

The Sean Bell Tragedy By Kevin Powell

Written by Davey D / Kevin Powell ID4345
Monday, 05 May 2008 11:59 -

As you read this article, keep in mind that Kevin Powell has long been out there speaking truth to power. Last night Tuesday April 29th) he had held a townhall meeting in Brooklyn to help the community find ways to deal with this frustrating Sean Bell situation. His meeting did not get all the fanfare mainstream coverage but it got love from the people in his neighborhood. We should also note that Kevin is also running for Congress and the word around town is his bold, forthright leadership is perched to unseat a 26 year incumbent who hasn't done too much for his district. While people go nuts over Obama, folks may wanna pay close attention to Powell's race in Brooklyn. One of our own may soon be sitting in the halls of Congress.

Davey D

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I am sick to my stomach and I really do not know what to say right this second. My cell and office phones have been blowing up all day, and people have been emailing me nonstop, to let me know that Detectives Michael Oliver, Gescard Isnora, and Marc Cooper, the three New York City police officers accused of shooting 50 times and murdering Sean Bell, were found not guilty on all counts: Oliver, who fired 31 times and reloaded once, and Isnora, who fired 11 times, had been charged with manslaughter, felony assault and reckless endangerment. They faced up to 25 years in prison if convicted on all charges. Cooper, who fired four times, faced up to a year in jail if convicted of reckless endangerment.

And that's it: Sean Bell, a mere 23 years of age, out partying the morning before the wedding to the mother of his two small children, dead, gone, forever. Sean Bell and his two friends, Trent Benefield and Joseph Guzman, all unarmed, ambushed by New York's finest. His last day, November 25, 2006, is marked as another tragic one in New York City history. How many more? I once heard in a protest song.

How many more?

But I knew this verdict was coming. I have lived in New York City for nearly two decades and, before that, worked as a news reporter for several publications throughout the city's five

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boroughs, and I cannot begin to tell you how many cases of police brutality and police misconduct I covered or witnessed, more often than not a person of color on the receiving end: Eleanor Bumpurs. Michael Stewart...Amadou Diallo...Sean Bell.

This is not to suggest that all police officers are trigger-happy and inhumane, because I do not believe that. They have a difficult and important job, and many of them do that job well, and maintain outstanding relationships with our communities. I know officers like that. But what I am saying is that New York, America, this society as a whole, still views the lives of Black people, of Latino people, of people of color, of women, of poor or working-class people, as less than valuable. It does not matter that two of the three officers charged in the Sean Bell case were officers of color and one White. What matters is the mindset of racism that permeates the New York Police Department, and far too many police departments across America. Shooting in self-defense is one thing, but it is never okay to shoot first and ask questions later, not even if a police officer "feels" threatened, not even if the source of that "feeling" is a Black or Latino person.

That is a twisted logic deeply rooted in the America social fabric, dating back to the founding fathers and their crazy calculations about slaves being three-fifths of a human being. And in spite of Barack Obama, Oprah Winfrey, Tiger Woods, and other successful Black individuals, by and large the masses of Black people, and Latino people, are perpetually viewed through this lens of not being quite human.

William Kristol of the New York Times wrote what I felt was an incredibly ignorant and myopic March 24th column implying, strongly, that we should not have conversations about race in America, that such talk was dated. This piece was in response to Barack Obama's now famous meditation on race. But Kristol, like many in denial, had this to say: "The last thing we need now is a heated national conversation about race... Racial progress has in fact continued in America. A new national conversation about race isn't necessary to end what Obama calls the "racial stalemate we've been stuck in for years"- because we're not stuck in such a stalemate... This is all for the best. With respect to having a national conversation on race, my recommendation is: Let's not, and say we did." Well, Mr. Kristol, what, precisely, do you think Black New Yorkers are feeling this very moment as we absorb the Sean Bell verdict? Or do our thoughts, our feelings, our wounds, not matter?

"Black male lives are meaningless in America," a female friend just texted me, and what can I say to that? Who's going to help Nicole Paultre Bell, Sean Bell's grieving fiancé, explain to their two young daughters that the men who killed their daddy are not going to be punished?

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I remember that November 2006 day so vividly, when word spread of the Sean Bell killing. And I remember the hastily assembled meetings by New York City's de facto Black leadership-the ministers, the elected officials, the grassroots activists-at Local 1199 in midtown Manhattan where it was stated, with great earnestness and finality, that after all these years, we were going to put together a comprehensive response to police brutality and misconduct. There were to be three levels of response: governmentally (local, state, and federal bills were going to be proposed, and task forces recommended); systemically within the police department (comprehensive proposals were called for to challenge police practices or to enforce ones already in place); and via the United States Justice Department, since any form of police brutality or misconduct is a violation of basic American civil rights. We met for a few months after the Sean Bell murder, divided into committees, then the entire thing died-again. There was a lot of research done, many hearings that were transcribed, much talk of a united front, then nothing, not even an email to say the plan was no longer being planned.

Anyhow, in the interim I spent a great deal of time, more time than I've spent in my entire New York life, in Queens, mainly in Jamaica, Queens, getting to know Sean Bell's family. I was particularly struck by Sean Bell's mother, Valerie Bell, and his father, William Bell. Two very decent and well-intentioned working-class New Yorkers, who had raised their children the best they could, who were now, suddenly, activists thrust into a spotlight they had never sought. The parents are what we the Black community calls "God-fearing, church-going folk." Indeed, what was so incredible was how much Mr. and Mrs. Bell believed in and referenced God. But that is our sojourn in America: when everything else fails us, we still have the Lord. And there they were, holding a 50-day vigil directly across from the 103rd precinct, on 168th Street, right off Jamaica Avenue and 91st Avenue in Jamaica, Queens, in the dead-cold winter air. They and their family members and close friends taking turns monitoring the makeshift altar of candles, cards, and photos. And I remember how we had to shame local leaders a few times into supporting Mr. and Mrs. Bell with donations of money, food, or other material needs. While much of the media and support flocked to Nicole Paultre Bell, Sean Bell's fiancé, and the sexiness of her being represented by the Reverend Al Sharpton and his lawyer pals Sanford Rubenstein and Michael Hardy, the media did not pay much attention to Sean Bell's parents and their kinfolk at all.

What was especially striking was the fact that Mrs. Bell got up every single morning, made her way to the vigil area, then to work in a local hospital all day, then to her church every single evening. She reminded me so much of my own mother, of any Black mother in America who has had to be the backbone of the family, often sacrificing her own health, her own wants and needs, her own hurt and pain, to be there for others in their time of need.

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Mrs. Bell always told me that she truly believed justice would be done in this case. She really did. I never had the heart to tell her that it is rare for a police officer to be found guilty of murdering a civilian, no matter how glaring the evidence. Nor did I have the heart to tell Mrs. Bell that the media and the defense would seek to destroy her son's image and reputation, that Sean Bell would be reduced to a thug, as an unsavory character, to somehow justify the police shooting. Nor did I have the heart to tell Mrs. Bell that this pain of losing her son would be with her the remainder of her life. I did not share my suspicion that the parade of Black leaders, Black protests, media hype-all of it-was all part of someone's carefully concocted script, brushed off and brought to the parade every single time a case like this occurred. I have seen it before, and as long as we live in a city, a nation, that does not value all people as human, there will be more Sean Bells.

"I am Sean Bell," many of us chanted in the days and weeks immediately following his death. Yet very few of us showed up to the hearings after, and even fewer had the courage to question the vision, or lack thereof, of our own Black leadership who accomplished, ultimately, little to nothing at all. And very few of us realized that the powers-that-be in New York City have come to anticipate our reactions to matters like the Sean Bell tragedy: we get upset and become very emotional; we scream "No Justice! No Peace!"; we march, rally, and protest; we call the police and mayor all kinds of names and demand their resignations; we vow that this killing will be the last; and we will wait until the next tragedy hits, then this whole horrible cycle begins anew.

Plain and simple, racism creates abusive relationships. It does not matter if the perpetrator is a White sister or brother, or a person of color, because the most vulnerable in our society feel the heat of it. Real talk: this tragedy would have never gone down on the Upper Eastside of Manhattan or in Brooklyn Heights. I am not just speaking about the judge's decision, but the police officer's actions. Those shots would have never been fired at unarmed White people sitting in a car. Until we understand that racism is not just about who pulled the trigger in a police misconduct case, but is also about the geography of racism, and the psychology of racism, we are forever stuck having the same endless dialogue with no solution in sight.

And until America recognizes the civil and human rights of all its citizens, systemic racism and police misconduct, joined at the hip, will never end. That is, until White sisters and brothers realize they, too, are Sean Bell, this will never end. Save for a few committed souls, most White folks sit on the sidelines (as many did when we marched down Fifth Avenue in protest of Sean Bell's murder in December 2006), feel empathy, but fail to grasp that our struggle for justice is their struggle for justice. They, alas, are Sean Bell, and Amadou Diallo, and all those anonymous Black and Brown heads and bodies who've been victimized, whether they want to accept that reality or not. And the reality is that until police officers are forced to live in the communities they police, forced to learn the language, the culture, the mores of the communities they police, forced to change how they handle undercover assignments, this

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systemic racism, this police misconduct, will never end. And until Black and Latino people, the two communities most likely to suffer at the hands of police brutality and misconduct, refuse to accept the half-baked leadership we've been given for nearly forty years now, and start to question what is really going on behind the scenes with the handshakes, the eyewinks, the head nods, and the backroom deals at the expense of our lives, this systemic racism, this police misconduct, these kinds of miscarriages of justice, will never end.

Our current leadership needs us to believe all we can ever be are victims, doomed to one recurring tragedy or another. It keeps these leaders gainfully employed, and it keeps us feeling completely helpless and powerless. Well, I am not helpless nor powerless, and neither are you. To prevent Sean Bell's memory from fading like dust into the air, the question is put to you, now: What are you going to do to change this picture once and for all? Mayor Bloomberg said this in a statement:

"There are no winners in a trial like this. An innocent man lost his life, a bride lost her groom, two daughters lost their father, and a mother and a father lost their son. No verdict could ever end the grief that those who knew and loved Sean Bell suffer."

No, the grief will never end, not for Sean Bell's parents and family, for his fiancé and children. But Mayor Bloomberg, you, me, we the people, can step up our games, make a commitment to real social justice in our city, in our nation, and, for once, penalize people, including police officers, who just randomly blow away lives. Sean Bell is never coming back, but we are here, and the biggest tragedy will be if we keep going about our lives, as if this never happened in the first place.

And as long as we have leadership, White leadership and Black leadership, mainstream leadership and grassroots leadership, that can do nothing more than exacerbate folks' very natural emotions in a tragedy like this, we will never progress as a human race. Instead a true leader needs to harness those emotions and turn them into action, as Dr. King did, as Gandhi did. In the absence of such action, so many of us, especially us Black and Latino males, will continue to have a very nervous relationship with the police, even the police of color, for fear that any of one of us could be the next Sean Bell.

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