

A federal case in Colwyn



Former Colwyn police Cpl. Trevor Parham was acquitted of charges related to the Taser of Da'Qwan Jackson.

Howard Popper

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On April 29, 1992, a jury in Simi Valley, Calif., acquitted the Los Angeles police officers accused of the videotaped beating of Rodney King, spurring six days of arson, looting, assault, and murder that became known as the Los Angeles riots. Within months, a federal grand jury indicted four of the officers for violating King's civil rights, and less than a year after the first jury's acquittal, a federal jury convicted two of the officers.

Last month, a Delaware County judge acquitted former Colwyn police Cpl. Trevor Parham of charges related to the Taser of Da'Qwan Jackson, then 16, while he was shackled to a bench in a holding cell. Parham's acquittal will not lead to riots. But it should leave the residents of Colwyn with questions about their acting police chief, who testified that he is "comfortable" with

the conduct of the officer who went into a locked cell and Tasered the shackled teenager because he was cursing and ineffectually kicking at a wall in anger over his baseless arrest.

This is the same acting police chief, by the way, who sought to suspend the lieutenant who reported Parham's Taser of Jackson. Those events led to a power struggle between the mayor and the Borough Council while the Police Department was torn apart.

On the night of Jackson's arrest, the teenager complied with the first responding officer's requests and answered all of his questions, that officer testified. But after Parham arrived at the scene, he and Jackson exchanged words. After the teenager tried to walk away, Parham arrested him.

Jackson and Parham's fellow officers testified that the teenager cursed and kicked a wall when Parham told him he was being charged with disorderly conduct. It was not disputed that Parham then entered the cell and used a Taser on the shackled youth. Parham never mentioned the Taser in his reports, however; it came to light only after it was reported by another officer and by concerned citizens.

A week after the incident came to light, Parham told an investigator that he had used the Taser because Jackson "was on his way to" hurting himself by banging his head against the wall of the cell. But Parham's initial report makes no mention of Jackson banging his head, and there was no injury or physical evidence of it, either.

Given these facts - the Taser of a teen chained to a holding cell bench, the concealment of the conduct by omission from police reports, the fellow officers' contradicting of Parham, and the lack of corroboration of Parham's belated explanation - the verdict seems inexplicable. And why didn't the Delaware County District Attorney's Office exercise its right to demand a jury trial, particularly in such a high-profile and politically charged case?

From the immediate aftermath of the Taser onward, this case raises far too many questions to let this verdict be the final word. Notwithstanding the acquittal, federal prosecutors have the power to present this case to a grand jury on the federal criminal charge of deprivation of rights under color of law.

After the verdict, The Inquirer reported, Parham said he intends to continue his law enforcement career. As in the case of the officers who were acquitted of beating Rodney King 20 years earlier, the U.S. Attorney's Office needs to step in and do its best to ensure that Parham's intentions are never realized.