

E. HUGHES SHANKS

# Police are threat to nonwhites

A man died recently in police custody after a "scuffle" with officers. Witnesses are reported to have said that police inflicted several "blows with their fists" and kicked Francisco Renteria in his groin.



*To say race played no part in it is crazy. Only the officers who beat Renteria can know how much their own racist attitudes played a part in the events that led to his death.*

Renteria died Saturday afternoon on his 30th birthday. His untimely death reminds me of one of my greatest fears: Being stopped by police and winding up hurt.

People should be careful when police question them, no matter what color they are. But for nonwhite males especially, this is something that is ingrained in our minds from early childhood on. We know how dangerous it is to have contact with the police, especially at night. For us, what happened to Renteria is no surprise.

It was not so long ago that police could legally oppress blacks. To die while in police custody is not at all unusual in our minds. Police violence inflicted disproportionately on nonwhites is a reality. We don't like it, but many of us have learned how to survive police contacts.

Renteria, who spoke little English, if any, did not survive. Regardless of what police say, nonwhites will be suspicious. The history of brutal police tactics directed at nonwhites is fresh in our memories.

Police officers' use of extreme force on nonwhites never went away with a piece of legislation. Any sane person would have to agree that it hasn't gone away at all.

It would be ridiculous for public officials to say that racist attitudes exist nowhere in the minds of their officers. Renteria's life was in their hands, and now he is dead. To say race played no part in it is crazy. Only the officers who beat Renteria can know how much their own racist attitudes played a part in the events that led to his death.

I can still hear my father warning me about avoiding contact with police. "Boy, you'll mess around and get picked up ... Stay

away from them ... and don't run at night."

Any black man running at night is thought to be running from something; therefore, police have cause to automatically question him.

My father was a decorated disabled veteran and law school graduate, but that doesn't mean much at night. He rehearsed with me how I should respond when police questioned me. He taught me that as long as I didn't scare them, I'd stand a better chance of not getting hurt and arrested.

"Say 'sir.' Don't hesitate, and keep your hands where they can see them," he said. I learned these things, and I still practice them today.

While I was in the Navy, older black sailors taught me to keep my uniform visible in my car. "That way they'll know you're not just another niggah," they would say.

We are conditioned to expect rough treatment when police question us. We expect to be questioned more often. We expect police to stop us at night and ask us to explain ourselves. These are things we've come to accept as facts of life. I've been stopped and questioned more times than I care to remember — more times than all my white friends combined.

One night in 1978, a friend had just dropped me off less than one block from my house. As I trotted down the sidewalk, I was overcome by two police dogs and a dozen New Orleans police officers with

their weapons drawn.

I waited while they screamed orders at me, their guns pointed to my head. They had mistakenly identified me as an armed robbery suspect. The speed with which they overtook me was incredible. Fewer than 30 seconds had passed from the time I got out of the car until the moment I reached my yard. It was clear: They saw me running and instantly subdued me.

This was the moment for which my father had prepared me. I knew exactly what to do. I had been over it in my head a thousand times. I had been trained how to survive this.

Following instructions to the letter, I stayed face down with my arms and legs spread apart. My neighbors, all of them black, watched in horror from inside their houses while police frisked me. No one dared come out until it was safe.

"Y'all keep your asses inside! You hear?" one officer shouted as he took my identification from my pants pockets. "You just keep still, boy, while we check you out."

Once the police realized their mistake, an officer spoke to me as I sat on the ground. "Boy, what the hell were you doing, running around here at night?"

"Going home," I said.

Thinking of Francisco Renteria's death, I realize how lucky I was.

I made it home — he didn't.

Shanks is a graduate student and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

MIKE ROYKO

# Pickpockets aren't picky folks

He was getting out of a cab near a nightspot on Chicago's Rush Street when a woman who wanted the cab started to brush by and bumped into him hard.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said, smiling apologetically and putting her arms out to steady him.

Because she was uncommonly pretty, he just smiled and said, "That's okay, take it easy."

But then he sensed that something wasn't right, and he reached for the pocket where he kept his wallet. The pocket was empty.

"Damn you," he said, "give me my wallet."

But she was already turning and moving away. He started to go after her, but he was jolted from behind.

"I turned," he said later. "Actually, I was kind of spun around by the way I was bumped. There was a big guy, bigger than me and obviously in better shape. All he did was point a finger at me. He didn't say anything. He just pointed a finger at me as if he was warning me that something could happen."

"He had on a tweed sport coat and a golf shirt. Well-dressed. He fit into the scene. But the way he looked at me, he wasn't the kind of person you would want to mess with over a hundred bucks, which is what I had in my wallet."

"So I wasn't going to tangle with him. The woman was walking away, and he turned and went after her. I don't know. I just got mad, and I pointed at them and started yelling: 'Murder, that guy is a murderer. Hey, that woman is a murderer.' I was yelling as loud as I could."

"I don't know why I did that. It just popped into my head. But some people on the sidewalk stopped and looked at where I was pointing. One of them said: 'What's going



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on?"

"I yelled: 'Yeah, them, those two ... They're wanted for MURDER.'

"The next thing I knew, my wallet flew up in the air and the two of them took off."

"They took off around a corner, and I went over and got my wallet. The money was still there. Everything was there. I guess she didn't have a chance to pass it off."

"Anyway, I thought I'd call you. I had read what you wrote about pickpockets. Maybe that's why I had a hunch something was wrong when she bumped into me. I don't think people realize how often it happens. I was really lucky."

He was. Every day, people are boosted in Chicago. Someone bumps into them in a perfectly understandable way. In an elevator, getting in or out of a cab, going through a revolving door.

Then their wallets or purses are gone. A minor crime? On the worldwide scale of pain and suffering, yes. But if it's your wallet or purse, and you are suddenly broke, your credit cards and checkbook are gone, and all your ID's are in the hands of thieves, it can be a disaster.

But pickpockets aren't conscious of class or need. As my calls and mail tell me, if the thieves think you are a patsy, they don't care

what your problems are.

"I was in a restaurant in Hoffman Estates," the woman said.

A pickpocket in suburban Hoffman Estates? Can that be? Sure.

"I was with relatives and had opened my wallet to give some of the younger ones money to play the video machines. Then when we were leaving, this woman stopped and bent over and fell down like she was having cramps."

"A man pushed past me to help her. It wasn't until the next day, when I looked in my purse, that I realized he had lifted my wallet and checkbook. And by that time, they had bought things with my credit cards and checkbook. I can't believe this could happen in a nice suburb."

Pickpockets are smart. Even if caught, they will be punished as gently as hubcap thieves or shoplifters.

So the answer is to amputate their hands. Or maybe only one hand. Even if a thief should have the right to blow his nose.

But you won't see it. Chop off even one hand and the American Civil Liberties Union screams as if it can't blow its nose. We are just too kind a society.

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