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WHEN (VERY) HARD HEADS COLLIDE (II)

*What should cops do when miscreants refuse to comply?
Refuse to comply?*



For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Other than depicting a police officer's backside, what else is unusual about this picture? Look closely. That shiny Lexus two Ohio cops tangled with on August 24 lacks a rear license plate. According to Blendon Township police Chief John Belford, it lacked a front license plate as well (click [here](#) for his video statement and [here](#) for our transcript). Indeed, the vehicle was probably unregistered. According to police accounts and records we dug up in municipal court files – we'll get into that below – its driver and sole occupant, twenty-one year old Ta'Kiya Young, was likely unlicensed.

But first, let's examine the circumstances that led to the ultimately tragic encounter (click [here](#) for the police chief's initial Facebook statement, posted one day after the event, and [here](#) for his follow-up account.) [Blendon Township](#), a prosperous community of about 10,000 residents, lies about sixteen miles northeast of Columbus, the state capital. Blendon's smallish, full-service [police department](#) employs seventeen sworn officers, including two detectives and eleven patrol officers. Chief Belford reported that immediately preceding their contact with Ms. Young, two patrol officers were in the Kroger parking lot, helping a locked-out citizen get back into their car. That's when a Kroger employee ran up and informed them that Ms. Young, who was walking up to her nearby Lexus (it was parked in a handicapped slot) stole liquor from the store. She had supposedly been in the company of other shoplifters, but they already fled.

So the cops shifted their attention. Here's a sequence of images from their [bodycams](#):

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Time hh:mm:ss	Image #	Bodycam Officer #	Event
18:27:55	1	2	Ms. Young enters her car
18:28:03	2-4, 6, 7	2	Officer 2 walks up, starts ordering her out
18:28:11	5	2	Officer 1 walks by
18:28:18	8, 9	1	Officer 1 positions in front of the vehicle
18:28:27	10	2	Vehicle starts moving
18:28:28	11, 12	1	Officer 1 fires one shot through windshield, fatally wounding Ms. Young
18:28:29	13, 14	2	Officer 1 struck, pushed aside by vehicle

Things happened very quickly. Eight seconds after Officer 2 began ordering Ms. Young to exit her vehicle, Officer 1 walked by and planted himself in front of the car (a clearly poor move that we'll come to later). Only nine seconds after that, the car began to move. Veering sharply to the right, it knocked Officer 1 aside. Having already unholstered his gun, he instantly fired. His round penetrated the windshield (images 11 and 12) and fatally wounded Ms. Young. Even so, she managed to safely steer the car to the shopping center's walkway and, as the officers ran alongside, bring it to a halt. Ms. Young was locked inside, so the cops broke in to render aid. Alas, it proved too late.

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Police haven't mentioned finding any ill-gotten merchandise in Ms. Young's car. According to her lawyer, [there was none](#), as she had been observed leaving the liquor in the store. Her decision to do so may have been spurred by employee reaction to the large-scale shoplift in which she allegedly participated. But the absence of loot certainly provides grist for the lawsuit being filed by her family.

Ms. Young *did* refuse to cooperate with police. Her flight also placed Officer 1 at great risk. Had she decisively stepped on the gas or failed to swing the vehicle away, he might have been killed. Her reckless behavior reflects an unfortunate pattern of conduct that's been documented in the municipal courts of [Franklin](#) and [Sandusky](#) counties:

Off. date	Case no.	Charge	Dispo
8/20/23	CRB 013483	Viol. protect. Order	Dismissed (deceased)
7/25/23	Unk.	Red light viol.	Unk.
1/5/23	CRB 000200	Viol. protect. Order	Dismissed (deceased)
10/14/22	CRB 016143	Petty theft	Diversion prog., then warrant, then dismissed (deceased)
12/29/21	TRD 100254	60 mph in a 35 mph zone	FTA warrant, \$242 fine
4/18/21	CRB 005169	Flee/elude officer; disorderly conduct	Guilty, 4 days jail, fine
4/18/21	TRD 111193	59 mph in a 35 mph zone	See above
1/3/21	TRD 100300	102 mph in a 65 mph zone	\$192 fine

We've often cautioned about the chaotic nature of police-citizen encounters (see, for example, "[Routinely Chaotic](#)"). Ditto, citizens' frequent reluctance to peacefully comply ("[Fair but Firm](#)"). Ditto, the risk that rushed responses might cause needless harm. ("[Speed Kills](#)"). Here, all three concerns seem to apply. Still, the circumstances that Officers 1 and 2 faced were unforgiving from the start. An alleged participant in a major shoplift episode was about to drive away. Worse still, neither officer had apparently connected with Ms. Young in the past, and her vehicle's lack of license plates deprived them of some potentially very useful information.

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Even so, Officer 2 (their names have not as yet been released) didn't treat the situation as a dangerous felony stop. He hurried to the driver's door and, without drawing his gun, ordered Ms. Young from the vehicle. But she refused to exit. And kept refusing. Officer 2 apparently tried to open the car's door (see images 7-9 above). But it was locked.

Officer 1 noticed. Perhaps to emphasize the seriousness of the situation, or simply as a bully tactic, he placed himself in front of the vehicle and drew his pistol. As one might expect, police trainers [have condemned his approach](#). While drawing a gun might be justified, accepted practices clearly rule out standing in front of a suspect's car. (Imagine what would have happened had Ms. Young *really* stepped on the gas.) Still, once the vehicle began to move and he got bumped, firing a shot could be justified as self-defense. Blendon PD's relevant [use of force rules](#) are typical for the genre. Here's an extract:

An officer should only discharge a firearm at a moving vehicle or its occupants when the officer reasonably believes there are no other reasonable means available to avert the imminent threat of the vehicle, or if deadly force other than the vehicle is directed at the officer or others.

A horrific outcome had been eminently avoidable. That it wasn't can be attributed to the unholy combination of two *very* hard heads: one a citizen's; the other a cop's. We wrote about a like pair fourteen years ago ("[When Very Hard Heads Collide](#)"). But for a notorious recent example there's the paradigm-shifting episode involving Minneapolis cops and George Floyd ("[Punishment Isn't a Cop's Job](#)"). It started out in a similar fashion, with officers responding to a call about a shoplifter who wouldn't give things back. Rookie cop Thomas Lane, the first officer on scene (he's now in Federal prison) managed to get Mr. Floyd out of his car and onto the sidewalk, no harm done. Unfortunately, Mr. Floyd (he had a substantial criminal record) soon stopped playing nice. That frustrated a senior cop (Derek Chauvin, now also imprisoned). So he came up with a "better idea."

What's the fix? Three years ago our *Police Chief* op-ed "[Why do Officers Succeed?](#)" pointed out that cops successfully handle fraught situations involving misbehaving citizens every minute of every day. While tactical blunders *do* happen (our [Strategy & Tactics](#) essays are riddled with examples) Officer 1's purposeful, obviously dangerous positioning seemed clearly intended to convey a message. And to the cop's likely dismay, his challenge was accepted. But there's no need to craft yet another elaborate set of rules. The solution is really quite straightforward. Impress on our public servants that society can't afford non-compliance with accepted procedures, and especially by its

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badge-wearers. In the fraught atmosphere that characterizes present-day America, their blunders truly *are* an invitation to disaster.