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## **Gibson: Police shouldn't think they're going to war**

By Bob Gibson

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Technology in the form of video is rewriting the news about how and when police use excessive or deadly force.

The Washington Post devoted several Sunday pages April 12 to an analysis of 54 criminal cases against police officers in fatal shootings across America the past decade among “the thousands of fatal police shootings that have occurred across the country in that time.” No one knows the exact number.

The mere fact of thousands of fatal police shootings, even if a vast majority were deemed justified, is shocking in its scope.

Retired Charlottesville police chief John deKoven Bowen reacted strongly to the number.

“That surprises me. That bothers me,” said Bowen, the city’s chief of police from 1971 to 1994.

I covered Bowen and his police for years as a reporter and contacted him for his perspective on the news about recent shootings by officers.

With many videos of police shootings now in public hands and shown around the world, Bowen said leadership is needed as well as better training and more accountability about use of deadly force.

Protests about shooting black men are growing in California and elsewhere. Los Angeles County alone has experienced at least 409 police-involved shootings since 2010 — and yet there hasn’t been a single prosecution for one since 2001, according to the Los Angeles Daily News and a Cato Institute blog. About half of the shootings in that county by on-duty officers — 198 — were fatal.

Bowen said he is concerned about making sure that police recruit from the communities they serve and about a tendency to militarize some police forces and some training.

“I don’t think every recruit has to come out thinking he is going to war,” Bowen said. He credits Albemarle County Police Chief Steve Sellers with noting that police officers’ best defensive weapons are their mouths and their language.

Having people know the police and know that they are of the community can build the trust that police need to serve citizens well, Bowen said. It also helps race relations, he said.

“I think the race relationships are worse today than they were in the 70s and ’80s and ’90s,” said Bowen, who worked the streets of New York City as a narcotics officer for seven years before becoming Charlottesville’s chief.

Proper police training in the use of deadly force is crucial to that trust, he said. Guns are to be used when police have no other way to protect the lives of officers and the public.

“You use deadly force to protect your life and the life of another” and not to shoot someone who is known to police and can be arrested later, he said.

Bowen acknowledged that he had heard about police officers elsewhere dropping or planting evidence to bolster false stories to elude blame for shootings.

“The drop — that is something that I can say occurs out there,” he said.

He also said there is something repugnant about a black student being slammed, bloodied and cuffed by Virginia ABC police officers questioning his use of an ID outside a University of Virginia Corner restaurant.

ABC police should have been better trained and probably should hand over all arrest powers and the ability to carry guns to state or local police who are better trained, he said.

State and local police are the ones who should handle underage consumers of alcohol, not special ABC police, he said.

Police need the community’s trust and cooperation to do their jobs well. Police hurt the trust they need when officer shootings are swept under the rug.

Something about having power over people, combined with an us-versus-them feeling, a lack of community connection and inadequate training, prompts some officers to use excessive force even when they are not threatened.

New uses of cellphone video to show the public things it never saw before doesn’t mean there is more bad behavior, but does provide more news and better evidence about police use of excessive force.

Perhaps the behavior has always been there to some degree but accountability and visibility are increasing.

The tragic use of deadly force by police has led to a national discussion.

It should. America cannot continue to allow police officers to shoot fleeing suspects in the back.