



N.Y.P.D. Clean

By Mark H. Moore
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In recommending a new approach to police corruption in New York — an independent audit commission to monitor the Police Department's anti-corruption activities — the Mollen Commission prompted a reasonable question: why should anyone think this approach would succeed where so many others have failed?

Success in controlling corruption lies in facing two unpalatable truths. The first, that the police alone cannot fight corruption successfully for long, is by now all too obvious; it's why so many people say the solution lies in an independent special prosecutor.

The second truth is less familiar but no less powerful: no outside body can permanently reduce police corruption unless the full weight of the department's own management and culture is brought to bear.

The corrupt officer must fear that his lieutenant, his sergeant, even his partner will inform on his corrupt

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activities without hesitation. He must know that civilian complaints about him will be investigated rigorously, that rookies around him are trained in how to recognize and resist his corrupt overtures, that undercover officers are setting clever traps to ferret him out.

Right now the department is taking corruption seriously, as it did during past scandals. This shows the importance of an outside "voltage generator" running an anticorruption current through the department. Top commanders and ordinary officers will overcome their natural reluctance to take on their colleagues (and make the department look bad) only with support from and accountability to outsiders. That is why a permanent outside agency is needed.

Why not a prosecutor, then? Because a prosecutor cannot deliver a reformed department. While such an office might well strike terror in the hearts of the corrupt, it would be the terror of the lightning strike: awful, but distant and unlikely. A prosecutor's office makes cases; it could not oversee the overall performance of the department. And by fixing the center of anticorruption activities outside the department, it would make it easy for the department to unite against the outsiders and shirk responsibility for fighting corruption and for instilling a corruption-resistant culture.

Why a special prosecutor can't slay corruption.

An external audit agency, by contrast, could force a sustained, department-wide focus on the values, culture, systems and operations that bear on corruption control. The department needs to be told when it is doing a bad job, and when it is doing a good one; it needs advice on where and how to improve its performance; and those assessments must be presented in a clear and public way. In short, the department needs the kind of systematic and unblinking scrutiny that until now it has received only during scandals.

With outside help, the department can mobilize itself to prevent corruption and, more important, sustain that mobilization. Without such outside help — even in the presence of a special prosecutor — its efforts will soon sink down to the sorry, half-hearted and defensive state in which the Mollen Commission and its predecessors found them. □