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Why I've Chosen Not to Strike

BY NICK LASINSKY ON NOVEMBER 6, 2020

Editor's note: All opinion pieces published in The Clerk represent the views and ideas of the author. We at The Clerk are committed to highlighting the work done by BIPOC students to advance justice on campus and beyond. However, we also believe that it's important that the opinion pieces we publish reflect the diverse set of perspectives on the strike among the community. With that in mind, we want to remind readers of the sit-in on Founders Green tonight at 9 pm. We hope to see you there.

This article is written independently of any organization I am involved in—the words here are mine and mine alone, and I would ask that you direct any disagreement you may have with my thoughts to me, and not to the wonderful extracurriculars and jobs which I am grateful to be involved in.

The parenthetical numbers correspond to footnotes at the bottom of the article.

At home, my father and I debate. He's a Trump supporter, and thus we deeply disagree on almost everything. It'll start off with a question "Hey, Nick, have you read this article about (*insert hot button issue here*)!" "No dad, I haven't..." I know what's coming. Inevitably, we're dragged into debate on whatever the issue of the day is, and sometimes that issue is racism in the United States. I've spoken for hours with my parents about this stuff. I spent the ride to campus this year explaining to them why it's not okay for a white high school to have the "Indians" as their mascot. I have always been the most liberal member of my family, the Resident Democrat at holidays and reunions and family dinners (1).

I include these details to provide context. My father is a police officer and, despite my (many) disagreements with him, I believe that he is a good man. He is a PA state trooper, a vehicle fraud investigator for two very rural counties in the western part of the state. He's run radar and gone on calls, but these days he works mostly on court cases and inspections. He works hard every day and he loves his family. He picks on—and takes immense pride in—his sons. He teases me constantly: a few weeks ago, he sent me a video of a homemade

sausage he was stuffing, reminding me to “be safe and use protection.” Police officers were at my parents’ wedding; my grandfather was a State Trooper. A police salary has put food on my table, given me a summer job; it’s helping to pay for my time here at Haverford.

“Really, Nick?” you may ask. “You think you can say anything about injustice? You think you can dream of contributing your perspective to what’s happening on campus? You need to take your privileged blood money and get the hell out of this conversation.” I hear this argument. I don’t claim to have personally experienced injustice. I am a straight, white man; I fit every category of privilege to the tee. I have no right to speak for BIPOC students on campus. I can only speak for myself. But I can speak for myself—and I do believe that some of my thoughts are worth sharing. Perhaps you disagree, but sometimes it’s worth adding something different to the conversation (2).

I gather, here at Haverford, that there is a tendency to demonize and simplify the institution of policing. When I hear “No good cops in a racist system,” I think with disgust to the horror of George Floyd’s murder, and the fact that men and women who claim to be protectors of the public abuse that power. But it also stings to hear that hundreds of my peers believe my father is irredeemable, that he is guilty beyond a doubt solely because of his profession. I am dismayed at racial injustice in America, at the decades of irreparable damage BIPOC have suffered. Yet I cannot bring myself to believe that demonizing the men and women who serve in the police, unilaterally condemning them as morally reprehensible, is the right course of action (3). The truth of the matter is this: police are people. Many are white, some are black. Some of them are lazy, some are selfish. Some of them hold racist views, and propagate violence in the communities they are charged with protecting. And some of them get up every day and bust their asses to protect those same communities. Some of them die for those communities (4).

The situation is nuanced. It is difficult to parse. Why else would I feel the need to make a ton of footnotes and clarify many of my statements? It’s so damn hard, not just for me but for everyone, to be frank and generous in this conversation, not to mention open to the possibility that one may be wrong.

But I worry that we as a college have decided that it is *not* hard. That the situation is simply easy: all cops are bad. All policing is bad. We should abolish all support of them, down to the last shred of our connection with local police departments. I sometimes wonder what I would be expected to tell my father to do in regards to his job if I ascribed to this worldview. I already spend much of my time with him trying to argue, the long and hard way, that there are deeply problematic ways our society crushes and kills minorities, that cops aren’t required to kill in times of distress, that there are problems that go deeper than a few bad apples. Should I tell him that he, an inspector of rural auto body shops, holds personal

blame for the death of Walter Wallace? Should I tell him that he should accept the accusation that he is a bastard as constructive criticism? Should I tell him that the only way for him to become a better person is to give up his job?

What does all this have to do with the strike, and why I'm not participating? The twelfth demand is my sticking point. I reject the idea that the Philadelphia Police and other police groups like it exist "solely to protect capital and perpetrate terrorist violence against those whose trauma and oppression the capitalist system profits from" (5). This frames the institution of policing as an organization so corrupt, so inherently evil, that it is unworthy of any connection to campus. It is clear in its certainty that there is no nuance at play, that cops in the system are fundamentally flawed and complacent in its corruption. It suggests that there is no redemption for their career, and that every single action they take is indicative of injustice—and I just don't believe that. I've been on the other side. There *are* good people there, people who try their best. People who work to make things better.

I've learned a lot from the strike, and I want to learn more. But I will not endorse the idea that all cops are immoral by default. I don't believe that my father is a bad man for being a police officer.

I am also incredibly impressed by the strike. I am awed daily by what this campus can do, and I admire the passion of Haverford students, even if I don't agree in this instance. I want each and every student reading this to know that whatever you believe, I think that it's worth recognition and exploration. Even if we disagree, I hold no ill will towards you for what you've seen, how you've felt, and the conclusions you've come to on this strike. I only hope that you would be kind enough to consider extending the same courtesy to me.

I'm concerned about campus, and the ability of students to express a differing viewpoint on something like this openly. I'm willing to try, if only to show that it can be done. I hope that Haverford is not too absolute, too far gone on this one to accommodate respectful dissent. I have said my bit, and I have said it openly. For better or for worse, my name is on the piece: Nick Lasinsky. I would love to talk further with anyone who wants to get in contact. But I'll give you fair warning: I think this is a tough nut to crack. If you engage in a conversation with disagreement, you have to accept that it's not going to be an easy one. It will be gray and unclear. But we have to have a collective hope that our disagreement can be in good faith, in good conscience, and know that it's much better to stumble through the real darkness than pretend that there's a clear-cut light.

Footnotes

(1): “You’re no advocate.” That may be one popular response to my anecdote. “Words of tacit support aren’t enough. You’re either with us in all of our demands, or you’re against us.” I recognize this point. I can’t claim to be an unequivocal, constant ally—to my fault, perhaps. But I most definitely do not always support my parent’s beliefs. It seems, on this one, that I occupy the middle ground, a middle ground which does not exist within the strike in the eyes of many. “The middle ground is automatically against the strike. You’re either with us or against us.” I’m uncomfortable with this dichotomy no matter the issue.

(2): Should this article even have been written? Many will say that it’s an abomination in the first place to release a view explaining why one has chosen not to strike. Is there *any* criticism of this strike written by a non BIPOC student which will be received with the belief that the argument was written in good faith? Perhaps not. But if I accept that every word I say will be discredited no matter the content of my opposition, I’m ascribing to a pretty bleak idea of how Haverford responds to disagreement.

(3): I feel the need to address the line that’s been floated: “Police officers chose their job. They may hold good values at home, but they still uphold a horrifying system.” I don’t agree. Society as a whole has corruptions; we are forced to work within and against them, because we do not live in a utopia. The idea that joining a profession which has contributed to systemic racism automatically disqualifies you from an ability to work within that profession to make it more equitable has always struck me as odd. I don’t believe that policing as an institution is too far gone. You may disagree, but I believe that a concerted effort of systemic reform nationwide of police training and techniques, coupled with increased funding and support for minority communities, would do more good than tearing down the current framework and labeling all of those who have worked within it as morally disgusting in their complacency.

(4): Don’t agree with the value of that last statement? Police do die in the line of duty, and maybe you’d argue that that’s of zero value in comparison to the violence done to BIPOC groups. I personally feel uncomfortable with that. When an unarmed black man or woman dies it is a tragedy. But many white community members I know show no empathy for that death. I am appalled by this. They don’t realize that they leave a spouse, children, that their death is devastating. When a police officer dies honorably on the job, that also strikes me as a tragedy. If my father had been shot while riding in his cruiser, I would have been devastated. And maybe you say that that emotion isn’t validated. Perhaps you would even contend that the loss of his life was justified, warranted, righteous. I disagree. I suspect the family of any other cop killed would feel the same way. Empathy is not limited. Compassion is not a one sided trait—one doesn’t have to pick and choose, and deny sympathy to some deaths. I believe that I can feel great sadness at the murder of BIPOC men and women, and

mourn the loss of police lives at the same time. Perhaps you disagree, and I acknowledge that. But my conscience has the capacity for split empathy.

(5): Some may say that disagreeing with one demand is not reason enough to oppose the strike. Fair point, though I'd argue that one's support or lack thereof does not "need" to meet any outside qualifications imposed on it. There are other things about the strike that I disagree with, but I feel much less qualified to speak on them. For me, the twelfth point is difficult not only in its pragmatic challenges (I am unsure if refusing to interact with local police is even a legal option), but also in its ideological implications. For me, personally, the twelfth demand is what pushes my decision over the line.

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