

Police Brutality

As a child I got to watch Officer Joe Bolton host his afternoon “Little Rascals” show for us kids. As a television host, the police officer was a friendly and lovable man. Around that time, I was old enough to go by myself to the 44th Precinct Station House to ask to enroll as a Civil Defense Volunteer. I was treated in a friendly fashion by the Desk Sergeant and sent upstairs to the Community Affairs Officer to enroll.

For the next decade and more I was first a messenger and later a communications technician, but I never did much. By the mid 60's, Civil Defense had withered away as improving hydrogen bomb technology made it clear we could not survive (in N.Y.C.) an atomic exchange.

I slid easily thereafter into the one branch of Civil Defense that continued in my neighborhood. I became an Auxiliary Police Officer in the 44th Precinct.

A.P.'s, as they are called, are volunteer citizens in police uniforms. They are extra eyes and ears for the police department, but they do not normally make arrests nor respond to 911 calls. In short, the job is often boring. This is especially true because the sight of two persons in uniform strolling down the block tends to discourage wrong doing as long as they are present.

On rare occasions, A.P.'s have no choice but to become involved with disputes or wrongdoing, just because they are there at exactly the wrong moment, but, even then, they are expected to call for help from the precinct.

On really rare occasions A.P.'s can find themselves in dramatic circumstances, such as looting during a Con Ed blackout. In 1965 I directed traffic all night long during that year's blackout. In 1977 the police used me and the A.P.'s I was supervising to help them discourage and chase away those of our neighbors who chose not to resist temptation to grab “free” stuff.

During all of my service as an A.P., I seldom saw much in the way of police brutality. I met with one exception, a clear lunatic who should have been removed from the force. He did later cause the death of a prisoner in custody. Former Police Chief Timoney (who had served in the 44 as a Police Officer in the 1970's), mentioned the loon with sincere regret in his autobiography. They had all known that a lot was wrong with the guy, but they also felt it was the job of their superiors to deal with it. Big mistake.

In my own case I was on both sides of the “blue line.” I had been a part of Civil Rights and Anti War protests and I was always willing to join a Labor picket line.

In 1967, my union had voted by 99 to 1 to engage in a work action that turned into a strike. Some of those who had voted yes for the action now chose to cross their own picket line to avoid loss of pay. This led to much animosity between the strikers and those who crossed the line. Police were assigned to keep order at each work site.

Since I was a strong union adherent I could find myself being rudely shoved back away from a scab by a Police Officer at lunch time. Then, donning that same uniform in the evening, I went out to maintain law and order at night.

It did feel odd.

My dual role as part time cop and full time union activist came together in 1974 when I was assigned to help the union's Community Service Officers throughout the Bronx. The CSO's were a group established under President Johnson's Model Cities program. By 1974, there were only 300 CSO's scattered across eleven Bronx precincts plus a headquarters at 160th St. and Third Avenue.

I got to visit each precinct at least once a month, either early before roll call or in the afternoon as they were assembling for dismissal. My years as an A.P. helped me relate to their Police bosses and I was popular with members and cadre alike (mostly).

The Model Cities program was going to phase out and I would be reassigned to work on the Analyst Organizing Drive, but for my last act I was able to persuade the City to offer our CSO's a Police Officer Promotional exam. From this exam a couple of dozen new Police Officers were appointed and served their City as "real" cops. The most active unionist of the Bronx CSO's, Barbara Howard, I am told, retired as a Sergeant.

All of this story is a background to why I think I have something to say about Police brutality. It starts at the top and it always has.

Mayor Wagner did not encourage Police brutality. (You could accuse him of not being bothered by petty bribery, perhaps, but he never encouraged brutality).

Mayor Lindsey was terrified of and did not understand, "the community." His "Tactical Patrol Force" grabbed young men fresh out of the academy and sent them out as an army to blanket areas of concern.

I would often run into them as an A.P. and they would be respectful and deferential to me (although, they actually outranked me) as an apparently senior Police Officer.

On the other hand, I saw them in action on one occasion on Southern Boulevard. A problem able to be handled by one beat cop turned into a full scale war once these young men in blue arrived in military formation to challenge the local youth in the neighborhood.

On another occasion, Ed Perlmutter, then working for N.Y. State Attorney General Bobby Abrams made the mistake of crossing the main hall of Grand Central Station as a bunch of radicals were demonstrating at or on top of the information booth. As he passed through, the Police were given orders to clear the site and Ed, who stood not much over five feet tall, had his skull cracked by a police baton.

I do not fault the young men assigned to clear that hall, but I find great fault with their bosses and even more so with John Lindsay.

By the time of Ed Koch, support for aggressive police tactics had begun to be very noticeable. Mayor Giuliani and Bloomberg's use of "Stop and Frisk" added a new dimension of unfairness and could be expected to generate hostility from those so selectively chosen for search and, often harassment.

As a former volunteer in uniform, I could form solid judgments about statements like "Of course, they (the police) are trained to shoot until the person goes down." Really. Who from Hades would authorize such training?

A former head of the PBA (“Doc” Savage) spoke my thoughts when he criticized the City Government for setting the Police up for a situation where there would be great community hostility.

By now, of course, that divide exists between our Police and many of the citizens who should be on their side.

Extreme ideas like “Defund the Police” come from an over reaction to real problems. We need Police. They are the force that insures law and order for us all.

Police Officers are willing to play the role of Officer Joe Bolton, a strong but friendly man who cares about us. If their superiors, right up to the Mayor, give them the chance to be the friendly cop, not the oppressive occupier, most will do fine.

No one should threaten or insult a Police Officer. At the same time every Police Officer should act with respect, concern, and politeness to any and all citizens who are not doing wrong.

Any police officer who wants to hide behind his or her badge in order to be a bully should be trained not to act that way. Warned and counseled if such behavior continues. Be subjected to progressive discipline if there is no improvement. Directed towards a new career if all else fails.

I do not see the Police Officer as the source of the problem. Certainly, in some cases, there are persons ill fitted to serve. The problem, however, comes more from the top. Both the “law and order” politicians who encourage and excuse brutality and the voters who endorse them are the source of the problem.