

Chua-Eoan, H. (2000, March 6). Black and Blue. Time, pp. 24-28.

OVERVIEW

"If the unarmed Amadou Diallo had been a white youth instead of a dark-skinned immigrant from Africa, would he be alive today?" This is the question posed by attorney Johnnie Cochran and poised on many minds after the March 4, 2001 verdict in Albany, New York. Mr. Cochran was referring to the acquittal of four white policemen who fired 41 bullets at the young African immigrant. After 21 hours of deliberation, the jury of seven white men, four black women, and one white woman sided with the police, believing that they "reasonably but mistakenly" used deadly force against Diallo in response to a threat. According to the article, the only close-up testimony came from the cops themselves, although other witnesses saw and heard things from a distance. The testimony of one police officer involved in the shooting, Sean Carroll, was pivotal to the court case. Officer Carroll testified that the police became suspicious by "the way he (Diallo) was peering up and down the block. He stepped backward into the vestibule as we were approaching, like he didn't want to be seen...And I'm trying to figure out what's going on. You know—what's this guy up to? I was getting a little leery, from the training, of my past experience of arrests, involving gun arrests." Officer Carroll described how Diallo began to remove a black object from his right side that looked like the slide of a black gun. Officer Carroll, believing Diallo was about to fire on his partner, began firing his weapon. His fellow officers joined in with a barrage of bullets, which pinned Diallo against the door. Officer Carroll, fearing Diallo would be wearing a bulletproof vest, shot at his legs. After Diallo was down, Officer Carroll made the gruesome discovery that Diallo was actually just holding his wallet. Officer Carroll's response: "Oh my god. I just held him, his hand. I rubbed his face. Please don't die." But Amadou Diallo was already dead.

The public outcry was great. The article reports that after hearing the verdict, one man raised his infant son in the air, pointed to the color of the child's skin, and said, "Shoot him now!" Kadiatou Diallo, Amadou's mother, was equally frustrated and upset. She told Time magazine, "No human being deserves to die like that. Standing in front of your doorway where you live. Is that a crime? All he was doing was going home. Mrs. Diallo described Amadou as a " 'good son' " who always smiled and never hurt

anyone. Although his father was a prominent businessman with many international ties, Amadou wanted to make his mark in America. He loved America and was so eager to live in the U.S. that he applied for the status of political refugee under false pretenses and once he was in New York, he took a job as a street vendor. Mrs. Diallo believes that the trial was for the benefit of the four policemen. "Amadou did not come out here. It was limited to the people who were on trial. No one came to know who Amadou really was." Mrs. Diallo does not want people to forget her son or what happened to him.

Bronx District Attorney Robert Johnson was heavily criticized for "losing the trial." According to the article, Johnson chose not to assign any blacks to the prosecution team, which may have led to a less passionate presentation of the case. Furthermore, race was never articulated as an issue at the trial, although its presence was pervasive. Moreover, prosecutors did not press the defendants when they stood by their stories and appeared remorseful. The government also failed to follow up on key points, one of which asked if Officer Carroll was actually within the vestibule when the shooting started. Rev. Al Sharpton, who has been an outspoken voice in the black community on racism, was quoted as saying, "The prosecution failed to raise a lot of issues that would have given the jury a better sense of what they were looking at. They never made it clear that many white cops come into the city thinking that they're going into the jungle to tame animals rather than serve people."

Meanwhile, the questions and arguments continue over the motivations and actions of police in dealing with minorities in their communities. The article concludes with Mrs. Diallo being asked if she would allow Officer Sean Carroll to meet with her. Her response, with folded arms: "Only when the person comes and says the truth, then forgiveness will come."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- What do you think of Johnnie Cochran's assertion that Amadou Diallo would still be alive if he had been a white youth instead of a dark-skinned immigrant from Africa?
- What do you think about Officer Carroll's reasoning for firing at Mr. Diallo?
- Why do you think there were neither black men on the jury nor any

black men on the prosecution team?

- What do you think of Rev. Sharpton's statement, "many white cops come into the city thinking that they're going into the jungle to tame animals rather than serve people"?
- What do you think police need to do to change the way they deal with minorities in their communities?

IMPLICATIONS

- The case of Amadou Diallo continues to highlight the need for police departments to establish a more comprehensive educational program for training officers about racism.
- Racism is not only a police issue; it involves the whole community, including local leaders, politicians, schools, and churches. A community effort aimed at education and reconciliation needs serious consideration and implementation.

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