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What would it take to trust the police?

A frank discussion on "The Black and the Blue"

19-25 minutes

There are enough studies, statistics, books and personal narratives floating around to prove that racism definitely exists within police departments throughout the country. But what happens when the cop is black? He deals with racism inside of the department from his fellow cops as well as possible alienation from his community because of the profession he chose.

Former police officer and law enforcement expert Matthew Horace is shedding light on racial stereotypes and how they play out in police departments across America. Horace sat down in Salon's studio recently to discuss his 28-year career working in law enforcement at all levels, his new book, "[The Black and the Blue: A Cop Reveals the Crimes, Racism, and Injustice in America's Law Enforcement](#)," and why he's attempting to bring new understanding between communities and police and change the media conversation around police brutality.

Thank you so much for coming here. I was really, really looking forward to having this conversation. Let's go back to day one. You were a football player in college and then you

decided to not pursue a NFL career?

Well, I think NFL decided not to pursue [my] NFL career.

Then you went to law enforcement?

Yes.

At the beginning, did it feel like the right thing to do or was it just a job?

I think growing up in Philadelphia and having accessed and watched the types of things I saw as a kid growing up at Philly, you sort of realized at some point, in some level that you want to be part of solution, not a part of problem. Athletics is a good way to sort of teach you those lessons that you're going to want to use at law enforcement a lot of ways. A lot of athletes gravitate towards law enforcement.

What point did you actually fall in love with the job?

I think when I went to the Police Academy and I had that feeling day in and day out that I was going to be serving a greater good and working on behalf of the citizens. It sounds sort of corny, but people who really get into the job, they do it because they love the idea of protecting and serving. That really attracted me. Quite frankly, it was a mantra amongst the people who I worked with.

You talked about a lot in this book. I want to get into some of it, but first, have you been getting any negative feedback from people in law enforcement now?

Sure. Well, you know our culture is such that we don't like to be challenged, right, naturally. We don't like to be called to the carpet. It's almost like you can't have a conversation and say, "Can we all

agree that some things need to change?”

It's like American culture, if you say something is wrong with this country, there's a segment of people who are like, "You hate America." It's like, "No, I love it because I want to make it — ”

— better. Well, what's interesting is because people ask why I write the book. We said, "Well, because we want there to be more understanding between community and police."

When the book came out, initially, the social media attacks, they begin. So I have kind of expected it.

What's the wildest thing somebody said to you on the internet?

Well, challenging your credibility and what you've done to your career and all those sorts of things. But the people who are doing that haven't read the book. As you know, the message in the book are very quiet, to the contrary of what people might think. We are very supportive of law enforcement, right? We don't say that we're against law enforcement . . . but that's the message that people are getting.

Supportive in a way of wanting reform, the way it's supposed to be done, so I want to get into that, too. Let's start with you defining implicit bias for the people who don't know what that is. Then I want you to speak on how dangerous it can be.

Right. Well, implicit bias or unconscious bias are those things that sort of drive our psyche that sometimes we're not aware of, but we make actions, we say things, and we make assumptions based on what our mind tells us to do or say or act in certain situations.

Implicit bias could be something related to race or gender or sexuality. It's those things that we had in us that we haven't addressed. Even when we have addressed them, it's still that thing that you have to go back and readdress it constantly if you expect to be able to treat people fairly.

Then in the book, I talked about . . . when I met a crime victim. I felt immediately because the crime victim was a man in a domestic assault situation that the perpetrator was going to be a woman, right? It didn't dawn on me at any stage in that earlier discussion that it wouldn't be a woman. We got up to the apartment, it turns out that the perpetrator was a man. Well, that was an implicit bias because I hadn't stopped to think that it could be a man, it could be a woman, you just don't know.

On that same call, we got into a situation where we had to sort of get the suspect downstairs on the apartment and we didn't know how big the individual was. When he stood up, he was a giant of a man, but he really wasn't dangerous in that sense, but we've felt that he might be.

That's why I want to say how dangerous it is because it seems like when you hear these cases and you see them in the media, you always get the same narrative of "I fear for my life." And this is a big question, but how do you teach people to not, I don't want to generalize and judge in that way, because these are life and death situations, [but] if my whole idea of "African American" equals *these are black guys so they are going to try to kill me*, if that's what I'm going out with as I go with the patrol and police, then that makes it dangerous for a lot of citizens.

Well, it doesn't have to be color. It could be size. You know when I was in college, I was 330 pounds. I'm in the gym four hours a day. Your friends say, "Hey, I would never fight you." You meet people and they always go, "Hey, I would never fight you, I'd shoot you." Well, they're saying it jokingly, but they really don't know, are you dangerous or they're just responding to your size. It doesn't have to be race. It doesn't have to gender. It's those assumptions that we make based on what's in our mental rolodex, so to speak.

Yes, but is there a way to get people to stop that type of thinking?

Well, the only way to do it to just go back to the core of what's happening now. What do I see? What am I dealing with? How is the person communicating to me? Do I need to be more afraid because there are three black men or three white men, or three white men with tattoos, or three black men with beards, or do I just take it as it comes and sort of evaluate the situation minute to minute? If you're fair and honest, then a lot of those things don't happen. But unfortunately, as we say in the book, it is human to have biases. It's not a black thing or a white thing, we all have them, they don't make us bad people, they just make us people.

You worked in law enforcement for over 30 years?

28 years, yes.

You feel like as far as the racism that you dealt with, is it getting any better? Well, did it get any better from the inside looking out?

Well, I think through the years, organizations did a much better job of identifying the behaviors that were consistent with racism and implicit bias, and those sorts of things. They instituted diversity

programs. They instituted training on implicit bias and unconscious bias training. Those programs are designed to help people understand themselves better. Hopefully, in doing that, you're able to interact with people in a more positive fashion.

I can't think of too many organizations that haven't instituted training like that through the years. The challenge is that you have high turnover with administrators, chiefs, commissioners, and those sort of things. You need buy in, you need buy in by everyone. Quite frankly, a lot of people aren't willing to acknowledge what those biases are, or deal with them once they identify them.

Do you feel like there's a way to make you even more effective? Because, as a black person . . . if somebody put a gun on me and robbed me, I'm probably not going to call the police unless they broke into my car and I needed to get an insurance report. I'll only probably call the police for insurance. That's only because I've had a lot of negative and bad experiences with them. A lot of people feel the same way. I'm not trying to speak for them, but a lot of people feel the same way.

What is it that we're missing or what is it that we can do differently to try to combat that? Because my tax dollars do pay for that service. It's like having cable and not watching.

Right. Well, there are couple of things in the book. Crystal Ping Smith, who was a Chicago Police Manager, she says in community, sometimes we have to be proactive and do things to help sort of establish how we want our communities policed. When she used that as an example of it, she says, every church in

America, especially in urban communities, you'll have a police liaison, someone that can force that relationship with local police authorities, so that you have the relationship before there's a problem, and not after there is a problem, but in too many communities that relationship is enforced.

The other thing is there's a two-way communication stream that has to happen and it has to happen from police to community and from community to police. I found even being an African-American police officer, or even a federal agent, there's a wall up, because you're an authority figure. A lot of times, people don't communicate with you just based on that wall. Everybody has to come together to try to make the situation a little better. It's not all on police. That's what the book says.

But you do feel like a lot of people have the right to not feel comfortable communicating?

Sure.

Like systemically, historically...

Absolutely. Well, let's look at the facts. The facts are that policing in the United States, early on, we were there to enforce rules of segregation, and keep people at certain neighborhoods or in certain stores, certain shops. Those were laws and policies that govern the way people live and police were the people who were responsible for that.

Then you have situations like looking at what we talked about in the book, some of the abhorrent behavior, and these are very extremes which happened in New Orleans, in Chicago, and other cities. I think people are lost on the fact that some of those criminal behaviors that people had seen in their communities have a broad

impact on people's trust of the police.

When I was in Chicago interviewing people in different communities, a lot of people just felt that it would do no good to call police to talk about certain things or give them information. They felt like police would turn the switch and tell on who was telling on bad guys. There's a mistrust . . . and there's a relationship issue that has to be connected in order for us to move forward.

I'm not sure if I've read this in your book or somewhere else, but a lot of that mistrust came from the invention of patrol cars. When cops stopped walking the beat, the relationships died, and then you became these strangers rolling up in these neighborhoods, doing whatever, and then you could just pull off and drive away and go wherever you're going at without really having that connection. Is that a thing?

In my lifetime, I've known nothing other than patrol cars. But certainly in my parents' lifetime there were police officers walking the beats in the neighborhoods and in the playgrounds and stopping on people's porches and things like that. I hear stories of people saying, "We knew the police officers on the beat for each shift." Now you really don't hear that as much because, like you say, people are in their cars, they're responding to calls, they're not out.

In communities where they have good community policing initiative and programs, it's a little different, but it still doesn't take away from the fact that there is a divide between the perception of how the community views the police and how, often times, the police views the community.

You worked really, really hard to build that trust between the community and different law enforcement departments, and then you see a cop caught on TV murdering a black person and the cop doesn't even get charged, or if the cop gets charged, he or she walks away. What does that do to trust? How can we fix that? Because that seems to be like a major problem right now, even with body cams.

Right. Well, the optics of it certainly aren't good, but the question is a good one. Even when you're moving programs that are forward and people are starting to gain that trust, then they see another incident happened, it sort of erodes that trust. But what also answers that is technology and social media. The fact that what happens in Alaska, happens in New York, and what happens in New Jersey, happens in Miami.

Let me tell you what I mean by that. It doesn't have to impact your community directly, but if you see an incident that happened in Miami, like the ones you describe, and you're watching it and it's live in real time on social media or television, you're aware of it and the world is aware of it. Now things changed so rapidly.

You know Freddie Gray, they were watching in London, everywhere. Yes.

Right. Absolutely. The effect now is so much different than it used to be, before social media, 24-hour news, things that happened in the community in Brooklyn, you might only hear about in the New York media market. Now because of social media, because of the different streams of communication, people get it right away, so the response is really global. As you said, it was global a couple of years ago, it's all over the world.

That's even breaking down trust on a bigger level because now communities that have police officers who are Officer Friendly are seeing other communities, many in protest, because one of their friends got killed. I feel like that even destroys trust at a bigger level.

Absolutely.

One thing we can't do is we can't stop and we can't quit. You know you make a great point. The police officers . . . and 98 percent of them are out there trying to do a noble job and trying to do the best they can, they become impacted by the responses of community based on incidents that happened anywhere, and even in communities where they're doing a good job and the Officer Friendly, as you described it, they're still impacted when the world sees an incident that happens 3,000 miles away, so it is a great challenge. But what is the opposite of moving forward, quitting? We can't quit.

Yes, I think, definitely, you need a system in place to establish that. We don't know what society will be without it. I'm not into experiments or anything like that. I'd be hard for me to say 98 percent, because I feel like in poor communities police officers enforce, and the communities that are more well off, they protect and serve. I've been on both sides. I also understand that it can be very cliquish, too. You might have a guy who had really good intentions coming in and he gets caught up with the wrong guys, I just saw this with the [Gun Trace Task Force in Baltimore](#).

One of those guys, I was sitting at his hearing. I was like, man, he sounds like he apologized 70 times. He took a

fraction of the money. The other guys stole hundreds of thousands of dollars, he took two grand or something like that, and he's about to go away. I'm like, wow, this guy, he got peer pressured into doing that. How many officers is this happening to?

We have no way of knowing, really, because the most egregious cases, they come out, and then we learn about it. Everybody goes, "Oh, my God, that officer is got indicted," and such. But at the end of the day, it becomes a crisis management issue also. You were asking about how do we manage a perception, right?

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What has to happen, and what does happen sometimes now, when something happens in San Diego, while police chiefs get on board in New Jersey, they say that we need to respond to this, because if they respond to it in New Jersey, they can either help build those relationships in their community or they can not respond and have people wondering and let the perception drives the perception.

In most areas now, as soon as something happens, chiefs and mayors and things, they come out right now to either condemn it, support it, or say, "We're going to do the best we can to make sure it doesn't happen here." They do something. They don't just let it ride and leave it to the vices of people.

Yes, I think a lot of police departments learned a lot from the PR nightmare that happened after Trayvon Martin was murdered.

Right, absolutely.

They responded in the way that was like, “So what?” I think nobody wants to be seen as people that don’t care.

Right.

People should care. I want to get your take on this. Donald Trump kind of brands himself as like the police officer’s president, right? He talks about law enforcement as if he’s worn a badge himself at some point. Do you think that’s a problem, or do you think it’s a great time to be a cop right now?

Well, me personally, I think it’s always been a great time to be a cop, right, because that comes from within in you and why you do the job, protect and serve. I think toward that leadership starts from the top and leadership sets the tone. I think that the tone right now when you look at the fact that some of the consent, it sort of takes the range off of regulation.

In some people’s mind that may be a license to sort of lighten up or move towards another level. But in others, I know police officers that they can care less about the consent decree. They’re going to do the same job the same way every day.

That’s my pushback with the whole leadership comes from the top. You do need great leadership. But sometimes it just doesn’t make it down to the people on the ground. You want to engage them and you want to, but it’s . . . I don’t know. It’s difficult.

Well, there are some great examples, and we use a couple of examples here in the book. Michael Harrison, the superintendent of police in New Orleans, who grew up in the New Orleans Police culture. They had some really, really egregious cases down there,

but he's done an incredible job of sort of reengineering and turning that ship to change the culture. You know there is something we use at leadership circles that says, "Culture eats strategy for lunch." What that means is you can be the best strategist, the best leader, but trying to change the culture of 3,000 or 4,000 or 35,000 people can be very challenging.

Chief goes through this all the time. That's why you see many department chiefs come and go because they're trying to change that culture, the culture of each of them, and at the end of the day they move on to another job. Culture eats strategy for lunch one sometimes.

I'm sure this happens to you, but if someone books you, brought you in to talk to a new class of young, white police officers who are going to work in a predominantly black district, what would you say to them?

I would say listen to the heartbeat. In other words, not just police officers, but people. This book, we're trying to reach people to understand that all these things that people are saying and all the things that they're hearing, can't all be wrong.

When it comes to people that have credibility and you can take me or anybody in this book off the table. Send it to Tim Scott, South Carolina. He's a sitting member of the United States Congress and he's getting stopped in this own state that he represents. It is a phenomenon, as you talk to people like you do and I do. It happens to more people than America wants to acknowledge.

If we can just get that understanding started and the conversation started there, and people say, "Yes, I see it, I understand it," I think we can go along with.

Then listen to the people, you have to acknowledge that the people you are policing are people, which is another barrier. What do you say to young black cops working on the same culture?

Well, I'd say, number one, always remember who you are and where you are. You have an awesome responsibility because when you're in that uniform, you're representing more than just the police department, you're representing your community. Many of the African-American officers or Latino officers or Asian officers that I know, they really take that oath very seriously and that "I have a responsibility to more than just the department and the uniform. Children look up to me. Communities look up to me. Grandmothers look up to me. I need to behave in a way that's going to help instill that trust."