

Shootings Unite Dallas Blacks

By Tony Castro

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DALLAS—A recent rash of shootings by city policemen has been a catalyst in uniting Dallas' usually conservative black establishment with local black activists, who have been staging a long series of protests.

In the last six weeks, Dallas police have shot six black men, killing four. In all, nine blacks have been killed by city police this year and 11 others wounded.

"A whole philosophy of law enforcement is in question here," Roosevelt Johnson, executive director of the Dallas Urban League, said. "Could the people who were shot—whether they were criminals or not—have been apprehended without shooting them?"

Blacks have been most critical of the Dallas police department's guidelines on use of handguns. Police describe the policy as "shoot to stop" in line with state law. Blacks call it "shoot to kill" policy.

Police Chief Frank Dyson, widely regarded as a progressive, has reaffirmed the policy several times. He says it is necessary in the wake of attacks on policemen. This year, five Dallas policemen have been shot, two dying of wounds.

However, about 100 police reservists resigned when Dyson rejected their requests to carry handguns.

Dallas black establishment leaders have continually decried the shootings of policemen, and in the past have refrained from getting involved in charges of brutality against police raised by local activists.

But last week, establishment leaders lent their support to activists' protests when 28 of the city's most influential black organizations called on city officials to institute a list of changes that closely resemble demands made by protesters.

A. Maceo Smith, federal official and leader of long standing, appeared before the Dallas City Council as a spokesman for the city's

black establishment and warned that tensions over the shootings had surpassed the seriousness of any of the city's past racial troubles.

"I submit that none of the past issues has been fraught with more ominous danger than the one which faces us now," Smith said.

Such notice from black leaders to city officials is an indication that the recent series of shootings only now has brought Dallas blacks to grips with issues that confronted blacks in other major cities during the height of civil rights activism in the 1960s.

The protests here began Oct. 21 when the Southern Christian Leadership Conference organized a march of more than 1,000 blacks to the steps of the city hall. Police, armed with clubs and other riot-control equipment, attempted to halt the marchers near downtown Dallas in a confrontation that developed into several highly tense moments.

The Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, national president of SCLC, marched with the protesters and called for daily demonstrations to further protest the shootings.

Since then, the demonstrations have included walkouts by an estimated 500 students from Dallas high schools, rallies at city hall, a boycott of one shopping center and takeovers by blacks of the City Council chambers and the city manager's office. More than 80 protesters have been arrested by city police in the past two weeks.

The unexpected entry of black leaders into the situation came as rhetoric from both protesters and city

leaders grew stronger and as tensions grew.

Among the changes sought by blacks is the appointment of a black assistant police chief, assurance that by 1974 the police force will be 25 per cent black, an independent investigation of the shootings of blacks by police and reassignment outside the black community of officers involved in the shootings. Currently blacks constitute about 5 per cent of the police force.

Black leaders say the next move now rests with city officials, who are studying the list of changes requested by the 28 organizations. The Council will meet again Dec. 4.

The show of unity and strength behind the protests and demands is a surprise. From the beginning, the protest have been viewed by city official as a factional movement, much like others staged here by SCLC in recent years, and not representative of the mood among the city's 210,238 blacks, 25 per cent of the Dallas population.

Most Dallas black leaders now are in agreement that racial tensions and polarization of whites and blacks had surpassed two of the touchiest points in the city's racial history.

In 1940-41 and again in 1951, there were a number of bombings of black homes in south Dallas as the rapidly increasing black population spilled over into white areas. More than a dozen persons were indicted, but none convicted. In the early 1960s, tensions rose again over desegregation of public facilities.

In both instances, a biracial committee—known as the Committee of Fourteen—made up of top-level community and business leaders, worked together to relieve the tension and seek solutions. The committee has since become a tri-racial group drawing its members

from the Dallas Citizens Council, the apex of the city's white power structure, from the Dallas Negro Chamber of Commerce and from the Dallas Mexican Chamber of Commerce.

Black leaders made no secret of the fact that the concern over the shootings of blacks had been raised at a recent special meeting of the tri-racial committee. Smith told the City Council the committee had concurred on the needs for publicly calling on city officials for the changes.

Smith's role as spokesman for the 28 black groups itself is symbolic of the gravity the black establishment has attached to the present situation. Smith, assistant regional director of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, also has played a major role in settling the city's past racial problems.

Smith told city councilmen of a "growing consensus of many in the black community, as well as outside, who feel that a dual system of law enforcement prevails."

SCLC leaders claim to have awakened the public conscience to the series of shootings, which began Oct. 11. In all six incidents, police officers reported opening fire when they were fired upon or believed the suspect to be reaching for a weapon.

In three of the shootings, including one that resulted in the death of a 20-year-old black allegedly involved in an abduction-armed robbery, no weapon was found in the possession of the victim.

The Dallas County grand jury has cleared policemen involved in three of the shootings.

But the work of an independent investigation, agreed to by city officials and the SCLC shortly after the initial protest, was cut short. The investigation was undertaken by the Greater

Dallas Community Relations Commission, a human relations agency.

The Dallas Police Association advised officers not to testify before the investigative committee, arguing that such investigations are the responsibility of the grand jury. Chief Dyson also declined, on the advice of the city attorney, to make available certain evidence, officer reports and statements from witnesses without their consent.

City officials have also opposed a request from the Community Relations Commission that a City Council panel already investigating other alleged police irregularities include in its inquiry a probe of the police shootings of blacks.

Most black leaders say racial tensions over the recent shootings—coming on the heels of emotional stress arising from stepped-up school desegregation and busing—were too near an explosive stage for them to remain silent.

"This is the gravest situation I've seen in this city," said black attorney E. Brice Cunningham, who was active in crystallizing the black leadership's show of strength. "We found ourselves having to awaken some people. This should make the City Council and the (white) establishment more aware of what the black community really feels and thinks."

"I think more people are concerned about this today than perhaps at any other time here in Dallas," said J. H. Glenn, president of the Dallas Negro Chamber of Commerce. "There's a certain amount of fear throughout the city, not just in one particular area. It seems like the racial problems we had here in the past were restricted to one part of the city. But this is a tense situation all over Dallas—whites as well as blacks."