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COPS UNSUNG HEROES IN RACIAL TRAGEDY

EDWIN A. LAHEY

Edwin A. Lahey is chief of the Washington Bureau for the Knight Newspapers. His article was originally published under his by-line in the July 30, 1964 issue of the *Chicago Daily News* and is reprinted through special permission of this paper.—EDITOR.

Isn't it time to say a good word for the cops? For my money, they have been the forgotten heroes of the racial disorders in recent weeks.

The riots in Harlem, Brooklyn, Rochester, N. Y., and St. Augustine, Fla., have looked bad in newspaper photographs. But they would have been a hundred times more disastrous without good police work, in which overworked officers faced danger and accepted abuse in the performance of their duty to act as a human retaining wall.

Nothing about the racial tragedy can be amusing. But one is tempted to grin at the unrealism of the Congress of Racial Equality leaders who organized a picket line to protest police brutality in front of the New York City Police Headquarters at 240 Center St. in Manhattan.

The CORE leaders knew that the pickets were exposing themselves to violent attack in a very tough Italian-American neighborhood in Lower Manhattan.

But they invaded this neighborhood to picket police headquarters knowing for certain that the "brutal" police would protect them in the exercise of their right to picket.

That is just what happened. The cops at headquarters protected the CORE pickets from assault by the neighborhood thugs, and then got them safely away from Mulberry St. by bus and subway.

There would be a welcome break in the racial tension if militant Negro leaders acknowledged that the cliché of "police brutality" has become slightly frazzled.

The cops didn't create the ghettos of the North, where Negro families pay rent that brings a return of 20 to 30 percent on the investment in slum buildings that have been picked up by sharpies at tax forfeiture sales.

Cops didn't create the economic jealousy that has made it difficult for a young Negro to win acceptance as an apprentice in many local building trade unions.

Cops have nothing to do with the high rate of dropouts among Negro school children who condemn themselves to the market for marginal workers before they are grown.

Cops have nothing to do with employment practices that persistently show an unemployment rate among Negroes twice that among white workers.

Cops didn't create any of the racial inequalities that are bugging so many millions of our people today, both non-white and white. Their place in the scheme of things calls upon them to direct traffic, abate nuisances, combat crime, and maintain some degree of public order when human passion reach tidal wave proportions.

When this summer of discontent has passed, it will probably be conceded by most folks that our local police departments have done their job well, not only in New York City and other scenes of rioting, but in the melting pot cities of the North, where interracial relations have frequently been close to the explosion point.