

Content Courtesy of *Reuters*



New York mayor faces conundrum over police chokehold protests

By Ellen Wulforth

NEW YORK Thu Dec 4, 2014 6:12pm EST

(Reuters) - Mayor Bill de Blasio, a liberal Democrat who vowed to bridge New York's divides over race and wealth, is struggling to balance the need for policing and unfair treatment of black people following a grand jury's decision not to indict a white police officer in the chokehold death of an unarmed black man.

De Blasio, of Italian descent and married to a black woman with whom he has two children, defused a first night of protests across New York City on Wednesday with a balance of restrained policing and by showing he was listening, political experts said.

De Blasio's initial comments following the decision, that the outcome was one "many in our city did not want," showed angry and disappointed New Yorkers that he shared their feelings, said David Birdsell, dean of the School of Public Affairs at the City University of New York's Baruch College.

"When you think about what sparks violence in these situations, it's that notion that you're just washing up against the rocks of bureaucracy with no hope of changing that shoreline," said Birdsell. "What de Blasio showed is that there's somebody there listening."

Not all New Yorkers were as impressed by de Blasio's words.

Patrick Lynch, the head of the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association police union, said he believed that de Blasio had failed to support police after the decision.

"Police officers feel like they have been thrown under the bus," Lynch said.

More demonstrations are expected in the coming days as city residents vent their anger over the death of 43-year-old Eric Garner in July and the decision by the grand jury in the borough of Staten Island.

"There's a difference between saying we should respect our officers, which of course we should ... versus the reality that so many parents have felt that unfortunately their child might confront unfair treatment," de Blasio said on Thursday when asked to respond to Lynch's comments.

The mayor delivered a strong call for retraining city police.

De Blasio made his reaction to Garner's death personal by referring to his son Dante, saying he has been warned by his parents to take "special care in any encounters" with police officers.

"The fact that he was able to take that pain and personalize it in the context of his own family ... was enormously important," Birdsell said.

Admittedly, experts said, the course of protests in the days ahead in New York could change, as organizers assess strategies, people's emotions sink in.

"Who's to say?" said Birdsell. "But I think that's so much less likely because of the response on the first night."

SPACE FOR PROTESTS

Under de Blasio and Police Commissioner William Bratton, the city of eight million has so far avoided the violence that erupted in Ferguson, Missouri, following a similar grand jury ruling on Nov. 24.

Thousands of protesters took to the streets on Wednesday after a Staten Island grand jury decided not to charge police officer Daniel Pantaleo for Garner's death in a banned chokehold, but no violence was reported and just 83 were arrested.

Fred Siegel, an historian and senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, said much of the credit for Wednesday's peace goes to police strategy.

"Bratton is doing a fantastic job," he said. "He's giving protesters space to demonstrate in a reasonable manner."

In comparison, after Mike Brown, an unarmed black 18-year-old, was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson in August and a grand jury declined to bring charges last week, the police took a far more confrontational stance.

Clad in riot gear, wielding shields and large guns, police in Ferguson used armored vehicles, smoke bombs and tear gas to force demonstrators through the city streets.

"They were out of their league," said Siegel.

In recent weeks, New York police had worked with community leaders, some of whom attended sessions at the police academy to learn what police deal with, a Staten Island activist said.

In Ferguson, police worked with protest leaders ahead of the grand jury ruling, but those plans seemed to fall apart, with protests quickly deteriorating to riots in which cars and buildings were torched and businesses looted. Some organizers said afterward that they felt the joint effort had not been done in earnest.

Images of Garner's stepfather Benjamin Carr consoling an angry protester in the wake of the news contrasted with Brown's stepfather Louis Head shouting "Burn the bitch down" upon the news in Ferguson.

(Editing by Scott Malone and Grant McCool)