

Video Displays Cultural Divide
Steve Lopez
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Columnist Steve Lopez joined the staff of The Times in May 2001, after four years at Time Inc. where he wrote for Time, Sports Illustrated, Life and Entertainment Weekly as editor-at-large.

While at Time, he helped establish the Bonus Section, a series of narrative news features. His first story in the series, about the French capture of Philadelphia hippie guru and suspected murderer Ira Einhorn, won a Society of Professional Journalists Award for national magazines.



He also was the author of Time magazine's "Campaign diary," a road journal filed during the 2000-01 presidential campaign; and of the weekly, "American Scene" column, for which he traveled the United States.

Prior to joining Time Inc., Lopez was a columnist at The Philadelphia Inquirer, where he won the H.L. Mencken Writing Award, the Ernie Pyle Award for human interest writing and a National Headliner Award for column writing. During his 12 years at the Inquirer, he filed dispatches from Iraq, Bosnia, Colombia and the Soviet Union.

His earlier newspaper jobs were at the San Jose Mercury News, the Oakland Tribune and three other daily newspapers in Northern California.

He is the author of three novels, "Third and Indiana," "The Sunday Macaroni Club," and "In the Clear." A collection of his columns is published in the book "Land of Giants: Where No Good Deed Goes Unpunished."

Lopez is married and has two sons.

It was probably a combination of factors that did it--the summer heat, the ghost of Rodney King, the unsettling reminder that our lives are being videotaped by people we can't see. But the footage of the July 6 altercation in Inglewood, and last week's public quarrel over the meaning of it, stirred passions across Southern California and beyond.

We all watched the same video and saw a thousand different things, depending on the lens through which we see the world.

The white cop was a hero or a monster. The black 16-year-old he pounded was a subject of sympathy or scorn. Race was a central factor or it had no role at all.

I wrote that Officer Jeremy Morse should be fired and prosecuted for slamming a handcuffed Donovan Jackson onto the trunk and punching him in the face, and about half the 300-plus readers who responded were in agreement. But the mail from the other side included some of the most vicious reactions to anything I've written in 27 years at the keyboard.

"I'll bet you make a career writing about and defending minority criminals," began a typical e-mail. "Look around you in Inglewood, Compton, and South-Central L.A. It is a sewer, filled with sewage.... You are pathetic."

If I were an honest man, others said, I'd admit that having to deal with African Americans and "your people" is no picnic for cops. I don't know which of my people they were referring to--the Italians or the Spaniards. But I got the clear impression from more than one reader that my ilk are definitely part of the problem and not the solution.

I was called a fool, a scumbag, a moron, a dummy, a coward, an ignoramus, a sicko, fecal matter, a hysteric and Mr. Nutsense.

All of that was OK--my wife has called me most of those things and worse. But what really got to me was the challenge to my manhood. It had to do with my writing that if Officer Morse had been grabbed in the privates, as he claimed, he still shouldn't have struck Jackson in the face.

"If you wouldn't punch a man in the face for grabbing your [privates], you obviously have no [privates]," wrote a reader named Wade, one of a few dozen people, mostly men, who expressed similar feelings.

Just to clear the record, if someone grabbed me there--as a reader named Robert of Marina del Rey kindly offered to do--yes, I would punch him in the face.

I never expected any news event in my career to produce so much mail about testicles, but that's part of what has given the story its legs. It also has turned legions of people into amateur detectives.

"Two points about this fabrication," wrote a reader named Gary. "(1) If the officer's testicles had been grabbed with any force at all, we should see some sort of facial reaction on his part. (2) Morse would have been rendered incapable of delivering such a forceful blow with his fist."

True enough, Morse doesn't double over in agony, jerk away swiftly or have his eyes roll back in his head. If he did any of those things, I would have caught it, because I have now seen the tape more times than I've seen the Zapruder film.

If it did happen, OK, I can understand Morse throwing a punch if he thought that was the only way to free up his boys. But he'd already lost his cool before that moment.

Jackson, after putting up a fight, was put down on the ground and his hands were cuffed behind his back. At that point, a well-trained officer doesn't: (A) pick up the suspect and slam his head into a trunk, (B) get close enough for the suspect to grab him, or (C) punch him in the face.

So why is it that greater Los Angeles sees this incident from such diametrically opposed viewpoints? Because we live in separate worlds and know next to nothing of each other.

I heard from black readers who told me they avoid driving at night in certain neighborhoods for fear of being pulled over, and I heard from white readers who told me they resent the race card being introduced in Inglewood.

"Minorities seem to have a lot of difficulty dealing with authority," one earnest reader wrote me. "Granted, there are some minority people who are raised correctly," she went on, closing with a comment about Rodney King. "I would have shot him the first time he lunged ..."

What happened in Inglewood wasn't racist, I told one reader from the San Fernando Valley, but it was racial. The best way I could explain it was to say that if a white person pulled into a gas station in the Valley with a possibly lapsed registration, as Jackson's father did in Inglewood, it's unlikely that six police officers would arrive on the scene.

I've been on ride-alongs with L.A. County sheriff's deputies, as well as with cops in several cities, and I don't envy them. It's a dangerous, thankless job. That they sometimes lose their cool is understandable, but it's not acceptable, and the best of them have written me to make that very point.

On the ride-alongs in L.A. County, I saw deputies shine a light in the face of every driver and every pedestrian in certain neighborhoods, and I've seen them run license plates whether there was an infraction or not. That doesn't happen in my neighborhood. Does it happen in yours?

Inglewood hits all the flash points. Race, economics, stratification. It reminds us we're all imperfect, and that, wherever we come from, we're not yet where we ought to be.

Steve Lopez writes Sunday, Wednesday and Friday. Reach him at steve.lopez@latimes.com