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®FC¯Demanding Quality Policing

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®FL¯ From May, 1986 to March, 1987 I was privileged to be a member of the Philadelphia Police Study Task Force. Our tasks were to outline a vision of what policing in Philadelphia could be, and to draw up a blueprint for realizing that vision. We knew that the vision had to include the establishment of a more effective working partnership among all of Philadelphia's diverse neighborhoods and their police department. Without strong ties to communities, the police would lack both legitimacy and operational effectiveness in dealing with such problems as crime, drugs, disorder, and urban decay.

 We also knew that it would be impossible to enact needed internal changes within the police department without the communities demanding and supporting the proposed reforms. But it was here that we ran into an unexpected problem: Philadelphia's communities seemed unaware of the size of the contribution that a first rate police department could make to the quality of life in Philadelphia, were uncertain about what constituted quality policing, and were surprisingly tolerant of slipshod practices.

 The Study Task Force asked a representative sample of Philadelphians for their overall evaluation of their police department. At a time when the Department had just burned down a city block in the disastrous MOVE operation and had seen some of its highest ranking officers indicted for corruption, citizens rated their department highly: almost three-fourths of the city residents (70%) rated the Philadelphia police as doing a good or excellent job overall; only 24% rated the performance as fair, and only 6% as poor. Even more surprising, however, was the fact that citizens gave the police this high rating despite the fact that they also believed that the police engaged in many forms of misconduct: 65% of those polled believed that the police used unnecessary force sometimes or often; 49% believed they took bribes sometimes or often.

 These results were hard for the Study Task Force to reconcile. How could the citizens of Philadelphia rate the police so highly when they also thought that the police engaged in a great deal of misconduct? We could not be sure of the answer, but it seemed to us that Philadelphians and the police had made a tacit deal: the citizens wanted the police to do the dirty work of dealing effectively with people who frightened them and filled them with despair, and, in exchange, they would forgive the police their occasional transgressions. This view of the deal was later explicitly articulated by one police manager who declared somewhat indignantly, "If we're going to have to shovel society's shit, we ought to be indulged a little bit."

 I suspect that this tacit deal is a common one across the nation's cities. The only thing unusual about Philadelphia was that it was far more explicit than elsewhere. It is, nonetheless a crummy deal. The collusion between the community and the police to set low standards of performance robs the city and its neighborhoods of the potential benefits of first class policing. It robs those in the police department of the chance of developing and expressing a finer kind of professionalism. And it robs Philadelphia of the kind of national standing that befits its historical significance to the nation. Thus, one of the tasks facing a new Mayor of Philadelphia is to forge a new, more demanding compact between Philadelphia's citizens and its police force. He (or she) must set and define the standards of quality policing for the city. These should include the following:

 First, the police must be present in Philadelphia's communities in a way that helps citizens feel secure, and makes them feel that the police are responsive to their concerns. This means far more than simply making a fast response to calls for service. It means giving officers permanent assignments to well defined local neighborhoods. It means getting the police out from behind the wheels of their automobiles and onto local streets. It means responding to calls for service with interest and resourcefulness rather than curtness.

 Second, the police must demand civility in public places, and must themselves set a standard for civility in enforcing these rules. We know now that fears are stimulated and neighborhood morale eroded not primarily by instances of serious crime, but by less serious disorder including noisy kids, petty vandalism, and public drunkenness. Effective enforcement against such disorder, however, requires extraordinary sensitivity and skill by police officers. They must sense the point at which such misconduct stops being harmless and becomes harmful to the community. And they must intervene in ways that are proportionate to the problem, and well designed to end it rather than enflame the situation.

 Third, the police must be able to command support and legitimacy not only from some, but from all of Philadelphia's communities. It is intolerable for there to be significant, systematic disparities in perceptions of the quality of police services across the city. It is particularly intolerable for those disparaties to be related to race and social class. The police cannot be a force protecting some elements of the city against others; it must be a force that allows the maximum amount of security and freedom to each of Philadelphia's communities.

 Fourth, the police department must be organized to make the best use of the initiative and resourcefulness of its individual officers. They are the department's most valuable resource. The department must be organized to help the patrol officers do their job. This means decentralizing operations, and encouraging the development of generalist rather than specialist skills in the department. It means reducing the department's reliance on specialist squads, and flattening the rank structure of the department to ensure that more officers are on the front lines. It also means finding ways to reward officers for outstanding service through means other than promoting them to command positions or specialist squads.

 Fifth, the police department must develop more effective ways of making itself accountable to individual citizens and the broader community. This effort will be aided by getting the officers out of their cars and back in touch with the community, and by encouraging a geographically decentralized organizational structure which will make the organization more vulnerable to the demands of small groups of local citizens. But beyond these measures, the police must find routine ways of reporting on the overall quality of their performance. Surveys of community attitudes and those who call the department must be added to reported crime figures as a way of evaluating the department's overall efforts. The quality of police encounters and investigations must be maintained not only through close supervision, but also through training and regular peer reviews of officer performance.

 Ultimately, every city gets the kind of police department they want. An important task of a newly elected mayor of Philadelphia is to set the sights of the Philadelphia community higher than they have been in the past. I know from experience that the talent and will to respond to these stiffer demands now exists in the department. They know better than many others in the city what the organization is truly capable of doing, and are itching for the chance to show what can be done.