreact, use excessive force and otherwise treat citizens poorly, and they must be weeded from the ranks. But when supposedly good people promote hostility towards police in general, potentially making the streets even “meaner” and more treacherous, encouraging officers to treat everyone courteously and with care becomes a very tough sell.