

California Commentary

Taxpayers Keep Getting Pummeled

By Jon Coupal

The name Rodney King became a household word because of a videotape. Although King received the beating, it was the Los Angeles Police Department (“LAPD”) that got the black eye.

Now, a new video available on YouTube raises some of the same questions about LAPD misconduct. The video shows one officer holding down a suspect while a second punches him repeatedly in the face. While these few seconds of video certainly look bad, it is possible they are out of context.

It is alleged that the perp had reached for one of the officers’ firearm. Therefore, an investigation may reveal that the totality of the facts are less clear than they appear on tape. Still, one thing is relatively certain, the alleged gang member who received the beating — although without serious injury — and his lawyers will be smiling all the way to the bank. It is *taxpayers* who will end up the real victims.

It is important to acknowledge that police officers are often forced to make life-and-death decisions on the spur of the moment. And yes, sometimes they make the wrong choice. However, the need to decide in haste cannot be used as an excuse by the Los Angeles City Council.

The City Council has voted a monetary award to a black firefighter who had dog food mixed into his food by colleagues. Like the video taped beating, the initial conclusion one reaches is that this is a significant harm inflicted on the

firefighter and some level of compensation appears justified.

However, in the words of Paul Harvey, it is important that we learn “the rest of the story.” The “victim,” firefighter Tennie Pierce, is 6-foot 5 inches tall and the star of the firehouse volleyball team. His self-professed nickname is “Big Dog” and during volleyball matches he is known to exhort his teammates to “Feed the Big Dog” so he can spike the ball.

After one match, a fellow firefighter mixed a couple of spoonfuls of dog food into Pierce’s spaghetti, to literally feed the “Big Dog.”

Pierce hired a lawyer who claimed the prank was racist and the City Council agreed to pay \$2.7 million to settle the case.

Ah, but was it racist or, offensive as it may be, just part of a pattern of frat-boy pranks that often accompany high stress male dominated jobs?

As it turns out, Pierce was an enthusiastic participant in practical jokes of this type — enthusiastic, at least, when others were the recipients of the conduct. Although there is no videotape, there is extensive photographic evidence of Pierce actively involved in the hazing of other firefighters.

Pictures available on the Internet show Pierce — or his double — pouring a helmet full

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of water on an unsuspecting colleague, as part of a group rubbing old food or garbage on the nearly naked body of a firefighter who has been tied to a chair, and apparently shaving the private area of another naked colleague who is strapped to a gurney. One photo shows Pierce with his hand on the shoulder of a hazing victim who is wearing a yarmulke and has been draped with a sign that says, "Oy Vey! I'm Gay!"

It would be unimportant that the victims of these pranks look to be Caucasian except that when a little Alpo was added to his pasta, Pierce claimed it was *racially* motivated; that a prank played on him caused him to lose trust in his fellow firefighters, and impaired his ability to do his job.

However, Pierce is not the most culpable here. If he or anyone else believes they are the victim of discrimination, they have the right to file a grievance.

The problem is that Los Angeles City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo and the City Council rolled over like a "big dog" at the mere mention of racism. They failed to adequately investigate the claim against taxpayers, the circumstances under which a juvenile practical joke was played, and the history of similar pranks played by the firefighter making the claim.

The only councilman to vote against the settlement was Dennis Zine, a veteran of the LAPD. Zine, who is of Middle Eastern extraction, has said that while serving as a police officer he too had been the victim of many pranks, which he had not taken personally.

When the photos came to light of Pierce pulling pranks on his firehouse buddies, five of Zine's colleagues voted to reconsider the settlement, but they were unable to corral the majority of votes needed to postpone the giveaway of taxpayer dollars.

So it looks like, once again, it is *taxpayers* who are taking a beating.

At age 51, Pierce is about to retire with a generous lifetime pension *and* a bonus of \$2.7 million for eating a few mouthfuls of dog food. Try explaining that to the families of the five firefighters who lost their lives fighting the Esperanza fire.

However, there has been a new development. Taxpayers have won an eleventh hour reprieve, even if it is only temporary. Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has just vetoed the settlement. This puts the taxpayers' fate back before a disinterested City Council for further consideration.

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