

**LOCKING UP
OUR OWN**

**CRIME and
PUNISHMENT in
BLACK AMERICA**

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REPRESENTATIVES OF THEIR RACE

The Rise of African American Police,
1948–78

On September 7, 1976, more than sixty law enforcement executives—representing twenty-four states, fifty-five major cities, and approximately ten million black Americans—gathered at the Twin Bridges Marriott Hotel outside Washington, D.C., for a conference on reducing crime in low-income urban areas.¹ The topic itself was unremarkable; discussions of crime were a staple of the era.² But something else about this meeting was special: all the principal attendees were black. It was the first-ever national summit of black police executives.³

D.C.'s assistant police chief, Burtell Jefferson, had worked as hard as anyone to make this gathering possible. Jefferson was the highest-ranking black officer in the District's Metropolitan Police Department (MPD). In two years, he would be named chief and would assume command of a force that was well on its way to becoming the nation's first majority-black urban police department. Jefferson was a modest man; with a thin mustache, close-cropped hair, and Bible at hand, he reminded some of a church elder.⁴ But on this day, he—and his rising generation of fellow black police leaders—would allow themselves a sense of accomplishment.

For most of American history, police departments had been almost entirely white. This was no accident. Police officers, after all, can take your liberty, or even your life. Putting such awesome power in black hands seemed preposterous to most whites, who believed that a primary police function was to control blacks. None of this was lost on black Americans. James Baldwin spoke for many when he wrote, in 1960, that the white policeman walks through the ghetto like "an occupying soldier in a bitterly hostile country."⁵

In light of this history, a room full of black police leaders was an undeniably powerful symbol. But a question loomed over the gathering: Now that policing's long-established color line had been breached, what would happen to criminal justice policy? How would black chiefs—and black officers—be different from their white predecessors? A symbolic victory had been won, yes, but the practical consequences of that victory were far from clear.

As far back as the 1860s, black Americans had been calling for the hiring of black police officers. This was an essential, if forgotten, part of our nation's civil rights struggle.⁶ But while these demands were consistent, the rationales were not. Some advocates claimed that blacks would make better crime fighters: they would win black citizens' trust more easily, could more effectively cultivate informants in black communities, and, above all, would be more motivated to protect black lives. This final consideration was especially significant to those who had suffered the consequences of white indifference to crime, vice, and public disorder in black communities. Others said that black officers would be less abusive and disrespectful than their white counterparts: unencumbered by racism, they'd be less likely to harass innocent blacks or use excessive force during stops or arrests; instead of treating all blacks as suspects, they would be able to distinguish decent folks from the criminal element. Still other advocates focused on economics: police jobs were good jobs, with decent pay and even better benefits, and blacks should get their fair share of the pie. Finally, some argued that investing blacks with the power of a badge and gun would send a vital message to Americans on both sides

of the color line, overturning a tradition of white resistance to the very idea of black authority.

In retrospect, it's not hard to see how these rationales might conflict in practice. To take the most obvious example (and the one that would eventually present itself most forcefully), the desire for more vigorous policing might prove incompatible with the goal of less police harassment. But for a century, no one recognized the potential for such conflicts. As long as the hiring of black officers remained a distant dream, there was no way to test any theory about the changes they would bring to law enforcement. By 1976, however, America's cities had appointed enough black police executives to fill a symposium and had hired thousands of additional blacks in rank-and-file positions. As a result, the question of what difference black police would, or could, make was suddenly urgent. With heroin and firearms swamping black America, crime on the march, and concerns about police abuse undiminished, the new black police officers faced extraordinary pressure to have a transformative impact.

The emergence of black police leaders in the 1970s did more than present new questions. It also signified the arrival of new voices to answer them. For decades, civil rights leaders, preachers, and the black press had made the case for hiring black police officers. They had made bold claims about what these officers would do once they achieved significant representation on the force. But of course, these advocates were not police officers themselves, and had no intention of joining the police.

Meanwhile, far from public view, Burtell Jefferson and his colleagues had long battled intense on-the-job discrimination in Jim Crow police departments. For twenty, thirty, even forty years, they had endured untold indignities and overcome impossible odds. Now they were at or near the top of a profession that was finally preparing to allow them—at least some of them—to assume leadership positions. Few people had bothered to ask these black officers what they would do if they were in charge. Now the nation—especially its cities with large black populations—would find out.

In 1948, Burtell Jefferson was a young man who needed a job. Born in D.C. in 1925 and educated in the city's segregated school system, he had graduated from Armstrong Technical High School six years earlier. Founded in 1902, Armstrong reflected the philosophy of Booker T. Washington, who in a speech at its dedication declared, "All forms of labor, whether with the head or with the hand, are honorable."⁷ Though Armstrong offered college prep classes, it couldn't compete on that score with D.C.'s legendary Paul Laurence Dunbar High School. Dunbar was probably the most prestigious black high school in the nation under Jim Crow, and the undisputed school of choice for the city's black elite.⁸ In contrast, Armstrong built its reputation on vocational training, sending its graduates into careers such as shoe repair, painting, and dressmaking.⁹

Armstrong didn't prepare students to be police officers. Considering the history of race and policing, that is hardly surprising. Many of the first police forces in the South were founded as slave patrols, explicitly charged with catching, beating, and returning runaway slaves.¹⁰ After the Civil War, slave patrols ended—at least officially. The job of controlling and repressing blacks continued under a new division of labor: the police would enforce Jim Crow vagrancy laws and nighttime curfews, and the dirtier assignments, including lynching, cross burning, and night riding, were left to vigilante groups such as the Ku Klux Klan.¹¹ Still, the Klan and the police often worked together, their rosters commonly consisting of the same people. Some sheriffs not-so-secretly traded their badges for robes at sundown.¹² To blacks, the continuities between these forms of repression were obvious. As one black man in North Carolina recalled decades after slavery had ended, slave patrols had been "jes' like policemen, only worser."¹³

During Reconstruction, when blacks gained the right to vote and hold office, they also joined southern police forces for the first time.¹⁴ But, as with much of the progress made during Reconstruction, the victory was short-lived. The very thought of black officers was both

infuriating and terrifying to a society that demanded black subservience and feared retaliation for the violence of slavery. When city leaders in Raleigh, North Carolina, hired four black officers in 1868, the *Daily Sentinel* responded with headlines proclaiming "The Mongrel Regime!! Negro Police!!" Readers were warned that "this is the beginning of the end."¹⁵ Whites in Jackson and Meridian, Mississippi, rioted when newly appointed black officers tried to do their jobs.¹⁶ Perhaps it was Mississippi congressman Ethelbert Barksdale who best summed up the prevailing southern view: the existence of black officers would imply domination over whites, "and the white man is not used to being dominated by the colored race."¹⁷

When forces hostile to Reconstruction took over state governments and began instituting Jim Crow segregation, black officers provided an early target. As the historian W. Marvin Dulaney concludes, "[B]y 1910, African Americans had literally disappeared from southern police forces."¹⁸ By that time, although 47.5 percent of the nation's black population lived in South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, or Alabama, there was not a single black officer in those states.¹⁹ The situation was barely better in border and northern states, where the vanishingly few black officers lived a second-class existence.²⁰

105,000 Negro Citizens Rate at Least 1 Negro Police.

—Protester, Atlanta, Georgia, 1946

Blacks wanted the right to serve as police officers just as badly as white supremacists wanted to deny it to them. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, national civil rights groups surveyed police departments in an attempt to document the number of black officers and to show that cities that *had* hired black officers were happy with the results.²¹ Local civil rights advocates used this information to push for change in city after city.

In Atlanta, for example, civil rights groups, religious leaders, and the city's largest black paper, the *Atlanta Daily World*, joined forces in

a decade-long campaign to bring about the hiring of black officers. Atlanta's wasn't the only such campaign, but perhaps because the city had a large black middle class (rivaling D.C.'s in size), the fight for black officers in Georgia's capital won exuberant coverage from the nation's black press. Atlanta advocates based their case on the theory that black police officers would fight crime more effectively. "Why does the high murder rate among Negroes in Atlanta continue unabated?" asked the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC), a group that brought together southern white liberals and conservative blacks, some of whom were associated with Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute.²² After hosting a series of gatherings in 1936 that included some of Atlanta's most prominent blacks, the CIC issued a report blaming elevated black crime, in part, on the "laissez-faire attitudes" of white police and white jurors in cases "where Negroes kill Negroes."²³ In such cases, the report said, "murderers have been known to get off with two and three years, and in some cases with six months." White police were not only indifferent to black suffering; they were also "abusive in word and manner" toward black citizens. This caused a vicious cycle: black citizens often refused to cooperate with police, which stymied police investigations, halfhearted to begin with, leaving blacks yet more vulnerable. This description of the problem—dispiritingly similar, in many respects, to accounts of the dysfunctional relationship between police departments and black communities today—led the group to call for hiring black police.²⁴

Registering the concerns of Atlanta's black elite, the CIC also argued that black officers would be capable of distinguishing among classes and types of blacks—a skill that white officers conspicuously lacked. Atlanta was home to many upstanding black citizens, but white officers either couldn't or wouldn't appreciate the difference. "Some white officers have no regard for the social standing of colored men or women," the CIC complained. "They use the same language to them [that is, to those of higher standing] as they do in the presence of gamblers and known harlots." Colored police, by contrast, would recognize

social distinctions. Just as important, they “would have more respect for their women,” and this treatment would have a reciprocal effect, with black officers receiving “more respect from the race.”²⁵

The case for black police expanded as the Atlanta movement gained strength. In November 1937, the city’s branch of the NAACP circulated a pamphlet titled *Wanted: Negro Police for Negro Districts in Atlanta*. Describing black neighborhoods as overrun by crime, lacking adequate public housing and recreational facilities, and resentful of the police, the pamphlet offered three reasons to hire black police officers: they could “interpret Negro problems and Negro people,” they would be more effective in enforcing the law without violence, and they would inspire community members to view the police more positively.²⁶

By 1947, the *Daily World* was calling the lack of black police the city’s top civil rights issue.²⁷ The Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr., was among the leaders of the campaign to change the city’s policy. On September 20, 1947, King urged a crowd at Morehouse College’s Sale Hall Chapel to continue the fight. With his son, then a Morehouse senior, almost certainly in attendance, King said that only persistent pressure would remedy the injustice of having a community of 100,000 blacks without a single black police officer to represent them. He eschewed waiting, just as his son would fifteen years later in “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” As the *Daily World* noted, King “exhorted the young people to organize and work toward this end, saying that nothing comes through waiting.”²⁸

Two months after King’s speech, with pressure mounting, the Atlanta City Council had no choice but to confront the issue. At a meeting in November 1947—which the *Daily World* called “a heated, rip roaring session that lasted three hours”—King told the council that “the time and the hour” for Negro police had come. As he had done at Morehouse, he argued that the city’s black community deserved to be represented on the police force: “Taxation without representation is not right.” Other speakers, including the editor of the *Daily World*, C. A. Scott, returned to the CIC’s argument from 1936 and said that black police would reduce crime.²⁹



Picketing outside the Georgia State Capitol building, demanding police integration, Atlanta, Georgia, 1946 (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution* Photographic Archives, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library)

The resistance from segregationists was fierce. Supporters of Herman Talmadge, Georgia's notoriously racist former governor, came out against hiring black officers, as did members of the Ku Klux Klan.³⁰ Echoing Congressman Barksdale's rhetoric from sixty years before, Georgia's Commissioner of Agriculture, Tom Linder, declared that "one race must dominate the other."³¹ Former Atlanta mayor Walter A. Sims argued that hiring black officers was pointless, since whites would never obey blacks: "If a white man saw a red traffic signal and a Negro policeman nearby, he would just run the red light."³²

Two weeks later, on December 1, 1947, the city council met again, this time with a resolution on the table that would require Atlanta's police department to hire eight black officers. More than a thousand whites crowded the chamber to oppose the measure.³³ But despite their vehement protestations, the campaign led by Scott and King finally succeeded: the council voted 10-7 in favor of the resolution.³⁴ The *Daily World* hailed its passage with the headline "The Long Awaited Dream Comes True."³⁵

And yet, the new black officers would be far from equal. The resolution stipulated that they were to be hired on a trial basis, that they would work out of a separate precinct (the basement of the local YMCA), that they would patrol only in black neighborhoods, and that they would not be permitted to exercise police powers over whites.³⁶ If a black officer witnessed a white person committing a crime, he could detain the offender, but for an arrest, he'd have to call his supervisor and request that a white officer come to the scene.³⁷

These restrictions were not atypical. All over the country, black officers were routinely and systematically humiliated in order to remind them of their second-class status and to reassure whites that the racial order remained fundamentally intact. In Savannah, for example, black officers were not allowed to wear their uniforms to or from work. In Montgomery, Alabama, they had to go around to the back door of the police station to pick up and turn in their equipment each day. Segregation was most thorough in Miami, which, until 1962, operated two completely distinct criminal justice systems, one for whites

and one for blacks. The latter system had black officers, a black-only police station, and a black judge and bailiff.³⁸

Despite the restrictions, Atlanta's black community rejoiced. The new officers were crowned the "Atlanta Eight" and became instant celebrities. Even before they were sworn in, crowds of black Atlantans gathered to see them in training. Hundreds more, including King, crammed into Greater Mt. Calvary Baptist Church to welcome them to active duty. Crowds spilled into the church's basement, annex, and balcony, and finally onto the streets outside. The list of speakers was long—"from the flower bedecked rostrum, speaker after speaker, both Negro and white, delivered stirring remarks in glorification of the city's hiring of Negro officers."³⁹ When Mayor William Hartsfield spoke, he told the officers that they carried a special burden. "You are more than just policemen," he said. "You are going out as the first representatives of your race in Atlanta. Your success is my success and the success of the City Council, the Chief, your race and the city at large." Invoking the Georgia native Jackie Robinson, who had broken baseball's color line the previous season,



Welcome ceremony for Atlanta's first eight black police officers, Atlanta, Georgia, April 30, 1948 (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution* Photographic Archives, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library)

Hartsfield urged the Atlanta Eight to "Do the kind of job that Jackie did in Brooklyn."⁴⁰

But what about the officers themselves? What did *they* think of the moment? What were their plans for policing? Nobody knew. Save for a brief response by one of the men on the group's behalf (according to the *Daily World*, he "praised his superiors for their manner of cooperation"), the Atlanta Eight were silent.⁴¹

As America's black news outlets trumpeted the arrival of the Atlanta Eight, Burtell Jefferson weighed his career options. After graduating from Armstrong, he had entered the Army, serving in the Philippines and New Guinea in World War II. Honorably discharged, he had returned to D.C. and enrolled in Howard University's School of Engineering. But even after receiving some limited benefits from the GI Bill, he had found it difficult to make ends meet, and he left school after less than two years.⁴²

The prospects for a black man in D.C. were bleak, and Jefferson knew it. A year earlier, in 1948, President Truman had established a commission to investigate the state of race relations in the nation's capital. The commission's report was damning:

If [a Negro] stops in Washington . . . with very few exceptions, he is refused service at downtown restaurants, he may not attend a downtown movie or play, and he has to go into the poorer section of the city to find a night's lodging. The Negro who decides to settle in the District must often find a home in an overcrowded, substandard area. He must often take a job below the level of his ability. He must send his children to the inferior public schools set aside for Negroes and entrust his family's health to medical agencies which give inferior service. In addition, he must endure the countless daily humiliations that the system of segregation imposes upon the one-third of Washington that is Negro.⁴³

No facet of African American life was exempt from the stranglehold of racism. The city even held separate children's marbles compe-

titions, crowning one white and one "colored" champion. In marbles, as was the rule with Jim Crow, separate was never equal: when the city selected its representative for national competitions, only the white champion was considered.⁴⁴

The social effects of segregation were devastating, but the policy's most enduring impact was economic, as generations of black citizens were trapped on the bottom rungs of the occupational ladder.⁴⁵ Every sector of the economy was implicated, not just racist employers. For example, the unions that controlled many of the best trade jobs, including those representing brickmakers and electrical workers, either excluded blacks outright or kept them in segregated locals that received inferior assignments.⁴⁶ So impenetrable were the walls excluding blacks from skilled-labor jobs that even the tiniest cracks were cause for celebration. In the 1950s, for example, when three black high school graduates—*just three*—were accepted into apprenticeship training programs, an announcement was made at their commencement, eliciting joyful cheers from an audience of six hundred parents.⁴⁷ In October 1958, the *Afro* trumpeted another "break-through": The D.C. government was undertaking a new construction project and had hired, among dozens of contractors, a single black electrician.⁴⁸

The federal government was an equally strict enforcer of segregation. One of the worst offenders was the State Department, which promoted American-brand democracy abroad while restricting blacks in the nation's capital to job categories such as chauffeur, messenger, and janitor.⁴⁹ Even when blacks gained a toehold in entry-level positions, a caste mentality dominated. One white official recalled how hard it was to integrate the department's typing pool:

After a great deal of effort, the typing pool finally agreed to take a couple [black typists]. Two or three days later, I asked the pool supervisor how things were coming, and she replied that she had solved the problem completely, that everything was going beautifully. I asked her what she had done, and she showed me a screen in one corner of the big room—behind which the two colored girls were sitting.⁵⁰

And so, as Jefferson prepared to enter D.C.'s apartheid job market, he had few palatable options. As he explained, "the only fields of financial stability available to me were teaching, the United States Postal Service, and the fire and police departments." When he joined the police force, he was not making a political statement in keeping with the passionate campaign of Scott and King down in Atlanta. By his own account, he was far more concerned with making a decent living. Of the fields open to him, he felt that policing would be "the most challenging."⁵¹

We'll beat them at their own game.

—MPD officer Burtell Jefferson

After World War II, with the struggle to end legally mandated school segregation well under way and the United States seeking to project a positive image of democracy during the early years of the Cold War, it would no longer do to blatantly prohibit blacks from getting jobs (and promotions) in the police department of the nation's capital. But that doesn't mean the system suddenly became egalitarian. Instead, as formally discriminatory policies were erased from the MPD's books, a new system of informal, under-the-table discrimination was implemented in its place. This new system achieved nearly the same results, but through subterfuge and misdirection.

So to say that policing was a possibility for Jefferson does not mean that the job was easy to get. From the moment a black applicant arrived to take the MPD's battery of written, physical, and oral exams, the scrutiny was severe. "It was extremely difficult for Negroes to get on the force," recalled Owen Davis, another black officer from that era. "Many blacks were blocked out of contention because of an ingrown toenail, that kind of thing. What could we do about it? Not much." Davis, like Jefferson, cited limited job opportunities elsewhere as his reason for joining the force. Though he had never wanted to be a police officer, the job paid almost twice as much as his job making mailbags at the post office, and it had better retirement benefits.⁵²

Once Jefferson passed the tests and completed the sixteen-week police academy training program, he was posted to the city's Ninth Precinct. The assignment did not come as a surprise. The Ninth was overwhelmingly black, and the city had an informal but rigidly enforced policy of restricting black officers to predominantly black districts.⁵³ Nor was this the only constraint that black officers faced. For example, as was common practice across America, the MPD limited black officers to foot patrol, barring them from driving scout cars. As Jefferson recalled, "They put cars out of service rather than have blacks drive them."⁵⁴

White officers made up 90 percent of the MPD's force and constituted a majority even in black precincts, including the Ninth.⁵⁵ And as Jefferson soon discovered, the police force was as segregated in those black precincts as it was anywhere else in the District. Black and white officers rarely patrolled together. Some commanders were unapologetic in defending segregation—one captain prohibited integrated assignments on the theory that "colored officers are more efficient and more contented when assigned with colored, likewise a white officer when assigned with white."⁵⁶ Other commanders used a more subtle "freedom of choice" explanation. For example, the chief of detectives said that he wouldn't stop a black officer and a white officer from working together, but he wouldn't compel it, either: "it would be bad for morale to force someone to work with a partner he was not happy with."⁵⁷ This approach was even endorsed by Robert Murray, D.C.'s chief of police, who acknowledged that "integration is the law of the land" without actually making any concessions. "I'm going to obey the law," Murray said, "but I'm not going to force colored and white to work together in a scout car."⁵⁸

Of course, "freedom of choice" was merely a euphemism for de facto segregation, as any white officer could veto an assignment that meant working with a black partner.⁵⁹ Unsurprisingly, most white officers exercised this right—and not just in D.C. In 1957, the University of Pennsylvania's William M. Kephart published a study of racial attitudes among Philadelphia's police.⁶⁰ The results were dispiriting. The

vast majority of white officers supported the department's policies of de facto segregation, with three-quarters asserting that black patrolmen should be assigned exclusively to black neighborhoods.⁶¹ White people, they believed, would object to having black officers in their communities; 60 percent said that they themselves would object to riding in a car with a black partner. Why? The most common objection, Kephart found, was the "so-called body odor of the Negro." "The Negro has sweat glands that give off a choking odor," one officer said. "One time I was assigned with a Negro," recalled another. "I immediately told my sergeant to take me off and put me on sick list." A third told researchers, "Yes, in my estimation they are savages. They have an offensive odor that forty baths a day will not remove. I am also a firm believer in white supremacy."⁶²

This endemic racial prejudice, confirmed by similar studies in Boston and Chicago as well as in D.C., affected more than the pairing of officers.⁶³ In D.C. and elsewhere, promotions were based on rankings, and rankings, in turn, were based on a test score and a "suitability for promotion" rating.⁶⁴ (The relative weights of these two determinants varied by city; in D.C., the test counted for 40 percent and the suitability rating for 60 percent.)⁶⁵ An officer's suitability rating was assigned by his or her supervisor, presenting an almost unlimited opportunity for both conscious and unconscious bias.⁶⁶ And so black patrol officers found themselves stuck: no matter how well they did on the written test, their suitability ratings disqualified them from promotion. These officers weren't naïve; everyone saw the practice for what it was. As the *Afro* put it, "There's a sneaking suspicion that the promotion system of the Metropolitan Police Department was devised by either the devil or Sen. Jim Eastland of Mississippi."⁶⁷ But there wasn't much the officers could do.

People respond to oppression in various ways, and one way is to surrender. After Owen Davis made the switch from post office employee to member of D.C.'s finest, it was impossible for him not to notice the inequities plaguing the force. "One effect all this outright

discrimination had was it destroyed initiative," he recalled. "Blacks tended not to spend too much time on the [promotion] exams. What the hell. It was too much effort, for no reason."⁶⁸ Officers who didn't study would predictably receive lower test scores, and these scores, in turn, provided fodder to those who claimed that the lack of promotions had more to do with black officers' inadequacy than with white supervisors' discrimination. Cue Chief Murray: "[Blacks] won't study and they can't pass the written examinations."⁶⁹

Burtell Jefferson himself was almost a casualty of the MPD's promotion process. In the late 1950s, after taking the test and putting in for advancement, he waited nervously for the promotion list to be posted. He had prepared for the test with his close friend Tilmon O'Bryant. In addition to studying hard, both men had compiled sterling achievement records. They were cautiously hopeful. But the list, when it was finally posted, contained neither of their names. Jefferson was despondent; O'Bryant was furious. "Not only were we not included," O'Bryant remembered, "but some pretty poor white choices got promoted ahead of us, and without even taking the police exams."

Over coffee, the two men talked out their options. They considered quitting the force but ultimately decided against it—the white flag, they felt, was exactly what the racists wanted. So even though surrender would have been understandable, the pair adopted a different strategy. They resolved, in O'Bryant's words, to "destroy the myth that it's no use for a black man to try." As they saw it, their only shot was to outperform whites on the objective measure—the written test for promotion—by a wide enough margin to compensate for low suitability ratings. "We'll figure out every possible question," Jefferson said. "We'll beat them at their own game."⁷⁰

In 1958, Jefferson and O'Bryant started a covert class for black MPD officers seeking promotion. Thirteen officers signed up, in addition to the two in charge. The group met at Jefferson's home two nights a week. At the first meeting, Jefferson laid down the rules. Attendance was mandatory—miss more than two classes and you were expelled—and

alcohol was prohibited. After six months of study, Jefferson passed the test with a high enough score to secure a promotion. So did O'Bryant and ten of their thirteen classmates.⁷¹

The segregationists didn't go quietly. They couldn't block the promotions, but they could try to stop this new black self-help strategy, news of which had gotten out. When the newly promoted Jefferson and O'Bryant decided to continue the classes, some white supervisors began changing days off and switching around tours of duty to make it all but impossible for black candidates to participate. Other white officers created their own study guides and kept them from blacks.⁷² But the men persevered: by 1966, *The Washington Post's* William Raspberry would write: "[M]ost of the Negro officers with rank are products of the O'Bryant-Jefferson 'school.'"⁷³ For Jefferson, the success vindicated his belief that even in a racist system, blacks could overcome; it just took hard work and self-sacrifice. As he put it, "Blacks *must* assume the attitude that 'you might beat me on the rating, but I'll beat you in the books.'"⁷⁴

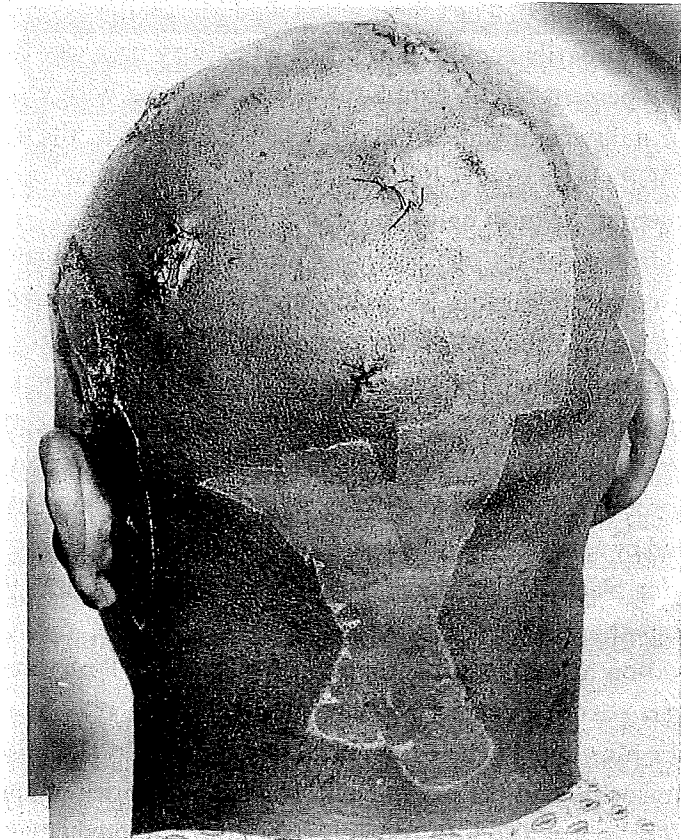
Our police department is the most dangerous spot in the District.
—Eugene Davidson, D.C. NAACP

Out in the community, D.C.'s black citizens faced a far more dangerous form of police discrimination: excessive violence. Though this kind of abuse was a perennial concern, it assumed greater urgency in 1956, when two black men were killed by the police in separate incidents. One victim, Harrison F. Finley, was a World War II veteran and the father of two young children. He was shot to death in front of his own parents while being arrested on charges of "resisting arrest" and "disorderly conduct." (The former was suspiciously common in cases where the police shot or beat someone; the latter was described by the *Afro* as "a catch-all charge that covers practically everything from talking loud to necking."⁷⁵) The second man, Nelson Marshall, was a Safeway truck driver with five children, shot to death during an arrest

for a traffic violation. The officer who killed Marshall was brought to trial but summarily acquitted by an all-white jury (in a city that was almost 50 percent black). Citing these deaths, along with a surge of police brutality complaints from black citizens citywide, the leader of the NAACP's D.C. branch, Eugene Davidson, asserted that "our police department is the most dangerous spot in the District."⁷⁶

Davidson accused Chief Murray of perpetrating two injustices: the MPD discriminated against its black officers, and it routinely used excessive force against the city's black citizens.⁷⁷ Though these grievances might appear distinct, Davidson's NAACP branch linked them, arguing that promoting black officers would reduce police brutality. This strategy—claiming that a change in the racial composition of the police force would change something about police behavior—had been employed by advocates in Atlanta a decade earlier when they contended that hiring black officers would help fight crime by offsetting the prevailing apathy among white officers.

Davidson maintained that the shooting deaths of Finley and Marshall were part of a pattern of police misconduct. In 1957, he submitted a scathing report (he called it an exposé) to the D.C. Board of Commissioners and the police chief, recounting stories of appalling abuse. The report also included affidavits from outraged citizens and officers, as well as copies of unanswered complaints the NAACP had already sent to Chief Murray and the board. In one affidavit, a black woman named Blanche Price said she went out one night to a club in Northwest D.C. The owner refused to let her in because a police officer had told the owner that Price had a police record. When Price went in anyway, the officer attempted to drag her out and, while doing so, hit her over the head with his nightstick. When Price fell on the sidewalk, the officer repeatedly beat and kicked her.⁷⁸ Later, when she tried to lodge a complaint, the police attempted to intimidate her into silence.⁷⁹ Another affidavit came from a retired black policeman who was stopped for a traffic violation. The officer who pulled him over opened the driver's-side door, hit the man in the face, and pulled him



out onto the sidewalk, where he beat him with his fists before arresting him.⁸⁰ A black man named Isaac Williams, Jr., submitted documents to show that he was severely beaten about the head by several officers after they had handcuffed him outside his house. In addition to excerpts from his testimony, a photograph was attached to the report.⁸¹

Alongside the physical violence, black citizens were consistently subjected to verbal disrespect from the very people whose job it was to serve them. (Though less newsworthy than physical violence, this was, and remains, the most common complaint against the police.) As in Atlanta—where, in the 1930s, blacks objected that white officers had “no regard for the social standing of colored men or

women”—D.C.’s middle-class blacks did not take kindly to verbal slights.⁸² Some complained that white officers had a “plantation system attitude” and couldn’t stomach the sight of blacks doing better than they were.⁸³ One black attorney recalled, “The other day some friends and I were driving in the area of 16th and K Sts. NW. When we stopped for the light, a white policeman told his companion, ‘Just look at them spooks in that Cadillac. I can’t even afford one.’”⁸⁴ In addition to complaining that they were singled out for mistreatment by resentful white officers, middle-class blacks also objected to being implicated in more general antiblack attitudes. As the *Afro* argued, “[S]o long as the color of a person’s skin becomes a factor in the enforcement of the law no colored person, *regardless of his station in life*, is free from possible abuse.”⁸⁵

After a hearing, however, the Board of Commissioners exonerated Chief Murray, clearing his department of all allegations of brutality against black citizens and workplace discrimination against black officers.⁸⁶ Davidson had lost his case. The NAACP had expected this outcome⁸⁷—the Board of Commissioners was not a group the city’s blacks relied on to dispense justice. The commissioners were, after all, beholden to Congress, many of whose members shared the views of Theodore Bilbo, the Mississippi senator who in 1948 had boasted that he chaired the congressional committee overseeing D.C. because it allowed him to “keep Washington a segregated city.”⁸⁸ Bilbo’s comment lent force to complaints like those from Sterling Tucker, the Urban League president and future D.C. Council chair, who said, “We have the anomalous situation where America’s only predominantly Negro city is ruled by enemies of the Negro. It’s almost as if the United Nations had sent the South Africans to run the Congo.”⁸⁹

Under such hostile conditions, there was no shame in losing. As the *Afro* summed up the situation, “The NAACP has no apologies to make for its honest efforts to protect the interests of the defenseless who turn to them for guidance and relief. When you lose in a good clean fight, the only question left is: ‘When do we fight again?’”⁹⁰

The answer: Very soon.

Stick to police work and leave the race relations business to the experts.

—*The Washington Afro-American*

In the summer of 1963, hundreds of thousands of civil rights activists planned to join the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, which many predicted would be the biggest demonstration in the District's history. The freedom movement was sweeping the country, exposing racial discrimination in all corners of American life, and the nation's police departments were increasingly coming under scrutiny. One 1959 study revealed that 83 percent of southern departments restricted black officers to segregated districts, and that in most cities, black officers could not arrest whites.⁹¹ In 1961, a U.S. Civil Rights Commission report found that 31 percent of the nation's police departments restricted the ability of black officers to arrest a white person suspected of a felony. Most of these departments required their black officers to hold suspects until a white policeman arrived to make the actual arrest; in a few cases, black officers were prohibited even from doing that. And across the country, their authority to make misdemeanor arrests was even more limited.⁹²

Meanwhile, the abuse black citizens faced from the police was unrelenting. Brutality was on especially vivid display in the South, where scenes of cigar-chomping sheriffs attacking civil rights protesters with water hoses and dogs became regular fodder for the nightly news. In the early 1960s, civil rights groups charged that police corruption and abuse were rampant throughout the country: the police still routinely arrested suspects without warrants and held them with little or no cause. When asked, many blacks conceded that they felt powerless to respond. In 1966, a nationwide study validated their fear, finding that police officers were almost never convicted or punished in the aftermath of abuse allegations.⁹³

Against this backdrop, the March on Washington presented a perfect opportunity for civil rights activists to press the case for more black police. Throughout the spring and summer of 1963, the *Afro* ran

headlines such as "D.C. Needs More Colored Cops in Top Jobs to Fight Crime, Says Lawson" and "Crisis in the D.C. Police Dept.: One Reason Crime Is Rising."⁹⁴ Chuck Stone, a civil rights journalist and *Afro* editor, argued that discriminatory employment practices fueled crime by undermining black support for law enforcement. "The unvarnished truth about the District Police Department," he wrote, "is that it is saturated with more white policemen full of racial antipathy than many Deep South cities." The vast majority of white officers were "intellectually, emotionally and ancestrally incapable of treating colored people equally or with respect." Effective crime control depended on mutual respect and cooperation between officers and citizens, Stone wrote. But the District police, as constituted, would never earn black people's respect, since they were unwilling or unable to bestow it.⁹⁵

As the day of the march approached, even the city's historically conservative black business organization, the D.C. Chamber of Commerce, joined the call for the promotion of a black officer to the rank of captain.⁹⁶ The chamber's president, Jesse Dedmon, Jr., met with Chief Murray and advised him that having a black captain in the MPD would "give the country and the world a better image of the police department in the Capital of the democracies of the world." Dedmon added that "it is important to our youth for them to know that it is possible for Negroes to achieve the higher echelons of the police department."

Dissent came from an unlikely source: Tilmon O'Bryant, the black officer—now lieutenant—who had co-organized those covert classes for black officers. In a statement to the press, O'Bryant expressed his gratitude for the activists' attention and support, and acknowledged that, were their campaign to achieve its goal, he would very likely stand to benefit. Nevertheless, he opposed the effort, objecting to the activists' overtly racial appeal for the promotion of black officers. O'Bryant still believed in the importance of police integration, but in what amounted to an early critique of affirmative action, he warned that any attempt to integrate police departments must "reject favoritism." The *Afro* pushed back, arguing that "it would have been better

for all concerned had Lieut. O'Bryant remained silent on the issue." The *Afro* concluded, "Our advice to Lieut. O'Bryant is to stick to police work and leave the race relations business to the experts."⁹⁷

The dispute between the *Afro* and O'Bryant probably made little difference. Chief Murray was never going to be pressured into promoting a black officer to the rank of captain. He was an obstinate man, and his racial views—to put it delicately—resisted evolution. That same year, upon learning that a white commander had integrated his precinct's squad cars, Murray called him in for counseling.⁹⁸

But the *Afro*-O'Bryant disagreement was significant as an early sign of emerging challenges. For decades, civil rights activists and black officers had seemed to have a rock-solid alliance predicated on mutual interest. The activists who fought to integrate American policing typically believed that police work was central to the "race relations business," and they saw their effort in support of black police as an integral part of their broader struggle for racial equality. But now the *Afro* was implying that "police work" and "the race relations business" were separate domains.

The problem ran deeper than intellectual incoherence. There was also the matter of the paper's condescension toward O'Bryant and, by extension, toward black officers generally. Previously, black police officers had been irrefutable heroes in the black community, held up by activists as pioneers and role models. (Recall the celebration of the Atlanta Eight.) Indeed, for fifty years, the outside game had fit hand in glove with the inside one. Pressure from civil rights activists—Martin Luther King, Sr., the NAACP's Eugene Davidson, the *Afro*'s Chuck Stone—had complemented the striving of insiders like Burtell Jefferson and Tilmon O'Bryant. But differences in strategy had suddenly appeared, and the *Afro*'s response was to treat O'Bryant less as a dissenting colleague than as a delinquent subordinate. The paper's political goals may have been diametrically opposed to those of white supremacists, but its tone was eerily similar: O'Bryant needed to shut up and stay in his place.

The condescension was rooted in class. Those who fought for the

hiring of black police occupied one stratum of black society; those who actually became officers occupied another. Eugene Davidson, for example, graduated from Harvard College and Howard University School of Law; Chuck Stone had a degree from Wesleyan.⁹⁹ By contrast, Burtell Jefferson's highest degree was his diploma from Armstrong Technical High School, and Tilmon O'Bryant had dropped out of Armstrong in the ninth grade.¹⁰⁰ Of course, education is not the only marker of social class, but in black America it's an especially important one. This was nowhere truer than in D.C., where the sizable black middle class (and smaller black upper middle class) had long drawn distinctions that were invisible to whites but clear to blacks. "It was a segregated city among blacks," said Calvin Rolark, who started *The Washington Informer*, which would become the city's second-most widely read black newspaper. "Lighter-skinned blacks didn't associate with the darker blacks, and the Howard University blacks didn't associate with anyone."¹⁰¹ So when the *Afro* told O'Bryant to be mindful of his station and leave race relations "to the experts," black readers couldn't miss the message.

Black policemen do not shoot black jay walkers.

—*Afro*-American columnist John Lewis

On October 8, 1968, Elijah Bennett was walking near the intersection of Fourteenth and U Streets, in the heart of black D.C., when he was shot by MPD officer David Roberts. Not much is known about the interaction beyond the following: Bennett was a black man, Roberts a white one; Bennett was jaywalking; Roberts shouted for him to get out of the street; a dispute ensued; Roberts fired his pistol, and Bennett was killed.¹⁰²

Bennett's death (like the deaths of Harrison Finley, Nelson Marshall, and, almost half a century later, Michael Brown and Eric Garner) provoked outrage and raised broad questions about the relationship between metropolitan police forces and the black citizens they were theoretically supposed to protect. For *Afro* columnist John Lewis

(no relation to the civil rights leader), the outrage sprang from the fact that Bennett's offense was jaywalking: few infractions are more trivial than walking in the street when you should be in a crosswalk. As Lewis saw it, the altercation was emblematic of a deep systemic failure. To understand how an unarmed black jaywalker could end up dead, he argued, it was essential to see that white officers treated black neighborhoods as the "wild west." As a result of this mentality, the white cop believed that he "must always 'get his man and bring him back alive or dead,' regardless of the magnitude of the alleged crime." On top of that, Lewis wrote, white officers had a macho mentality that made them ashamed to call for backup, even as a strategy for de-escalating tensions and resolving the conflict with less-than-deadly force. Lewis's solution? Change the racial composition of the police force. A killing like this "would not have occurred," he wrote, "if the Washington police force was not permitted to patrol the so-called ghetto streets like a foreign occupation army and leave the city to go back to their snow white suburban homes." Black cops would make a difference, Lewis concluded, because "[b]lack policemen do not shoot black jay walkers."¹⁰³

Lewis's piece was published in 1968, at the height of the civil rights revolution, and one part of this revolution was the spread of campaigns for the hiring of black police. In the past, such campaigns had largely taken the form of prolonged efforts waged by the black elite, but now a new pattern had emerged. Across the country, ordinary black civilians were actively protesting their treatment at the hands of the police. These protests often turned violent, and when the unrest ended, the demand for more black police was often at the top of the black community's reform agenda. In Harlem in 1964, for example, a white New York Police Department (NYPD) lieutenant shot and killed James Powell, a fifteen-year-old black boy, exacerbating the long-simmering animosity between the majority-black community and the majority-white police force that patrolled it. For six consecutive nights, the neighborhood was seized with violent protests. Harlem's congressional

representative, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., provided Mayor Robert F. Wagner, Jr., with a list of demands that included the immediate assignment of a black police captain to Harlem.¹⁰⁴ The demand wasn't new, but the unrest forced the city's hand. On August 14, 1964, Lloyd Sealy became Harlem's first black precinct captain.¹⁰⁵

The next year it was Watts, a majority-black neighborhood in Los Angeles, that erupted in riots. A white California Highway Patrol officer stopped a black man for reckless driving. The suspect survived the encounter, but there were allegations of excessive force during the arrest. Word of the incident spread through the neighborhood, and soon Watts was in flames. The death and destruction were horrific: 34 dead, more than 1,000 injured, almost 4,000 arrested, and \$40 million in property damage.¹⁰⁶

As in Harlem, long-suppressed issues were forced to the surface—and once again, police racism loomed large. Watts was two-thirds black, yet its police precinct had only seven black officers on its 205-person force.¹⁰⁷ And those black officers, like their counterparts everywhere else, faced rampant workplace discrimination.¹⁰⁸ Los Angeles's leading black newspaper, the *Sentinel*, assumed the same position as D.C.'s *Afro* and Harlem's *Amsterdam News*: its pages became a bullhorn for change. The paper described black citizens' "bitter resentment" of the police and claimed that this resentment was at the heart of the recent violence. It was 1965, the *Sentinel* pointed out, yet the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) did not have a single black captain.¹⁰⁹

In the riots' aftermath, the calls for more black officers grew in both number and volume. NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins cited "police problems" as a major cause of what had happened in Watts; he "urged more Negro policemen on the force, an expanded public relations program and more promotions of Negro officers."¹¹⁰ At a particularly well-attended Los Angeles Police Commission meeting in 1966, everyone seemed to have an opinion about the reforms that were needed. The Ministers Council of Watts proposed increasing the number of integrated patrol cars and installing a black captain in

Watts; the 82nd Street Improvement Club suggested abolishing the oral test for new recruits on the grounds that it discriminated against black applicants; and the Commission on Human Relations called for racial integration of the LAPD's top echelons.¹¹¹

By the late 1960s, black citizens were not the only ones pushing for more black officers: white officials at the highest levels of government had joined the fight. The most prominent call for black officers came from President Lyndon Johnson's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, chaired by Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach.¹¹² In *The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society*, the commission concluded that "the relationship between the police and the community is so personal that every section of the community has a right to expect that its aspirations and problems, its hopes and fears, are fully reflected in its police."¹¹³ One or two token black officers was not enough: "If there is not a substantial percentage of Negro officers among the policemen in a Negro neighborhood, many residents will reach the conclusion that the neighborhood is being policed, not for the purpose of maintaining law and order, but for the purpose of maintaining the ghetto's status quo."¹¹⁴

In 1968, the Kerner Commission—known formally as the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders and convened to address the riots and violence devastating American cities—would reach the same conclusion. The racial disparities in police departments were stark and undeniable: in the twenty-eight departments that provided data, blacks made up just 6 percent of the workforce, even though the cities were, on average, 24 percent black.¹¹⁵ The commission approvingly cited the testimony of Patrick V. Murphy, the reform-minded police leader who had recently been appointed D.C.'s director of public safety. "One of the serious problems facing the police in the nation today," Murphy said, "is the lack of adequate representation of Negroes in police departments. I think the police have not recruited enough Negroes in the past and are not recruiting enough of them today."¹¹⁶

Black nationalists, who typically had little good to say about the Johnson administration, seconded the Katzenbach and Kerner com-



Mobile Recruiting Station, Oakland, California, 1967 (President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, *The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society*, 1967)

missions' calls for more black officers. D.C.'s Black United Front (BUF), whose leadership included not only Stokely Carmichael but also future city council members Doug Moore and Sterling Tucker, developed a police reform platform that demanded the "immediate prohibition of all-white police patrols in the Black community."¹¹⁷ Other planks called on the city to "cease all promotions in the Police Department and upgrade present Black policemen" and "fire Police Chief John Layton immediately and replace him with a Black man."¹¹⁸ The BUF believed that the black community should be policed exclusively by black officers; white officers, they wrote, "should be assigned downtown directing traffic and helping old ladies to cross the street."¹¹⁹

Marion Barry, the future mayor of D.C., joined the effort. Barry's disdain for the MPD was well known—as he said at a news conference in 1966, back when he was an organizer for the D.C. chapter of SNCC, "The people in this city are tired of Gestapo cops who break into their homes illegally and arrest them on flimsy charges."¹²⁰ Barry believed that only black control of the police would change how the department

treated D.C.'s black citizens. In 1969, he became even more determined: when a confrontation with a police officer over a parking ticket turned physical, Barry was hospitalized. After spending part of the night in the hospital and the rest of it in jail, he emerged to find a crowd of three hundred citizens who had gathered to protest his arrest. With dried blood on his shirt and a bandage on his head, Barry told the crowd: "This shows me that the black people need to control the nation's capital police department. The police are like mad dogs."¹²¹

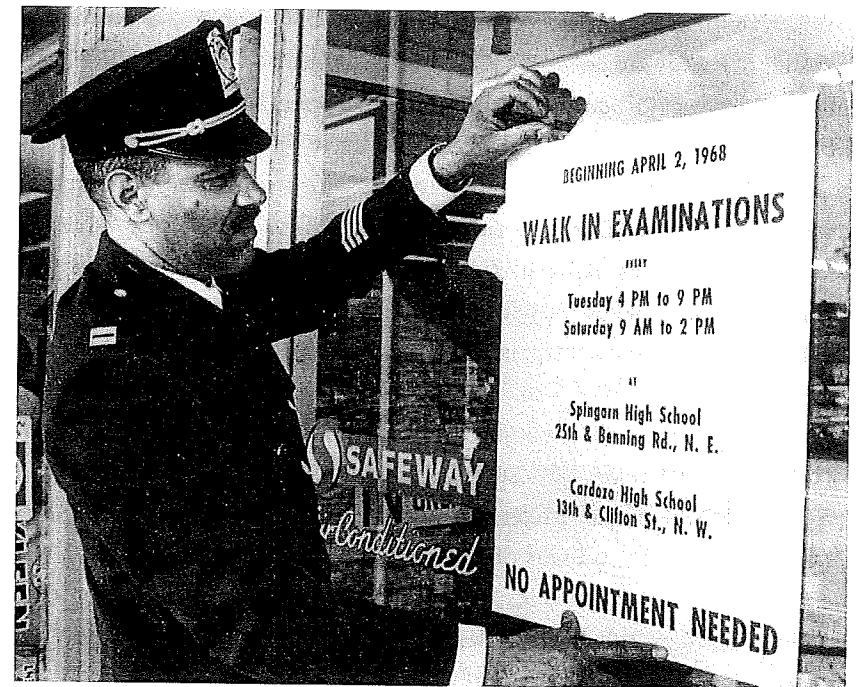
So it came as no surprise that when D.C. began a major police recruiting campaign on black radio stations, Barry became its public voice. He took to the airwaves, offering \$50 to anyone who referred a candidate to the force (provided that the candidate passed the MPD's entrance exams).¹²² The campaign paid off: in 1976, a survey of D.C.'s black police found that 30 percent of the officers had heard about the job from the radio.¹²³

Barry's on-air appeals were part of a national trend. In Michigan, Bill Cosby recorded ads and visited the state numerous times to recruit black officers (Detroit, at the time, was 45 percent black, with a police force that was only 12 percent black).¹²⁴ In Philadelphia, billboards urged residents to "cop in, don't cop out," and to "join [Police Commissioner Frank] Rizzo's team."¹²⁵ Recruitment efforts reached all the way to Vietnam, where the U.S. Navy's in-house newspaper ran ads featuring Bunker Bunny, a bikini-clad model. "Hey big fella," she beckoned, "bet you didn't know that gals like me are big on the fuzz, did you? Well, it's true. We all dig those handsome brutes in blue who sport the shiny silver badges in big cities like Washington, D.C."¹²⁶

I'm not their soul brother or friend, I'm a policeman.

—Officer, Prince George's County, Maryland

The warning signs came early, but few paid attention. As the recruitment effort took root, evidence emerged that black officers might have a more limited impact than many had hoped. The most im-



Police Captain Tilmon O'Bryant hangs a recruiting poster announcing police examinations to be given in predominantly black neighborhoods. (D.C. Public Library)

portant reason for the disappointment was this: blacks who joined police departments had a far more complicated set of attitudes, motivations, and incentives than those pushing for black police had assumed. The case for black police had always been premised on the unquestioned assumption of racial solidarity between black citizens and black officers. Whether it was Rev. King declaring that black police would "represent" the race or *Afro* columnist John Lewis asserting that "black policemen do not shoot black jay walkers," advocates had supposed that black officers would, at the very least, *identify* with the populations they policed.

But what if King and Lewis were wrong?

Unfortunately, there was reason to think they just might have been. In San Diego and Philadelphia, for example, black citizens were hostile

to black officers, contending that those officers were as harsh as or harsher than white ones.¹²⁷ Researchers who had ridden with both black and white officers corroborated that belief, concluding that the black officers were just as physically abusive as their white counterparts.¹²⁸ Even in the Katzenbach commission's *The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society*, the clarion call for more black police was accompanied by a detailed report noting that "in some places, low-income Negroes prefer white policemen because of the severe conduct of Negro officers."¹²⁹

It turned out that a surprising number of black officers simply didn't like other black people—at least not the poor blacks they tended to police. In 1966, the University of Michigan's Donald Black and Albert Reiss led a team of researchers who rode or walked for weeks with black and white officers in Boston, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. What they found was disturbing: though black officers were not as prejudiced as white ones, a significant minority of black officers still expressed antiblack attitudes. The researchers classified 28 percent of the black officers working in black precincts as "highly prejudiced" or "prejudiced."¹³⁰ Many of these black officers sounded like Klansmen. One told the researchers, "I'm talking to you as a Negro, and I'm telling you these people are savages. And they're real dirty. We were never rich, but my mother kept us and our home clean." Another said, "There have always been jobs for Negroes, but the f—— people are too stupid to go out and get an education. They all want the easy way out."¹³¹

Of course, most black officers didn't share those views. But even those who saw themselves as pro-black (or at least not as antiblack) engaged in aggressive tactics against black citizens whom they saw as a threat to law and order. In part, their conduct reflected class divisions within the black community. When some blacks (usually middle class) demanded action against others (usually poor), many "pro-black" officers responded with special enthusiasm. This is what James D. Bannion and G. Marie Wilt found in 1973, when they studied black officers in Detroit. Bannion and Wilt wanted to know how blacks on the force compared themselves to their white colleagues. Without

exception, the black officers believed they had better rapport with black citizens and did a better job in black neighborhoods than white officers did. They cared more about black communities; in particular, they were more concerned about protecting black neighborhoods from crime, violence, drugs, and disorder. So while they were less likely than whites to use excessive force (at least according to their reports to the researchers), these officers freely admitted to being markedly more aggressive about responding to such low-level infractions as drunkenness and loitering.¹³²

Other research indicated that a form of black pride was at the heart of aggressive policing. In Kephart's 1957 study of Philadelphia's police force, black officers indicated that they were embarrassed by black offenders. When asked, "Do you ever get discouraged at the large amount of Negro crime?" one officer responded:

I feel it personally. I was coming home in the streetcar the other day—I was in street clothes. Across the aisle a colored man and a white man were sitting together. The colored man was drunk—he was pushing all over the white man, knocking his packages off his lap—just wouldn't stop. Finally, I couldn't stand it any longer. Everybody was watching. I felt it was a reflection on me—know what I mean?¹³³

A black NYPD officer expressed a similar sentiment to researcher Nicholas Alex as he described his interaction with a young black suspect:

I wanted to give this kid a lesson in civil rights. I take him into the precinct and take my gun off and tell him that I will beat the living hell out of him. He starts to cry and tells me that he doesn't fight his race. I tell him that doesn't he know that he is killing his race by doing things like that.¹³⁴

A few black officers rejected the notion that race was at all relevant to the performance of their duties. As an officer in the D.C. suburb of Prince George's County, Maryland, said, "Sometimes we'll be cruis-

ing down a street, and a group of black teenagers will yell, 'Hey, soul brother!' So I get out and explain that I'm not their soul brother or their friend, I'm a policeman."¹³⁵

The notion that black officers would represent the race, or treat black citizens differently, ran into another problem as well. For many black officers, as early as the 1960s, the question of being pro-black or antiblack was beside the point. They were not joining the force with dreams of becoming a warrior for (or against) the race. They were signing up because they needed a job.¹³⁶

When Nicholas Alex interviewed hundreds of black NYPD officers in 1964 and 1965, they couldn't have been clearer about their motivations. Police work was a good job—stable, secure, with good benefits—and most blacks chose it for that reason. One black officer told Alex, "I was broke. I can't honestly recall any grandiose dreams of being a big fellow in blue." Another said, "I looked around for the highest paying nonprofessional civil service job available. I took the test for the police, fire, sanitation and correction. I passed all the tests, and the police was the first I was called for."¹³⁷

These explanations would have been familiar to officers like Burtell Jefferson, Tilmon O'Bryant, and Owen Davis, who had faced a Jim Crow job market. There were fewer employment barriers for blacks by the late 1960s and 1970s, but they had hardly disappeared. The stability of a police job was especially appealing to blacks trying to navigate an uncertain and often discriminatory private-sector job market. As one officer told Alex, "I couldn't take the layoffs. I had a wife and a baby to support." The officer pointed out that policing came with another perk—the chance to rise in the force. "The police job is the best job I ever had in terms of much more money," he said, "and much more opportunity for advancement." Another said, "You can plan on your income because it's steady. Prior to this job . . . I had nine or ten small jobs. They would lay you off. You went from one job to another. Small jobs and not very steady."¹³⁸

Not only did police work look good by comparison with the rest of the job market; for most officers, it was a step up from what their par-

ents had achieved. As Eugene Beard found when he studied the backgrounds of black D.C. officers in the early 1970s, most black officers were both better educated and better paid than their parents. The most common father's occupation listed by the black officers was unskilled laborer.¹³⁹

There is nothing wrong with seeing policing as a source of stable employment or upward mobility. But the fact that so many blacks joined the force for these reasons undermined the theory that integration would change police practice. After all, most new black officers saw policing as a job, not as another front in the civil rights movement. Expecting them to change how police fought crime was like expecting black firefighters to change how the fire department fought fire. At the same time, the limited job market for black officers made it less likely that they would do what many reformers hoped they would: buck the famously powerful police culture. The few who tried paid a high price.¹⁴⁰ Finally, although police work paid decently, it didn't make the officers rich, and maintaining wages and benefits was a constant political struggle. These realities would influence which battles black police—and their unions—took up in the 1980s and beyond. Even those black officers inclined to use their political capital to fight police brutality would often find themselves in the minority. Most of their colleagues—black or white—wanted to fight for wages, benefits, and an equal shot at promotions.

Burtell Jefferson was sworn in as chief on January 13, 1978. The exceedingly brief ceremony—only five minutes—was in keeping with Jefferson's understated persona, but it offered little opportunity to reflect on the day's significance: D.C.'s first black mayor handing the reins of law enforcement to its first black police chief. Indeed, Mayor Walter Washington never mentioned race during the ceremony.¹⁴¹ Perhaps he thought that the symbolism was too self-evident and powerful for words.¹⁴²

Jefferson had struggled for three decades against unfair hiring and promotion practices, and his most impressive accomplishment as a

young officer was the study class that led to his own promotion. Jefferson never forgot his up-by-bootstraps history, not even as chief, and he was determined to remedy the decades of discrimination as best he could. As he put it later, "I hoped to provide growth opportunities previously denied to African Americans and other minorities to make them ready to replace me as chief or capable of becoming chiefs in other departments."¹⁴³

Since black officers already constituted the majority of new recruits by the time he took over in 1978, Jefferson tackled the promotion process, the last barrier to black advancement. His stance was exceedingly popular among the MPD's black officers, a majority of whom listed career advancement as their top concern in a 1974 survey.¹⁴⁴ Nearly every officer who responded to the survey had identified the small number of black supervisors as a major problem. Even though the department had begun recruiting more black officers, two-thirds of the respondents to the 1974 survey said they trusted few or no whites on the force, and even greater majorities claimed they faced discrimination in work assignments and promotions.¹⁴⁵

Luckily, Jefferson had the benefit of a favorable political environment. Many black police leaders had faced tremendous obstacles in bringing about the hiring and promotion of a nontrivial number of black officers; Jefferson, on the other hand, was able to work with a black mayor and a majority-black city council that unanimously endorsed affirmative action.¹⁴⁶ The former SNCC activist and gun control advocate John Wilson was especially tireless, using council oversight hearings to demand that the department move faster to close racial disparities in the supervisory ranks.¹⁴⁷

And so Jefferson succeeded. Isaac Fulwood, who became D.C.'s police chief in 1989 and later served as head of the U.S. Parole Commission, called Jefferson "the all time affirmative action person." He "broke it wide open," said Fulwood, who credited Jefferson for his own success: "I stood upon Jefferson's shoulders. He blessed me with opportunities that were previously denied to us." Fulwood was not

alone: more than twenty senior black police leaders, including chiefs in Atlanta, D.C., New Orleans, Charlotte, and Maryland's Prince George's County, can trace their careers back to Burtell Jefferson.¹⁴⁸

But that's where the celebration ends.

Throughout the twentieth century, America's metropolitan police forces were collectively the targets of two distinct campaigns for racial equality: those that sought to end discrimination *within* police forces, and those that sought to end brutality and discrimination *by* police against the black community. Ultimately, in practice, these goals were often unrelated. While Jefferson proudly grabbed the baton from the previous two generations of activists who had campaigned for equality within the ranks of the MPD, and even as he fulfilled those activists' wildest dreams on that day in 1978 when he became chief, he assumed a harsh stance when it came to responding to crime in poor urban areas. Unfortunately, this part of Jefferson's agenda would cause great damage to the black community.

During an interview for a profile celebrating his swearing-in ceremony, Jefferson told an ominous story. Once, as a child, he'd been hanging around near a group of other black boys, and all of them got picked up by a white police officer. The other kids had been shooting dice, but Jefferson had merely been playing with a football. Still, the officer took him home to his parents.

What did Jefferson make of the incident almost fifty years later? He could have wondered why the officer had picked up an innocent kid in the first place. He could have asked whether policing looked the same in white neighborhoods. These would not have been revolutionary questions; they'd been on the table for more than a century. As far back as 1887, *The Washington Bee* had complained that prejudiced white policemen "take a great delight in arresting every little colored boy they see on the street, who may be doing something not at all offensive, and allow the white boys to do what they please."¹⁴⁹

But no: the moral Jefferson drew from this story was *not* that the white officer had been wrong to pick him up, but that he, the

football-tossing black boy, had deserved it. "I've always been taught," he said, "that if you yourself are not actually engaged in some wrongdoing, if you're with a crowd you're just as guilty."¹⁵⁰

Any doubts about where Jefferson stood on matters of criminal punishment would be put to rest shortly thereafter, when he was faced with a decision about whether to support mandatory minimum sentences for drug and gun offenses. This debate, the subject of chapter 4, would divide the city and ultimately be resolved by voters in a citywide ballot initiative in 1981. But Jefferson was not conflicted: he was a staunch supporter of the legislation to toughen criminal penalties. In a letter to the city council, he said that mandatory minimum penalties for drug selling would "serve as a deterrent and weapon against drug sellers in the battle to rid this city of illicit drugs."¹⁵¹

In his support for mandatory minimums, Jefferson was acting in line with what most black cops wanted. In 1970, the National Council of Police Societies, the largest and oldest national organization of black police officers, urged its members to "move against pushers and others who sell" drugs.¹⁵² D.C.'s rank-and-file officers supported tougher sentencing in general; in a 1976 survey, they reported lenient sentencing by judges as their top concern.¹⁵³

Two years before Jefferson's historic promotion, at the conference of black law enforcement officials, the attendees abruptly voted to dispense with the rest of their agenda and dedicate their time to chartering a brand-new organization: the National Organization of Black Police Executives (NOBLE).¹⁵⁴ The move was evidence of the progress they had made: there were now enough black police executives to warrant the creation of a formal group.

For their founding document, NOBLE's members produced a list of policy recommendations for fighting crime. To be fair, the executives joined many of America's other black leaders in calling for root-cause solutions to crime, including socioeconomic reform and a health-care overhaul. But they also demanded "a nationwide war on drugs" and—yes—"minimum mandatory sentencing."¹⁵⁵

In one respect, the century-long fight for police integration had succeeded. Its victory brought a prominent new set of voices to American criminal justice policy: those of the nation's dozens of black police chiefs. But many of these voices would propel, not constrain, an emerging tough-on-crime movement.