

Review of:

Chief: My Life in the LAPD

by Darryl Gates

Mark H. Moore

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Darryl Gates has finally ridden out of town, but like the Lone Ranger, has left a silver bullet. His book, Chief: My Life in the LAPD, marks his departure.

At one level, the book is a fascinating account of the operational and administrative challenges facing modern police departments. We learn, for example, that SWAT teams were formed by adapting military tactics for dealing with barricaded snipers to the quite different task of saving barricaded hostages. We also learn that vice operations in the LAPD were guided to their proper targets by the "Three C's: Commercialization, Complaints and Conspicuousness."

But the book is most compelling as an introduction to the complex character of the man who wrote it--his perceptions, values, and vision for policing. The question for readers is: Who was that masked man, and what is his legacy?

In the political climate of today, it would be easy to dismiss Darryl Gates. But that would be a great mistake -- as wrong as Gates' cavalier dismissal of his many critics. For there is much that Gates has right.

He is right, for example, about evil. There is evil in the world. The police see it firsthand, and recognize it for what it is. In confronting the mutilated body of the ninth victim of the "skid row slasher" whose head has been nearly severed from his body and whose blood has been collected in goblets apparently for drinking, Gates confides that he has collected another "image of the dead" to be kept "on file in my memory" like "grainy photographs in an old album."

Of course, Gates does not see everything relevant to justice in these awful crime scenes. He does not see the mental illness that drives the killers; nor the equally horrifying conditions of brutality and neglect from which such killers often emerge. And it is these things that are added to the picture when the case comes before a judge who, in Gates' disparaging view, "sits there in his germ-free surroundings, making all these ruling based upon his...perception of the world, not having rolled around in the gutter."

But it is an undeniable and important reality that the police confront shocking instances of cruelty and humanity. That horror becomes part of their understanding of human nature, and a challenge to the justice system.

Gates is also right when he observes that society is deeply ambivalent about the police use of authority and force. On one hand, society grants the police the chokehold, the baton, and the gun to ensure that suspected criminals can be made to stand still for the orderly process of justice. Yet, as Gates observes, "people are quite naturally repulsed by violence"; therefore "any visual depiction of force can appear worse than it is". It is far easier to see police officers who hit or shoot as bullies than as surgeons.

But there is also a great deal about which Gates seems far less insightful. And it is these blind spots and insensitivities that, in the end, teach us the most about what has gone wrong with American policing.

Gates professes to be constantly surprised that many view him as a racist -- this despite the fact that he once appeared to try to explain the fact that more blacks died as a result of LAPD chokeholds than whites because he had a "hunch" that blacks were more vulnerable to such a hold. He's enough of a realist to know that race will be "interjected and become a significant factor when it really shouldn't be". But this apparently never teaches him to take steps to reduce this vulnerability.

Why not is an important question. Why doesn't Gates focus more of his considerable intelligence, political acumen and administrative skill to combat the charge of racism, particularly since that charge not only dogs him personally throughout his career, but also seems to play an important role in preventing the kind of partnerships that police need with their communities to be successful, ~~from springing up in Los Angeles?~~

The answer, I think, is simply that Gates thought the charges were trumped up and untrue; therefore, beneath his dignity to answer. He reports that he knows he is not a racist because, as a child, he was offended by his father's bigotry. He believed his department to be free of racism, because its administrative systems guarded against racism in hiring, promotions, and responses to calls for service. And he has seen his officers work hard and sensitively on behalf of poor minorities.

These personal convictions felt like objective facts. If these were the facts, Gates simply did not owe it to the minority community to persuade them that he and his department were not racist; it was enough that it was true. To work at being responsive; to court them as well as the business community as a "power base"; to make LAPD's operations transparent to the minority community; would simply not be professional. It would pander to rabble rousers, subvert the autonomy and degrade the professionalism of the department.

Such confidence and arrogance is extraordinary. To find no racism in himself; to be confident that his department was under firm enough control that no racism could slip into its operations; well, that's more confidence than I could reasonably muster. What seems even more astonishing, however, is the lack of historical perspective that would teach him that police departments would always be suspect in minority eyes. And what seems unforgivable is the determined indifference to the views of others that treats others' perceptions as false and badly motivated, and one's own as true and virtuous.

Gates seems similarly obtuse in failing to understand why some would be alarmed by the views that "casual users should be shot," or that the right way to plan for the next era of policing is to calculate the size of the "criminal army" that the police must confront. In such views, Gates recalls the absolutist Inspector Javier: people are either drug addicts or drug free; depraved criminals or decent citizens.

Now, I don't believe that all crime comes from the economically deprived or the mentally ill. Nonetheless, the fact is that a very large portion of the drug users and criminal offenders now processed through the criminal justice system simply do not fit the stereotypes of drug addicted, dangerous offenders. The real challenge, then, is not to figure out what to do with real evil; we know the answer to that. Instead, the real challenge before the criminal justice system is to figure out how to respond to the far more common crimes that emerge from human misery, conflict, and neglect.

In the end, Gates seems driven by two powerful values: maintaining the respect of his troops by standing tall against the lies of politicians and the foolishness of judges and lawyers; and preserving at all costs his own integrity and self-respect. These values make him an extraordinarily valuable witness of the experience of being a police officer.

But in pursuit of his troop's respect, and to maintain his own invincible pride, he led himself and his department off a cliff. By being indifferent to the concerns of the minority community; by failing to notice that much of what people wanted from the police was effective responses to misery and fear rather than major crimes; and by establishing LAPD law as the only sure guide to justice; Gates built a police department that felt strong and independent to those inside. But to those on the outside, he built a department that was isolated, arrogant, and dangerous.

The political scientist Karl Deutsch once observed that power is the ability to impose one's own perceptions on the world; therefore, it is ability to not have to learn. That is what we see in both Darryl Gates and the LAPD. He and they are excellent teachers, but not very good students. They confuse sympathetic insight with corruption, and learning with weakness.