

We Stand on Their Shoulders: The Meaning and Mission of Today's Chiefs of Color

By Dr. Cedric L. Alexander, Former NOBLE National President and Lynda R. Williams, Current NOBLE National President

On September 10, 2020, a *Wall Street Journal* editorial headlined “Black Cops Don’t Matter” announced: “Democrats are driving African-American police chiefs out of their jobs.” It was a cheap political shot, beneath the dignity of a major newspaper, exploiting the high-profile resignations of black chiefs in Dallas, Rochester (New York), and Seattle in the wake of George Floyd’s death in Minneapolis on May 25th.

Clearly, the *WSJ* editorial board was not interested in genuine substance. They did not care that Dallas chief Reneé Hall was the first Black woman to lead that city’s police force, that her father was a Detroit police officer murdered when she was six months old, that she served in the Detroit Police Department, earning promotion to deputy chief in 2014 and then moving to Dallas, as chief, three years later. They did not note that she championed the reform precepts of President Obama’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing and that, on her watch crime and violent crime both came down nearly 6 percent.

That same editorial board failed to acknowledge the achievements of chief La’Ron Singletary, who announced his retirement from the Rochester Police Department on September 8th following the public disclosure of the death by asphyxiation of Daniel T. Prude nearly seven months earlier. Rochester’s mayor, Lovely Warren, peremptorily relieved him of duty six days later. Neither she nor the *Journal* addressed a distinguished twenty-year career on the Rochester

force, which began in 1998 when Singletary came on board as a lowly intern and worked his way through the ranks and to the top.

In Seattle, on August 11th, Carmen Best, announced her retirement as that city's first black woman chief. Her action came after the City Council voted to cut her salary as well as that of her command staff, to reduce the force by some 100 officers, and to slash department funding by \$4 million—all in response to criticism of the department's handling of protests following George Floyd's death. Neither the *WSJ* editorial board nor Seattle mayor Jenny Durkan praised Best's remarkable professional qualifications, which include a certificate of police management from the University of Washington, a Master of Science degree in criminal justice from Northeastern University, and advanced training from the FBI Executive Institute, the FBI National Academy, and other distinguished bodies. Best explained her resignation as an act of conscience, in response to the reduction of the department, mainly through the sacrifice of new hires, 40% of whom were persons of color.

These bold and courageous leaders, each a NOBLE member, have stepped down, but we cannot allow them to fade away, forever pegged by shallow journalism as mere pawns in a political game.

They were, in fact, social and professional innovators, who worked tirelessly and with compassion, compiling for their departments and their cities a record of excellence. It is upon their shoulders and the shoulders of other rising and established black law enforcement executives that we must and will create police reform for this century.

It is also true that, in their arrival, ascent, and, yes, their departure, we must recognize and come to grips with the challenges chiefs of color face in today's troubled yet hopeful

communities. Pandemic illness, unemployment, climate change, and political and social divisiveness sweep over us like wildfire, and nowhere are these scourges more cruelly felt than in minority neighborhoods.

We are often asked, *What will the new generation of police chiefs look like?* We can think of no better way to begin that answer than by simply repeating the names Reneé Hall, La’Ron Singletary, and Carmen Best.

But it is not just that the new generation of police executives will include more women and more persons of color. An increasingly diverse society requires the increasingly diverse leadership of increasingly diverse public and political institutions. It also requires 21st century chiefs not merely to reform their departments, but to *re-form* them, discarding the woefully obsolete police image, attitude, and approach of *warriors* (who march into a neighborhood as an invading army) and instead adopt the model of *guardians* (members and allies of the community, who are pledged to defend and advance its well-being).

We believe that the outgoing chiefs in Dallas, Rochester, and Seattle were guardians, who possessed the mindset, qualifications, and commitment chiefs desperately need now and will need for the foreseeable future—

- A deep understanding of policing in American history, going all the way back to the “slave patrols”—the organized cadres of armed white men who enforced discipline on black slaves and were the first police forces in colonial America and the states of the Antebellum South

- An awareness and acknowledgment of structural and systemic racism throughout many American institutions, including those that enforce laws and administer justice
- An ability to recognize, manage, and overcome implicit biases that are either learned or hardwired into our neurological makeup
- An eagerness to embrace the broadest possible definition of diversity
- An understanding of the urgent need of mental health support for officers as well as certain members of the community
- A broad expertise in the latest “best practices” of law enforcement
- An openness to new initiatives based on science and experience
- Political savvy and astuteness
- Compassion and a clear moral compass
- A commitment to recruit and train to create a guardian policing culture

- A true and abiding respect for the community and can forge an unbreakable link between public safety and community vibrancy

More than ever, we need the shoulders of giants on which to stand. For genuine reformation, at scale, must be big enough to shift paradigms that no longer serve our neighborhoods, our communities, and our increasingly diverse nation.

Yes, we need more racial, ethnic, and gender diversity among our chiefs. And, just as important, we need this body of diverse leaders to guide their departments boldly in the ways of realignment with our nation's new and emerging realities. At the very same time as they step forward and advance, this rising generation must also glance back and rededicate law enforcement to the timeless mandates and aspirations of our imperiled Constitution.