

## Today I Got Pulled Over by the Police

By Kamau Bobb

Today I was pulled over by the police on my way home. It was rush hour and the traffic was heavy, but it wasn't dark yet. I was just crawling along when he flashed his lights behind me. I thought at first that he just wanted me to get out of his way. I pulled over, but he pulled over behind me. This is the singular moment in American life where Black men wish they were White women.

This is the moment that drives fear into the hearts of Black people. White police officers shoot Black men in cars for all kinds of reasons. Anything in the interaction with police can escalate to deadly outcomes. Once he got out of his car, there was no telling how this would go.

I was nervous. I watched him in my rearview mirror approach me on the driver's side. Once he reached the back fender, he put his hand on his gun. Now, I was scared.

Ironically, I was listening to a story on NPR about Iowa House Representative Steve King being stripped of his committee seats for saying that White Nationalism and White Supremacy are essential elements of being an American Nationalist. There isn't space in the America of White Nationalists for Black men. I was being stopped by a White man in a uniform with his hand on his gun who may have been, what Rep. King called, an American Nationalist.

I turned off the radio.

I rolled down the window before he approached and put my hands on the steering wheel where he could see them.

He asked for my license. I asked, "Officer, why did you stop me?"

Gruffly, he said, "Sir, give me your license."

My car is brand new. I just replaced my old car right before Christmas and still have the temporary tags on this one, which do not expire for another week.

I explained that I was going into my pocket to get my wallet. I gave him my license. Then he said, "you're driving without insurance". I said, "officer there must be some mix up. I just bought this car, they wouldn't have let me drive off the lot without insurance." "There's probably just some confusion."

Again, in an angry voice, "sir, put your hands on the steering wheel where I can see them."

I said, "I'm just going to put my wallet down," which I was still holding.

More agitated he said, "Sir, keep it in your hand and put your hands on the steering wheel where I can see them."

He went to look at the vin number in the wind screen and then just walked past me back to his car and didn't say anything.

Now, in addition to being scared, I was pissed. The basic disrespect was infuriating.

He sat back in his car for a long time, nearly 15 minutes. That is an eternity when you're sitting with police lights flashing behind you. Then a second police car drove up. Now, I was really scared. Why did he need to call another cop? I texted my wife to let her know where I was and that I was hemmed up. I had turned off the main road to get out of traffic so I was on a narrow one-way street with two police cars blocking the road behind me. Fortunately, it was a very public spot with all the traffic just behind us.

But Black families know. My wife closed her shop and was on her way to where I was. She texted a friend who was nearby to see if she could see me. We all know in our gut, that this could go wrong.

Two White men with guns and the uniforms of immunity were blocking me in. This is the part of the story where Black people in general and Black men in particular know that it could go any way from here. The cop that stopped me first was angry for no

apparent reason. He'd put his hand on his gun when he approached me and was talking to me as if I were half threat and half irritant. Then he went away and called more police.

For White people and others who, in response to Black fear and distrust of police, typically say that if you've done nothing wrong, everything will be fine, this is the moment that they don't understand. This is the terror moment. This is the moment of anxiety at fever pitch.

The situation had escalated and I hadn't done anything. There was one cop, then he called another. They'd blocked the road. This is the moment when Philando Castille did what he was asked in a routine traffic stop and was shot and killed. I mention him because, of the long list of Black men who've been shot and killed by police recently, the image of his shooting immediately came to mind. He was stopped because one of his tail lights was out. Apparently, the insurance on my car had lapsed. The cop was gruffly telling me to put my hands where he could see them and was obviously agitated.

These are some of the singular seconds in American life that fully distinguish Black people from White people. White people of my stature likely would never experience this kind of terror at the hands of the police. I don't think any White man in America who has accomplished what I have would even be remotely nervous about such an encounter.

Meanwhile, I was grappling with real fear and trying to keep terror at bay. I have among the best possible education that the country has to offer. I have a PhD from Georgia Tech, and Bachelors and Master's degrees in engineering from the University of California, Berkeley. I'm on the faculty at Georgia Tech. I have a global leadership position at Google. I am accomplished in ways that protect White people from harm.

In my mind, however, when I watched the officer approach my car with his hand on his gun and subsequently bark at me to put my hands where he could see them - I'm just the next nigger encounter who may or may not get hemmed up. I do not, and have never, operated under the false assumption that accomplishment is protection from the police for Black people.

This is where the assumptions of some White people about meritocracy break down. They don't have the lived experiences to justify their ardent belief in this fictitious meritocratic system. The central tenet that if you didn't do anything wrong, nothing is going to happen, is false at its root. The government shutdown is rudely teaching that lesson to thousands of federal workers right now. The corollary is equally false, that if you do all that you're supposed to, you will get your just deserts. The reason they are false, in this instance, is the central pillar of Rep. King's world view, that White people are supreme and the rest of us are merely to be tolerated.

If I'd reached for my insurance card to show the officer, which I was about to, while he was telling me to keep my hands where he could see them, he could have shot me. Clearly, I would not have deserved that, but sadly, I know that that doesn't matter - as is the case in so much of Black American life.

The original officer returned to my car followed by the second officer. Again, he approached with his hand on his gun.

"I'm going to impound your car for lapse of insurance. Sir, take all your personal belongings and get out of the vehicle."

"What? How did we get all the way here?"

"Officer, I just got this car, there must be some mix up in the transactions. Can we just call State Farm and sort this out?"

"Sir, take your personal belongings and get out of the vehicle."

Now, astonishment came to accompany my fear. I knew that I was in no position to argue or negotiate and the officer with his hand on his gun was already angry and postured in such a way that all I could do is comply. That is a humiliating experience. Just then he got a call and said something to the other officer. He then said to me that he was leaving me with the other officer until the tow truck arrived and he left.

The second officer was Italian and sounded like he was from New York. In any other world, I would have been equally afraid of him. Now, think Eric Garner. But, I could tell immediately that

he was reasonable and not angry at me just for being me. His presence, in the absence of the officer with Rep. King beliefs, deescalated the whole affair. I repeated my case to him, that the car is new and I could surely sort it out with the insurance company. He said pleasantly, "if you can get it done right now, do it. You have until the tow truck gets here."

While I was speaking with the agent, the tow truck arrived and immediately started backing up to pick up my car. The officer waived him off for me to complete the call.

I was able to call the insurance company and find out that there had indeed been a lapse, but within a moment, the agent was able to restore it, speak directly to the officer to confirm that it was done and my car was covered. He still gave me a ticket for driving an uninsured vehicle. I asked if he had to since it was obviously some oversight and I was able to get it sorted out immediately. He said the other officer had already written the ticket so there was nothing he could do.

Then he said, "some officers get a little excited, have a nice day" and drove off.

Ironically, this whole ordeal made me late for a video conference with one of the senior most women in engineering at Google. She's White. I was asked to explain to her the educational infrastructure that limits Black and Latinx students' access to high end computing in Google's critical growth areas.

I started with....some people get things they don't deserve and others deserve things they don't get.