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“DISTRACTION STRIKE”? ANGRY PUNCH? BOTH?

When cops get rattled, the distinction may ring hollow



For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Delivered in L.A.’s crime and poverty-beset Watts neighborhood by a clearly angry cop, that notorious punch rocked far more than its beefy victim. Within moments of the officers’ approach to Alexander Mitchell’s double-parked, wrong-way Dodge Charger (the car on the right), residents closed in with cell phones in hand. Less than four-and-one-half minutes later, as two regular-size cops struggled to handcuff the ornery, six-foot-four, 280-pound citizen, bystander videos captured a “distraction strike” that will surely go down in infamy.



LAPD released both officers’ bodycams (click [here](#)). They cover the same 30-minute period, 5:15 to 5:44 p.m., Sunday, July 28, and are in two parts, with the driver-side officer first. Simply connecting with Mr. Mitchell proved challenging. Heavily tinted windows blocked view of the car’s interior, so the wary driver-side officer looked in with a penlight. He asked that the window be rolled down, and Mr. Mitchell complied. But he became quarrelsome when the officer asked for ID, objecting that “I’m not on probation or parole”.

After Mr. Mitchell repeatedly ignored requests for I.D. the officer ordered him to step out of the vehicle. Mr. Mitchell grudgingly complied, but violently resisted an attempt to pat him down. Although the officer didn’t announce his intentions, we assume that he

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was arresting Mr. Mitchell for [failure to comply with the lawful orders of a peace officer](#) (i.e., present a driver license.) According to LAPD, Mr. Mitchell was ultimately booked for a misdemeanor violation of [Penal Code section 148](#), resisting, delaying or obstructing a public safety officer. [He was cited and released](#), and a court date is pending.

Throughout the struggle, Mr. Mitchell repeatedly asserted that that he knew the (correct?) “protocol” and was “not on probation or parole”. More citizens arrived, and their sympathies clearly didn’t lie with the cops. Several began filming away.



Mr. Mitchell’s size forced officers to use two pairs of handcuffs. Their commands to “put your hands behind your back,” though, fell on deaf ears. Repeatedly intoning “what did I do?”, Mr. Mitchell made affixing the second set impossible (left image depicts the passenger-side officer.) About four minutes into the tangle officers wrestled Mr. Mitchell back to the patrol car. That’s when the driver’s-side cop delivered that blow (second image portrays the moment just after the strike). While the punch instantly aroused spectator scorn (third image), it did seem to slow the large man down, [“enabling the officers to complete the handcuffing”](#) (LAPD’s initial assessment.) Moments later, the second pair of cuffs were affixed (right image).

For a brief bystander video of the punch, click [here](#). For our edited, 1– minute compilation of the key aspects of the encounter, including officer and bystander footage, click [here](#).



Many more officers arrived. More passers-by also appeared, and they sauntered through the area mostly unimpeded. Meanwhile, a now fully-cuffed Mr. Mitchell kept resisting. “What did I do?” he repeatedly demanded. And when told that he was going to jail, he complained “I didn’t do nothing”. As officers struggled to place him in a police

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car, his objections morphed into “I can’t breathe.” Complaining about passing out, he soon went more-or-less limp.

Officers placed Mr. Mitchell on the ground and summoned paramedics. They soon arrived and placed him on a gurney. That’s when the (now, compliant) patient noticed that his car was being driven away.

“Why you taking my car?” he asked.

[According to Mr. Mitchell’s lawyer](#), the encounter broke his client’s nose and left him with jaw pain. “It was brutal, it was uncalled for, it was unjustified,” complains attorney Brad Gage. As one would expect, he’s preparing a claim (precursor to a lawsuit) against the city.

This wasn’t Mr. Mitchell’s first tangle with the law. Our search of civil and criminal records revealed that his family hails from the Lone Star State. Texas criminal record no. 50226672 indicates that a man variously known as Alexander Donta Goffney, Alexander Goffney-Mitchell, and Alexander Donta Mitchell had two encounters with the state’s criminal justice system:

Date	Type	Details
4/7/2022	Adult dispositions	Both below cases convicted as misdemeanors, concurrent 1 yr. sentences
10/6/2021	Felony arrest	Violate protective order, 2+ prior convictions
10/30/2020	Felony arrest	Aggravated assault w/ serious injury, family member



Why are we confident that these entries are about “our” Mr. Mitchell? His birthdate on Texas records is consistent with his chronological age (28) as reported by LAPD and other sources. “Goffney” is also very close to “Gofferney”, the middle name ascribed to Mr. Mitchell on the LAPD report and elsewhere. And a somewhat dated photo from Mr. Mitchell’s Texas record (see



left) seems a dead ringer for the facial images captured by LAPD and passer-by bodycams (LAPD on right).

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As this intriguing episode wends its way through the criminal, civil justice (i.e., lawsuit) and police disciplinary systems, two aspects of the encounter provoked our interest. First - and most importantly - the reason for the arrest.



Click [here](#) for the driver-side officer's initial, one-minute interaction with Mr. Mitchell. After using a penlight to confirm that the car was occupied (left image), the officer asked the driver to lower the window. Mr. Mitchell did so (second image), then promptly demanded to know "what's going on?" In a low-key, conversational tone, the officer asked for a license and I.D. (third image) But Mr. Mitchell ignored him. Instead, he repeated "what's going on?" and added "I'm not on probation or parole." And when the cop (again, in a mild voice) pointed out that Mr. Mitchell was double parked and facing the wrong way, his antagonist countered with "what does that mean, I'm not on probation or parole". With the exchange seemingly going nowhere, the officer soon accused Mr. Mitchell of "ignoring" him and politely asked that he step out of the car. Again complaining that he wasn't "on probation or parole," Mr. Mitchell did so (right image.) That's when the officer moved in. And when the fight began.

Once again, consider the circumstances the officers encountered. Mr. Mitchell's car was double-parked and facing the wrong way. Its windows were blacked out all around. And its driver's ornery, challenging attitude must have provoked suspicions about his intentions. Why didn't the cop demand Mr. Mitchell's driver license from the very start? After all, he could have then simply ordered him to move the car. Job done!

But he didn't. He then moved in, seemingly to make a physical arrest. Was there sufficient cause?

That brings us to our other concern: the need for the punch. The officer is reportedly still on the job but off the street. His supervisor, though, has filed a personnel complaint, and [a use-of-force investigation is underway](#). However, the cop's prospects aren't completely grim. As mentioned above, LAPD credited the punch with resolving the situation. In fact, "distraction strikes" are widely recognized throughout cop-land as a "[decisive means to regain control of an encounter](#)." Still, they're not part of the [California State peace officer curriculum](#). Former LAPD Chief William J. Bratton

actually banned use of the term because he thought it could invite misconduct. However, [an official March 2023 LAPD directive](#) authorizes officers to use “strikes and kicks” when doing so is necessary to “overcome active resistance to arrest, create distance from a suspect, protect self or others from injury, stop or stun a suspect, and distract a suspect.”

But did it have to get to that point? Let’s self-plagiarize from [our essay in *The Crime Report*](#):

How can cops make it more likely that crooks and ordinary citizens will voluntarily comply? De-escalation – slowing things down, providing distance, avoiding the use of threats – can be a useful approach. Yet, as I discovered on the job, defusing potentially explosive, rapidly-evolving encounters doesn’t always come from being “nice.” Indeed, a few folks seem to consider courtesy as an invitation to misbehave. Avoiding violence might require firmness. Displaying weapons and using less-than-lethal means might even be called for.



[A recent study of officer-citizen interactions](#) captured on police bodycams concludes that suspects were more likely to comply with officers who “presented a positive tenor/demeanor or employed noncoercive verbal tactics.” But for an ornery few, nothing helped. While we’re not sold on the approach employed by the driver’s-side cop, considering Mr. Mitchell’s uncompliant nature, maybe there *really* was no hope. Still, as we mentioned in “[Blows to the Head Were Never O.K.](#)”, kicks and punches to the head are not an accepted practice. Even [Officer.com’s](#) relatively permissive piece recommends that distraction strikes be delivered “somewhere in the neck area with the edge of the hand or arm.” Considering Mr. Mitchell’s size, strength and combativeness, the only realistic alternatives might have been to deliver multiple blows from a club, multiple strikes from a Taser, or have additional officers join in. Problem is, as we discussed in “[Piling On](#),” and “[Policing is a Contact Sport \(II\)](#)”, each of these practices carry substantial risks.

So we’re back to square one. A more (verbally) forceful approach *might* have peacefully resolved the problem of a double-parked car. While the underlying reason for Mr. Mitchell’s presence would have remained a mystery, in these troubled, deeply polarized times, half a loaf isn’t bad.