



A Native perspective on the inquest into the shooting of John T. Williams

Thank you to jurors for their honesty and to the deputy police chief and others in the SPD who have shown humanity, but the inquest process brings to mind lessons from smallpox-filled blankets.

By Gyasi Ross

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Lord Jeffrey Amherst, after whom the town of Amherst, Mass., and Amherst College are both named, routinely passed out smallpox-filled blankets to members of the Ottawa Nation during the French and Indian War. The Natives knew, instinctively, that this war commander did not have their best intentions at heart — history showed that. Yet, the Ottawa were cold, out of options, and Amherst proclaimed that he came in the name of “peace” and “reconciliation.” So the Ottawa accepted this peace offering, hoping for humanity from someone who had never showed any, and thousands of members of the Ottawa Nation died as a result. Still — given the time and circumstances — the Ottawa had little choice but to feign belief.

Sitting in the fourth row of seats in the King County Courtroom on the first and second day of the inquest, I had an epiphany: there was zero possibility that the John T. Williams family would get “justice” out of the inquest. The only way that “justice” would occur is if, somehow, the Seattle Police Department could reverse the horrible sequence of events of Aug. 30, 2010, and stop the actions of officer Ian Birk that left John T. Williams dead. Understanding that justice was an impossibility, I simply prayed for — as, I think, as all justice-seeking Seattleites did — the next best thing: a full, meaningful and objective inquest process. I simply hoped for — despite a 40-year history of inquests that screamed that it was impossible no matter how clear the evidence — an inquest process that was what it claims to be, “a fact-finding process,” and not simply what it has been, an excuse-creating process that will ultimately exonerate any police officer, no matter how severe and heinous the deprivation of human and civil rights.

I suppose, like the members of the Ottawa Nation who accepted the smallpox-filled blankets from a man that they hoped would be honorable, I should have known better.

God bless the inquest jurors in the death of John T. Williams. The jury handed down their findings mere minutes ago as I finish writing this and seemingly saw through Ian Birk’s smokescreen, conjured by his lawyer Ted Buck, and four jurors said that John T. Williams was never a threat to Birk. Now, the question is whether the King County prosecutor will bring charges against Officer Birk or not. I have no idea what the prosecutor’s decision will be; I do, however, have a pretty good suspicion that King County prosecutors will do absolutely nothing in this case, as they have never done anything to punish police officers who act rashly and harm or kill civilians.

My suspicion is confirmed by 40 years of inquests that simply never determine that the officer should be charged criminally, no matter the facts of the case. Never. Doesn’t happen. And, if by some miracle, the King County prosecutor determines that Birk should be charged in the death of

the so-called “drunk Indian” while said drunk Indian was walking away, God bless the prosecutor’s decision.

Still, it will not change the facts that are painfully clear after watching 10 minutes of the Inquest proceeding. The facts are these: 1) The King County inquest process is not fair when the Seattle Police Department is involved. 2) The inquest process is not meaningful. 3) The inquest process is certainly not transparent; in fact, much like a criminal trial, the police officer’s attorneys go to great lengths to suppress evidence that could potentially incriminate the officers. If the SPD is confident that everything that their police officers do is “above board,” after all, why the need to prevent any evidence from being seen?

Therefore, even with this “win” in this inquest — the determination of four of the jurors that John T. Williams was never a threat to Ian Birk before Birk killed him — does not change the fact that the inquest process is fundamentally flawed. It is flawed for all of the above reasons, and we have 40 years of evidence that shows the flaws. Still, there is one more very important reason that the process suffers from system failure.

The inquest process is all about putting the dead man/woman, in this case John T. Williams, on trial — a fundamental disrespect, as well as deprivation of due process. As the saying goes, “dead men tell no tales,” and in the inquest Ian Birk spread as many dubious ideas, inconsistencies, and stereotypes as he could about this dead Native man in hopes of saving his own skin. In this instance, however, the dead man does tell us all a story.

He tells us that his carving knife was never a threat — his small knife, contrary to Ian Birk, was not open. He tells us that he was not walking toward Ian Birk as Birk contended — he was shot in the side four times. Most importantly, John T. Williams reminds us of the lesson of Lord Amherst: Do not accept or even feign belief in this process; these people show absolutely no humanity or honesty when their own are threatened. Watch out for these men and women who shoot first and ask questions last — they do not have your best interests at heart.

I respect men and women who offer their lives to serve our communities as peace officers. Deputy Police Chief Nick Metz and others have done a great job of showing the SPD’s humanity during this process. Still, we can respect our officers and simultaneously have absolute disdain and disgust for a disingenuous inquest process.

I will never again feign belief that this process can be fair or objective; I will learn from the lesson of Lord Jeffrey Amherst — be wary of those who say that they come in peace. I think that I speak for many Seattleites of all colors, ethnicities, political beliefs etc. when I say the following: The days of an insular, clandestine inquest process are over. This must be a time of healing and learning, even despite the obvious and understandable pain, frustration, and anguish with the Native community. I commit myself to healing and learning; still, true healing and learning will only begin when we stop making excuses for the bad behavior from our peace officers.

(Editor's note: The writer submitted this article on behalf of a consortium of Seattle's Native Community, including the following: Andrina Abada, Tlingit. Janeen Comenote, Quinault/Hesquiaht/Oglala. qwayahciiuich — Pat John, Ahousat First Nations. Teresa Brownwolf Powers, Hunkpapa Lakota. Robert Satiacum, Puyallup Tribe. Elizabeth Satiacum, Qileute Nation. Millie Kennedy, Tsimshian. Deborah Parker, Tulalip Tribes. Robert Upham - AKA — "Harlem Indian." Daniel R. Smith, Swinomish. Kristine Wilson-Torset, Shoalwater Bay Tribe. Charla White Eagle, Cheyenne River Sioux. Travis Torset. Mike Peters, Lower Elwha Tribe. Marilyn Liden Bode. Kay Fiddler, Turtle Mountain Ojibwe. Carmen Rose Becera, Quinault/Oglala/Aztec. Wendy Johnson, M.D. Karen Capuder, Ph.D., Mohawk. Carol Warrior, Alutiiq/Dena'ina Athabaskan/Gros Ventre. Penny Octuck-Cole, Ho-Chunk. Bryan Cole, Hoh Nation. Dakotah Cole, Hoh Nation. Carol Edelman. Connie Maipi, Apache Nation. Anwar Peace. Penny Octuck-Cole, Ho-Chunk. Matt Remle, Hunkpapa Lakota. Fern Renville, Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate. Tanya Powers, Siberian Yupik. Carey Fuller, Cherokee. Shaleena Bertam, Lummi/Quileute. Janice Brown, Tlingit. Christopher Schulz. Sky Lark, Iroquois League.)

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