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Flags at Half-Mast & Police in the Middle

We all know that this is a hard time in law enforcement. On the one hand there are accusations of law enforcement sometimes using excessive force against citizens - - - especially black citizens.

On the other hand, recently, we have seen seven police officers ambushed and assassinated while simply trying to do their jobs.

Throughout these last weeks, the flags in our communities remained at half-mast. News programs feature large police funerals. Not a good thing for law enforcement. Not a good thing for individual communities. Not a good thing for America.

In America today, in many ways, we have intentionally and unintentionally placed police "in the middle". It's not a good position to be in. Too many community members and elected officials have adopted an attitude of "just let the cops handle it". It has become the politically convenient response to any complex or expensive or unpopular social issue which they choose to ignore.

Homelessness, cuts in mental health spending, drug addiction, lack of a coherent federal immigration policy? "Just let the cops handle it." This is becoming a popular way for politicians and others to avoid civic and political responsibility.

Need to sort out problems in the middle of America's unresolved racial divide? Heck, just let the cops handle that too. And everyone else can look away. Then, when the cops don't get it right, shame, shame on them and everyone else's hands are clean. "If only those ignorant cops would get their act together everything would be ok." Or, so some people would like to assume. Really?

Law enforcement officers respond into the middle of America's unresolved racial divide every day. We have a three digit phone number. We make house calls for every conceivable issue, in every neighborhood, every hour of the day and night.

Due to availability and willingness to respond, police become the flashpoint for anger and concern over a wide range of issues: the criminal justice system in general, schools, unemployment, family problems, lack of access to medical care and transportation as well as well as anger and concern over true instances of police misconduct.

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Let me be clear, this does not absolve law enforcement from responsibility for inept conduct or misconduct or instances of racial bias. We should be expected uphold high standards. But, America's racial divide goes far beyond and far deeper than problems of police community relations. And so it does not only fall to law enforcement to improve things.

Law enforcement needs to, and should be expected to make improvements. We should be willing to be self-critical when criticism is warranted. And we should expect that the public would be willing to do the same.

We need to remember that while policing can be improved, policing does not occur in a vacuum. It occurs within the context of the civic culture of a community. In too many communities, especially in poor minority communities, it occurs within a context of degraded and hopeless social conditions and high rates of violent crime.

It is difficult and, too often, dangerous for the millions of good citizens who live in such circumstances. Likewise, it is difficult and, too often, dangerous for police who serve in such circumstances.

It is my hope and the hope of our personnel that the losses of the last several weeks not continue.

In law enforcement, we need to accept the responsibility to police with respect and reject bias. In the community, we need to tone down the rhetoric of insult and the calls for violence against law enforcement. And we need to work together to call out the national crisis and terrible heartbreak of internal violence within poorer minority communities.

The bottom line is: we need each other. Failure to recognize and act on that bottom line undermines America and can lead to the failure of this nation.