CFLJ SIXTH COMMENTARY

The Last Half Century of Systemic Racism in Albany

During the late 1960’s serious citizen protests against police treatment of Blacks emerged. Most notably, “The Brothers,” a group of Black male civil rights activists, organized the Black community to protest police brutality and social, economic, and political conditions. Organized demonstrations and marches were carried out in a number of locations. Mayor Erastus Corning’s administration responded with what has been called "political bullying" of the Brothers' members. Many were harassed by police on the street and arrested.

The Brothers' agenda included organizing the community to demand changes in policies adversely affecting Black communities, especially police brutality. Deeply concerned over the strained relations between the Black community and the police, the Brothers met with the Police Chief in 1967. Together they set up a monthly advisory committee to review police practices in the Black community. However, little change resulted from the group's forceful protests or attempts at diplomacy. Tensions remained high between the Black community and the Police Department.

In the 1970’s, federal funding from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, established after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination and the urban riots that followed, became available to Albany. With the funding, the Police Department tried a new form of policing to address perceived citizen mistrust. Decentralized storefront neighborhood police units were set up in both Arbor Hill and the South End in 1971. For more than 10 years, an uneasy truce existed between police and the Black community.

Then, on July 8, 1984, Jesse Davis, a 35-year-old mentally handicapped African American man, was killed by police officers responding to a call of "a man gone berserk." Although there was no ostensible crime being committed by Davis, who was alone in his Clinton Avenue apartment, police broke down his door. They later claimed that Davis threatened them with a knife and fork. Photographs taken by a police officer at the scene would surface 10 years later, showing Davis clutching a toy truck and set of keys instead of the reported knife and fork.

In 1985, Mayor Whalen ordered an in-depth assessment and evaluation of the management, structure, and operations of the Albany Police Department. Although it commended the Mayor for commissioning the study, the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of colored people (NAACP) criticized the report as:

Incomplete, misleading, and dishonest...No mention is made of the context surrounding the establishment of the Study Committee or community concerns over existing police-community relations. Major issues such as affirmative action, racism, brutality, or police brutality are completely ignored.

In 1989, Mayor Whalen appointed veteran Albany Police Lieutenant John Dale as the Department's first African American police chief. Dale increased the number of people of color and women on the force, but Mayor Whalen’s changes failed to significantly improve what some saw as a deteriorating relationship between the police and communities of color. There were increased charges of police harassment, mistreatment, and abuse of Black and Latino citizens. These charges were independently corroborated in 1989 when defense attorney Terence Kindlon hired a private investigator to secretly monitor police activity at the Albany Greyhound bus station.
In their report, the investigators noted that, "not a single white person was stopped, or questioned, and not one Black or Latino had gotten through the bus station without being stopped."

Several well-publicized lawsuits during the late '80s and early '90s added to citizen mistrust of the police. Albany paid out close to a million dollars for violating the civil rights of plaintiffs including Greg Baity, Daniel Amlaw, Ronald Grier, James White, and James Lunday. Lunday was awarded damages for excessive use of force by Albany Police Officer Kenneth Sutton, who had acquired the nickname “Batman” for his alleged use of a baseball bat during interrogations.

Incidents of police brutality persisted during the 1990’s. In 1994, Capital District Citizen Action called for the creation of an independent civilian review board, and the Capital District chapter of the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) issued a report, “The City of Albany: The Need for All-Civilian Review of Police Misconduct to Ensure Accountability and Fair Law Enforcement.” In the report, NYCLU called for an all-civilian review of police misconduct to replace the existing internal investigations unit of the Albany police Department.

Also in 1994, Alderman Keith St. John, an African American representative on the Albany Common Council, introduced legislation to establish a citizen review board with subpoena powers. After his measure was defeated by two votes, several widely publicized police encounters with African Americans contributed to increased community-police tensions and prompted new calls for a citizen review board. In one case, three young African American men, 19-year-old Adrian Moore, Jason Moore, 16, and Radcliff Angus, 19, were arrested by police during a street disorder outside the Albany Domino Club. The men maintained police hurled racial slurs, beat them, and unleashed a police dog on them outside the club. After community members held several protest marches, the Police Department began an internal investigation into the actions taken during the incident.

Later that year, a young African American college basketball star, Jermaine Henderson, was arrested after an alleged altercation with two off-duty police officers, William Bonnanni and Sean McKenna, in an Albany bar. Henderson, while handcuffed, was allegedly beaten by the two white officers in the police station garage. A Deputy Police Chief took the unprecedented steps of suspending the officers for 30 days without pay and filing assault charges against them. Mayor Jerry Jennings ordered the release of what some called damaging evidence that suggested a cover-up attempt by fellow officers.

Rank-and-file police officers and the Albany Police Officers Union were strongly critical of these disciplinary actions. Several officers suggested that some of their fellow officers were protesting the arrests of Bonnanni and McKenna by making fewer arrests. An estimated 100 officers marched in front of City Hall in open protest of the official handling of the matter.

The NAACP and other Black groups raised concerns about the continuing strength and influence of the Albany Police Officers Union, a group that many contended had historically dominated and unduly influenced policies governing the relationship between the Police Department and the African American community. Police/community relations continued to deteriorate into the 2000’s --- for a description of systemic racism in Albany in the twenty-first century, please see CFLJ’s Fourth Commentary.

**Next Friday’s Commentary: An Overview of Civilian Oversight of the Albany Police Department**