

The killing of Patrick Dorismond: New York police violence escalates in wake of Diallo verdict

By Bill Vann
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Less than one month after the acquittal of four New York City police officers in the fatal shooting of Amadou Diallo, new acts of murderous violence by the city's police force have made it clear that the fusillade that felled the West African immigrant in the Bronx was no aberration.

Patrick Dorismond, a 26-year-old security guard, was shot to death March 15 in a confrontation with plainclothes police involved in a controversial anti-drug crackdown that has netted more than 18,000 arrests and cost the police department more than \$24 million in overtime over the last two months.

As in the case of Diallo, there is no clear evidence that Dorismond ever knew that the man who pulled a gun on him and fired a single bullet into his chest was a police officer.

If the acquittal of the four cops in the Diallo case signaled that police in the city have a license to kill, New York's Mayor Rudy Giuliani has sought to make the Dorismond shooting into an argument that such police murders of unarmed and innocent people represent a positive, and even heroic, act in defense of the city's security.

Dorismond, a father of two young girls who had himself hoped to become a cop, was confronted by an undercover officer outside a bar where he had gone with a friend after a 3-11 p.m. shift as a guard for a Business Improvement District (BID) that operates in the westside Manhattan area of Pennsylvania Station and Madison Square Garden. The two stopped at a bar for a beer before seeking to hail a cab to go home.

Police claimed Dorismond became belligerent after the undercover cop approached him asking to buy drugs. The cop called in backup, also plainclothes, and Detective Anthony Vasquez intervened. While the New York Police Department's version of the confrontation had the security guard throwing a first punch, and Vasquez's attorney claimed that his client's gun went off after Dorismond lunged for it, civilian eyewitnesses gave very different accounts. Some said that the shot went off as Vasquez was

beating the off-duty guard with his gun. Others said that a van pulled up with a screech and men jumped out, with a shot going off almost immediately.

There are elements in the Dorismond shooting that are reminiscent of the killing of Amadou Diallo in February 1999. Dorismond too was an entirely innocent victim of an aggressive police operation. Like Diallo, there is every reason to believe that Dorismond had no idea that the men who confronted and then killed him were police officers. His reaction, taking umbrage at someone assuming—because of his age and his race—that he was a drug dealer was entirely understandable, particularly for someone who was himself seeking to pursue a career as a cop.

In the wake of the Diallo shooting, the New York Police Department (NYPD) went through the motions of "self reform," putting the cops in the elite Street Crime Unit, whose members were responsible for the killing, into uniform and ultimately disbanding the elite unit by assigning its members to the city's various borough commands.

The Diallo shooting struck such a cord in the city's population because so many young workers and youth, particularly in predominantly minority neighborhoods, had been subjected to stop-and-frisks by the plainclothes Street Crime cops, often suffering beatings and humiliation in the bargain.

The ongoing anti-drug campaign, dubbed "Operation Condor," has reproduced the same methods used by the old Street Crime Unit. It incorporates the military mentality of targeting entire areas and assuming that anyone within them fitting a certain profile in terms of economic status, race and age is a suspect.

Ironically, on the eve of the fatal shooting of Dorismond, Police Commissioner Howard Safir was questioned at a City Council hearing about the advisability of naming a NYPD initiative "Operation Condor," given that the same title had been used for a CIA-backed collaboration between Latin American military dictatorships in the 1970s that resulted in

the rounding up and execution of political opponents throughout the region. Safir replied lamely that a condor was just "a bird."

There are aspects of this latest strategy that are even more insidious than the methods pursued by the now-defunct Street Crime Unit. While the SCU focused its activities on seizing guns and pursuing armed criminals—the four cops who confronted and killed Diallo in the vestibule of his own apartment building were supposedly on the prowl for a rapist—Operation Condor has been aimed at cracking down on the bottom rung of the drug ladder, producing the arrests of poor and working class people on charges of sales or possession of small amounts of marijuana and cocaine.

The Condor cops have been sent into the street with the aim of enticing randomly selected people, like Patrick Dorismond, into committing a crime. The program is based almost entirely on recruiting police to work overtime to supplement their income. To get the overtime, the cops know they must produce results, registering high numbers of arrests. The police who confronted Dorismond had reportedly already bagged eight people for drug offenses and decided to go for "an even ten" to get their numbers up.

Before Patrick Dorismond's body was cold, the Giuliani administration launched an obscene campaign to vilify the dead security guard and all but portray him as someone who had a police bullet coming to him. Having little to work with, Giuliani ordered Police Commissioner Safir to unseal a juvenile record on the man, disclosing that he had been arrested for robbery and assault in 1987, when he was 13.

The charge, reportedly stemming from a childhood fist fight over a quarter, was dropped and his record sealed because he was a child. But Giuliani's legal advisers took the position that once he was dead, Dorismond's right not to have police records from his childhood publicized by the mayor died with him. It allowed Giuliani to declare that Dorismond was no "altar boy" and that his previous brush with the police "may justify, more closely, what the police officer did."

As for the cop who shot the security guard, Giuliani praised him for his "distinguished" career as an undercover officer, declaring that in going out and shooting an innocent, unarmed man to death in the street he "put his life on the line in the middle of the night to protect the safety and security of this city."

While inflating Dorismond's dismissed charges into the portrait of a "common criminal," the mayor has remained silent on Detective Vasquez's own record, which makes it clear that the precipitous shooting of an unarmed man was hardly out of character. The cop came to the attention of the NYPD in 1996, before he even graduated from the Police Academy, for using his service revolver to shoot his

neighbor's dog after the animal had dug under the fence that separated their two homes on Long Island.

The neighbor insists that the dog posed no threat and the shooting was entirely unjustified. A year later, Vasquez was arrested in a bar after drawing his service revolver in a fight that witnesses say he himself had initiated. Later that same year, his wife accused him of domestic violence, subsequently dropping formal charges.

The mayor, who is focusing his attention on a campaign for election to the US Senate as the Republican candidate from New York State, is speaking to a definite audience. To the financial and corporate elite who make Manhattan their home, as well as the more reactionary sections of the middle class who have grown wealthy off of the stock market boom, he is declaring his resolve to defend their interests. Police killings of innocent workers and youth, he tells them, are an acceptable means of policing the tense social divide between the city's fabulously wealthy "haves" and the huge population of impoverished and largely minority and immigrant "have-nots."

Significantly, Giuliani's Democratic opponent in the Senate race, First Lady Hillary Clinton, has maintained a discreet silence on the Dorismond shooting.

Two weeks before the killing of Patrick Dorismond, another undercover officer shot an unarmed man to death at point-blank range in the Bronx, just blocks from where Diallo was killed. Malcolm Ferguson, 25, was killed with a bullet to his head after cops chased him through a building in his Bronx neighborhood as part of the anti-drug blitz.

He had been arrested just a week before for participating in a protest over the acquittal of Diallo's police killers. He also had filed a civil suit against the city and its Police Department over an earlier arrest in which cops broke his hand and left him without medical attention. Some neighbors and friends suggested that he may have been executed for seeking legal redress to police brutality.

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