

*The Atlantic*

# The Paranoid Style of American Policing

When officers take the lives of those they are sworn to protect and serve, they undermine their own legitimacy.



Paul Beaty / AP

TA-NEHISI COATES | DEC 30, 2015 | POLITICS

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When I was around 10 years old, my father confronted a young man who was said to be “crazy.” The young man was always too quick to want to fight. A foul in a game of 21 was an insult to his honor. A cross word was cause for a duel, and you never knew what that cross word might be. One day, the young man got into it with one of my older brother’s friends. The young man pulled a metal stake out of the ground (there was some work being done nearby) and began swinging it wildly in a threatening manner. My father, my mother, or my older brother—I don’t recall which—told the other boy to go inside of our house. My dad then came outside. I don’t really remember what my father said to the young man. Perhaps he said something like “Go home,” or maybe something like, “Son, it’s over.” I don’t really recall. But what I do recall is that my dad did not shoot and kill the young man.

That wasn’t the first time I’d seen my father confront the violence of young people without resorting to killing them. This was not remarkable. When you live in communities like ours—or perhaps any community—mediating violence between young people is part of being an adult. Sometimes the young people are involved in scary behavior—like threatening people with metal objects. And yet the notion that it is permissible, wise, moral, or advisable to kill such a person as a method of de-escalation, to kill because one was afraid, did not really exist among parents in my community.

The same could not be said for those who came from outside of the community.

This weekend, after a Chicago police officer killed her 19-year-old son Quintonio LeGrier, Janet Cooksey [struggled to understand](#) the mentality of the people she pays to keep her community safe:

“What happened to Tasers? Seven times my son was shot,” Cooksey said.

“The police are supposed to serve and protect us and yet they take the lives,” Cooksey said.

“Where do we get our help?” she asked.

LeGrier had struggled with mental illness. When LeGrier attempted to break down his father’s door, his father called the police, who apparently arrived to find the 19-year-old wielding a bat. Interpreting this as a lethal threat, one of the officers shot and killed LeGrier and somehow managed to shoot and kill one of his neighbors, Bettie Jones. Cooksey did not merely have a problem with how the police acted, but with the fact that the police were even called in the first place. “He should have called me,” Cooksey said of [LeGrier’s father](#).

Instead, the father called the Chicago Police Department. Likely he called them because he invested them with some measure of legitimacy. This is understandable. In America, police officers are agents of the state and thus bound by the social contract in a way that criminals, and even random citizens, are not. Criminals and random citizens are not paid to protect other citizens. Police officers are. By that logic, one might surmise that the police would be better able to mediate conflicts than community members. In Chicago, this appears, very often, not to be the case.

It will not do to note that 99 percent of the time the police mediate conflicts without killing people anymore than it will do for a restaurant to note that 99

percent of the time rats don't run through the dining room. Nor will it do to point out that most black citizens are killed by other black citizens, not police officers, anymore than it will do to point out that most American citizens are killed by other American citizens, not terrorists. If officers cannot be expected to act any better than ordinary citizens, why call them in the first place? Why invest them with any more power?

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## **In America, we have decided that it is permissible, that it is wise, that it is moral for the police to de-escalate through killing.**

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Legitimacy is what is ultimately at stake here. When Cooksey says that her son's father should not have called the police, when she says that they "are supposed to serve and protect us and yet they take the lives," she is saying that police in Chicago are police in name only. This opinion is widely shared. Asked about the possibility of an investigation, Melvin Jones, the brother of Bettie Jones, could muster no confidence. "I already know how that will turn out," he scoffed. "We all know how that will turn out."

Indeed, we probably do. Two days after Jones and LeGrier were killed, a district attorney in Ohio declined to prosecute the two officers who drove up, and within two seconds of arriving, killed the 12-year-old Tamir Rice. No one should be surprised by this. In America, we have decided that it is permissible, that it is wise, that it is moral for the police to de-escalate through killing. A standard

which would not have held for my father in West Baltimore, which did not hold for me in Harlem, is reserved for those who have the maximum power—the right to kill on behalf of the state. When police can not adhere to the standards of the neighborhood, of citizens, or of parents, what are they beyond a bigger gun and a sharper sword? By what right do they enforce their will, save force itself?

When policing is delegitimized, when it becomes an occupying force, the community suffers. The neighbor-on-neighbor violence in Chicago, and in black communities around the country, is not an optical illusion. Policing is (one) part of the solution to that violence. But if citizens don't trust officers, then policing can't actually work. And in Chicago, it is very hard to muster reasons for trust.

When Bettie Jones's brother displays zero confidence in an investigation into the killing of his sister, he is not being cynical. He is shrewdly observing a government [that executed a young man](#) and sought to hide that fact from citizens. He is intelligently assessing a local government which, for two decades, [ran a torture ring](#). What we have made of our police departments America, what we have ordered them to do, is a direct challenge to any usable definition of democracy. A state that allows its agents to kill, to beat, to tase, without any real sanction, has ceased to govern and has commenced to simply rule.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**TA-NEHISI COATES** is a national correspondent for *The Atlantic*, where he writes about culture, politics, and social issues. He is the author of *The Beautiful Struggle* and *Between the World and Me*.

Coates—*The Paranoid Style of American Policing*

Please answer the following questions regarding rhetoric and style.

1. What does Coates mean by the word “paranoid” in the essay’s title? Use evidence from the text to formulate your definition.
2. In paragraph one, Coates admit several times that he does not "recall" some of the details of the anecdote. To what extent did those admissions affect his ethos? Explain.
3. Explain the rhetorical effect of making paragraph 3 a single sentence.
4. Analyze the logic of the argument that Coates makes in paragraph 6. He supports that logic with analogies in paragraph 7. Do you find his argument persuasive? Explain.
5. Analyze the meaning and effectiveness of the claim that “police in Chicago are police in name only” (paragraph eight).
6. Using two or three words or phrases, define Coates’s tone in paragraph 9. Then, using evidence from the paragraph, briefly explain how Coates uses language to convey his tone.
7. Two key verbs in the essay are “de-escalate” and “delegitimized.” Define what Coates means by these words, and analyze the effectiveness of his word choice.
8. Analyze, carefully, this sentence from paragraph 10: “Policing is (one) part of the solution.” What is the purpose of the parentheses? How does that statement function in the paragraph? Is it a concession, a counter argument, or something else? How does it relate to the following sentence?
9. In the essay’s final sentence, what distinction does Coates make between “to govern” and “to simply rule”?
10. Over the course of the essay, Coates makes very few references to race, although his readers would know that he is writing about a racially charged issue. What does Coates gain by avoiding direct references to race? What would be the effect of he omitted the few references he chose to include?