

Commentary

PERSPECTIVE ON POLICE

The Gulf Between 'Them' and 'Us'



Los Angeles and its chief epitomized the professional crime-fighting force. Therein lies the weakness.

By MARK H. MOORE

Four days before Rodney King was savagely beaten, I publicly noted the achievements of Daryl Gates in holding his officers to his own exacting standards of professionalism. Gates is not a different person now, nor is his department radically changed. I still admire them both.

Yet I cannot help but be troubled by my remarks. Whether that savage beating was a rare event or not, it must be witnessed. Lessons must be drawn.

The incident, I now believe, gives powerful evidence of the ultimate limitations of a certain ideal of policing that Daryl Gates and the Los Angeles Police Department have long exemplified and that has inspired police executives and guided police practices across the country. At the core of this ideal, which I call "professional crime-fighting," are two powerful values.

One is the value of professionalism. In the world of policing, professionalism is primarily concerned with creating a disciplined, highly trained, law-abiding and technically competent force. It has also meant keeping the police insulated from improper political influences, well away from local political machines. Finally, professionalism has been pursued through technical proficiency, expressed in such technologies as computerized crime analysis, automated fingerprint identification systems and the development of specialized units from SWAT teams to narcotics task forces.

Gates has excelled at professionalism, and this approach is fine as far as it goes.

But there is another part of the Los Angeles ideal: the focus on "crime-fighting" as the principal objective and dominant justification for the existence of the police force. A professional police department focuses its resources on the highest-priority task, which the police believe to be the control of the most serious crimes—robbery, rape, murder, assault. To attack those crimes effectively, police professionalism has insisted on the value of a mobile patrol force, able to respond immediately to calls for assistance. Thus police are always near when emergencies come, but sufficiently distant to preserve privacy and guard against the favoritism or prejudice that would follow from familiarity.

Beneath this straightforward logic, the commitment to "crime fighting" has a nastier edge. The end of controlling crime comes to dominate

the legal means that the police are allowed to use; the criminals are transformed from sad and desperate people who get into fights or prey upon equally hopeless people for small economic rewards into well-armed, dangerous offenders. In this world, Dirty Harry becomes the hero of the law-enforcement community.

To a degree, the police are encouraged to think in these terms by a political rhetoric common among some chiefs of police, which also reflects the views of the officers themselves: The police are a "thin blue line" that protects the good people from the bad. If crime is rising, it is said to be because the recidivists the police arrested were allowed to walk and because the weak-kneed criminal-justice system exacted no real accountability. Such themes work well in external politics as well and may even have some truth to them.

The problem is that, in the end, there

is a profound tension between the ideal of professionalism and the nasty edge of crime-fighting. The effect of this tension is to create a hidden culture. Beneath the shiny surface of even the most professionalized police department is an undercurrent of cynicism. Street-level officers are often given mixed mes-

sages by their superiors: They are told to do whatever is necessary to get the job done, but not to get caught in any form of misconduct. This is less common in truly professionalized organizations like the LAPD. But in any case, officers know that if they do get caught, their supervisors will not back them. Thus, they band together to protect themselves not only from the criminal offenders but from the arbitrary demands and betrayals of management.

To a great degree, most of the time, the public colludes in this deal. When I was a member of a task force reviewing the Philadelphia Police Department, the task force was surprised to discover from a survey that most citizens thought their police department was performing well, despite the fact that they also thought that the officers slept on the job, were often rude, frequently took bribes and used unnecessary force.

The public seemed to think that if the police were going to do the hard job of dealing with crime and offenders, they had to be allowed to behave badly. This view was later articulated by one police officer who explained to me: "If you're going to have to shovel society's [garbage], you ought to be indulged a little bit."

The police eventually discover that

Law and democratic values become constraints on effective action rather than important ends.

By relying on motorized patrol and rapid response to calls for service, and by denigrating the importance of non-crime calls for service, such as neighborhood quarrels and the fears of the elderly, the police have limited their contacts with and their value to the communities they police.

So, what seems to me important in responding to the beating of Rodney King is not more effective investigations of misconduct, or improved training, or closer supervision, though all those things may play a role. Instead, the Los Angeles community and its police department ought to return to a path that the LAPD once pioneered.

In the 1970s, the department experimented with "team policing," a vision of a police department broken into groups, each with a strong sense of responsibility and accountability to the people living within a small geographic area. The aim was to develop greater closeness with the community and a wider concern for the overall well-being of an area. The police department acknowledged its accountability to the citizens for the use of force as well as the other resources of the department.

This vision still survives in Los Angeles in the form of "senior lead officers," who retain responsibilities for the quality of life in given geographic areas. Some of these officers, encouraged by superiors who see the value of promoting close relationships with local communities, are doing excellent police work. By concentrating on the problems that the communities nominate (rather than exclusively on serious crime) and by enlisting the cooperation of the communities (rather than going it alone), these officers are stilling fears and restoring hope in hard-pressed neighborhoods.

Despite past successes, the department's commitment to this style of policing has remained ambivalent. When budgets tighten, officers are pulled from community assignments for citywide dispatching. And in the culture of the department, the rapid responders and crime-fighters enjoy higher status than the community-based "rubber gun" crowd.

It's a pity, for this kind of policing offers more to citizens than the narrowest kinds of professional crime-fighting. As my colleague David Kennedy, who has worked closely with some of Los Angeles' best senior lead officers, told me, "It is inconceivable to me that these officers could have beaten Rodney King in the way that the other officers did. They just think about citizens, even troublesome ones, much differently than the rapid responders."

The nation as well as Los Angeles has benefited from Daryl Gates' leader-

ship. In his demands for discipline, for competence, for effectiveness, he has been valuable not only to his own city and department but also to others.

But he has also become an icon for those who love the ideal of professional crime-fighting.

Gates must now become an educator rather than an icon, and show us a path forward. He'll have to bridge the gulf that separates the professional, crime-fighting police department from the community it serves and protects. Only he can decide whether this means heeding the calls for his resignation on fighting to retain his job.

Whatever the path, the values of mutual respect, restraint and civility must be the ultimate goals of those who guard a diverse, democratic society.

Mark H. Moore is Guggenheim professor of criminal justice at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.



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this tacit deal with the community is as unreliable as their deal with management. When an incident occurs, as it inevitably will, and as it did in the case of Rodney King, the public turns on the police. Usually, scapegoats are sought and the cleansing power of improved training and discipline applied. Thus the police are reinforced in their cynicism and sense of isolation.

There is an alternative. The community and the police could decide that the ideal of professionalized crime-fighting embodies the wrong values and establishes the wrong relationships between the police and the community. The reasons for this are many.

By focusing on the instrumental goals of controlling serious crime, the police become too narrow in their objectives and too ruthless in their operational methods. They see only the worst parts of the community and form a view of human nature based on what they see.