



June 10, 2020

To the University of Texas System Police Family—

As we face these difficult times together, perhaps the most challenging for American policing that we have seen in our lifetime and a defining moment for law enforcement, I want to share my thoughts with you as well as my belief that better days are ahead. As human beings first and then as Americans and police professionals I know you join me in expressing dismay and anguish over the death of George Floyd. For my part, I have made every effort humanly possible to understand what exactly happened in Minneapolis, why it happened and where the responsibility rests.



My conclusion is inescapable: George Floyd, who was African American, died because police officers failed to be the public servants that they had taken an oath to be and fractured the rule of law in doing so. Their behavior was criminal and must be held to account and their prosecution is appropriate—because in the end, they breached the faith, undermined the justice system of which we are a part and forever tarnished the badge that we all wear. Their actions were a fundamental violation of the public trust and the compact between us and all the communities we serve and represent the antithesis of who we are as peace officers. Simply put, we are a profession that must police humanely, justly and by consent of the people.

In the wake of the unrest that has swept America, a national publication acknowledged the toll and the tests that are levied on us as the violence that has followed the death of George Floyd touches us all. That same publication observed that “as the world watches...both the best and the worst of American law enforcement has been on display.” I believe this is a true statement. Pope Francis has called prayerfully for an end to racism and exclusion and that neither can be allowed to stand, and then observes that violence is self-destructive and self-defeating and that “nothing is gained by violence and so much is lost.” I believe those are true statements as well.

The violence he speaks of is ours to contend with because under no circumstances can we turn, walk away or deny our obligation or oath. We are peace officers or working in support of peace officers and we have solemnly sworn to uphold the law, embody the best of humanity and protect our communities and all the people who make up those communities. Given the unlawful decisions of those Minneapolis police officers, we cannot allow ourselves to be party to their decisions through silence or acquiescence. Our oath of office is deeply meaningful, gravely important, and must represent all that is good in America and our chosen profession. We must lead the way and be that beacon of light and reassurance for all Americans, regardless of color or race, symbolizing the best that this nation has to offer. There is only one path to follow and that is continuously engaging in constitutional policing carried out by character-driven police officers, supported by a value system and philosophy that is grounded in the recognition of the sanctity of life. I believe in our ability to do that just as I believe in you—with conviction, admiration and respect. This is a tough, tough job, make no mistake about it, but we are up to the test.

In the days ahead, remember that we must stand not only for a nation of laws but for justice, equality, and peace for all—thus the title of “peace officers.” Our authority to enforce the law is balanced by the sacred obligation we accept in doing so. The tools that we employ are not just those with which we physically train but also can include faith, prayer and a commitment to being a gift, a comfort and blessing to each other and to those we encounter, even under the most demanding and difficult of circumstances.

Let me close by returning to the word “comfort” that I have just used and urge you to find comfort, hope and inspiration in the image above which depicts the arrival of the USNS Comfort passing under Lady Liberty when arriving in New York City to aid those devastated by illness during this recent public health emergency. May that lift you up as it does me and affirm our moral compass as a profession and as it was intended to be. -- Michael J. Heidingsfield, Director – University of Texas System Police