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# RETHINKING

AN OFFICER'S  
CONFESSION  
AND THE  
PATHWAY  
TO REFORM

THE  
POLICE



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# A HISTORY OF THE POLICE

## FROM PROMISING BEGINNINGS TO ABUSE

**THROUGHOUT MY TWENTY-FOUR-YEAR** career as a police officer, I was thanked for my service on many occasions. In restaurants and drive-thrus, I often went to pay my bill only to learn an unknown person already paid it. Gestures like these are not necessarily based on anything an individual officer has done, but due to the recognition that an officer is part of a collective. A police officer represents a history and culture over 150 years old. During that time, many officers have served honorably, and some have even paid the ultimate price by dying in the line of duty. People recognize and appreciate these sacrifices by honoring representatives of the collective.

Most officers readily accept the gratitude and truly appreciate the sentiment. We love advancing this noble history, even though the kindness we receive may not directly relate to anything specific we have done. I believe this is a healthy attitude, and all officers should accept the compliment stemming from the connection with our history.

However, we should also take the bad with the good.

When the public recognizes our past of racism and abuse, officers tend to shy away from any association with these negative realities. Acknowledging our participation in the enforcement of Jim Crow laws and other disturbing practices of the past is difficult. Yet our history cannot be disconnected from who we are. Today, we can view video of officers wading into masses of peaceful African American protestors during the civil rights movement and beating them with batons. We are part of that history too. The uniform I wore every day represented the entire story—which is not an easy truth to digest. When these unfortunate events in our history are brought to light, officers tend to respond by noting they weren't alive when these things took place, or that they aren't the perpetrators of the incidents of brutality taking place today.

I understand the tendency to reject our past failures and accept only the honorable aspects of law enforcement. But we are representatives of a history and culture in all that it is and is not—the amazing acts of valor and the despicable abuses. We represent both those who gave their lives in service and those who abused their power. If we adopt an incomplete and inaccurate depiction of our history, we will cease to truly know who we are as a profession, a culture, and a people—the “family” of law enforcement, as we like to say.

## **THE JOURNEY FROM PEEL AND PEACE TO TENSION AND ABUSE**

The modern idea of policing started with a Christian foundation, oriented toward servanthood, the cultivation of peace, and the judicious exercise of power. However, almost immediately the

American police deviated from this philosophical foundation. Understanding the drift from this foundation into the sad history of abuses and reforms will help the reader appreciate how police culture was formed.

While serving as the British Home Secretary, Sir Robert Peel created a modern police force in London in 1829. It emphasized peacekeeping and later served as the model for the first modern police forces in the United States.<sup>1</sup> He drafted nine foundational principles focused on the prevention of crime, public approval and respect, public cooperation, the judicious use of force, impartial service to all members of society, friendliness, strong public relations, police unity with the public, and professionalism.<sup>2</sup> Robert Peel's principles reflected one foundational maxim: "To keep the peace by peaceful means."<sup>3</sup>

Peel was a Christian, and his principles were a reaction, at least to some extent, to the objections of evangelical Christians concerning law enforcement practices. "British evangelicals long had protested Britain's legal and penal system; its law enforcement strategy involved tactics that some citizens found intimidating. . . . Peel was sympathetic to these evangelicals."<sup>4</sup> The principles he drafted were partly a response to the concerns of these British evangelicals and became the foundation for American police departments promoting peace and harmony. That foundation, however, would not hold for long.

## **1845–1960: THE BEGINNINGS OF CORRUPTION AND REFORM**

In 1845, New York City was the first modern police department built on Peel's principles.<sup>5</sup> However, the model for police in the

United States differed from that of London in that they were municipal and not federal, thus controlled by local politicians, and even at this point known to be “more liberal in their use of force than were the English bobbies.”<sup>6</sup> The police became tools in the hands of politicians and subject to their agendas, which led to selective enforcement by law enforcement and politicians taking bribes to reward positions in the police departments.<sup>7</sup> Sadly, despite the promise of Peel’s foundation, modern policing in America was imperiled from the start.

Nonetheless, there were some promising aspects of early policing. For instance, the police tended to be heavily involved in social services. The Boston Police Department, for example, housed the homeless, while the New York Police Department entertained children at the police stations, looked after troubled youth, and started a “junior police program.”<sup>8</sup> Police officers served their communities through more relational functions and were not simply focused on criminal enforcement.

However, in the 1930s reform efforts shifted the focus away from such services as corruption continued to worsen throughout the 1920s, prompting President Hoover to form a commission in response. The Wickersham Commission published the *Report on Lawlessness in Law Enforcement*, which detailed how the police utilized “intimidation, brutality, illegal arrests and detention,” particularly when interacting with “particular groups of people such as racial and ethnic minorities.”<sup>9</sup> Sadly, it only took American police departments a matter of decades to become thoroughly corrupt and brutal.<sup>10</sup>

By the 1930s, the need for police reform was glaring, and was instituted through more science-based policing, where the police focused on professional conduct, enforcement of criminal law, criminal investigation, and objective hiring practices.<sup>11</sup> Reform efforts eventually wrestled control from corrupt local politicians and gave authority to police chiefs, who provided structure and accountability for officers.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, motorized patrol increased an officer's range and the ability of supervisors to oversee officers in the field. However, motorized patrol also had the adverse effect of separating officers from their communities.<sup>13</sup> The reforms of the 1930s helped reduce police corruption, but the focus on crime fighting and motorized patrol further contributed to the dwindling of social services, distancing the officer from the community.

Sir Robert Peel had conceived of police success as an absence of crime, not the presence of enforcement. Police departments in the United States, however, deviated from Peel's principles and measured success through arrests and other crime statistics. Gaines, Kappeler, and Vaughn describe the 1940s and 1950s as a professional phase in policing and provide a helpful description:

The professional phase of policing produced a more efficient police organization that was devoted to criminal apprehension. Officers were moved from foot patrol to vehicular patrol and a variety of technologies were adopted. Police officers were discouraged from getting involved with citizens for fear of breeding corruption. Also, efficiency of operation was considered more important than solving problems, and the application of human

relation skills within the police organization or by its officers in their daily activities was viewed as being inefficient and therefore unprofessional.<sup>14</sup>

Even at this early stage of American policing, one can clearly see the drift away from community relationships, problem solving, and crime prevention toward impersonal enforcement. Police departments were crime-focused and insulated from outside control, but while their autonomy lessened corruption among the ranks, it also removed them from external accountability.<sup>15</sup> The 1940s and 1950s also surfaced growing tensions among mostly White police departments toward racial minorities, even while garnering support among the middle class.<sup>16</sup>

The modern American police department may have been inspired by London's police force and Peel's nine principles, but it swiftly embraced a more liberal use of force. Amid the influence of local corruption and reform efforts, police continued to deviate from Peel's principles, focusing on crime and enforcement of criminal violations rather than community relations and peacekeeping. Technology, the emphasis on more science-based policing, and professionalism further contributed to officers isolating themselves from the community. The social distance was most poignant in communities of color, and the tensions between mostly White police departments and African Americans took root in the decades leading up to the 1960s.<sup>17</sup> The history of policing in America has been one of ever-increasing social distance, particularly with racial minorities, where tensions were growing in communities of color throughout the decades following the Second World War.



## **1960–1990: TURBULENCE AND CHANGE**

The simmering pot came to a boil in the 1960s.<sup>18</sup> The war in Vietnam, the increase of crime, the civil rights movement, and the assassinations of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert Kennedy marked this decade as one of severe turbulence, and the police were not prepared to deal with the new challenges.<sup>19</sup> The 1960s “shocked” and “changed” the police, and riots, crime commissions, and Supreme Court decisions were instrumental factors in the process.<sup>20</sup>

In 1965, the arrest of an African American driver sparked a riot in Watts, a neighborhood in Los Angeles, resulting in several deaths and extensive property damage. Over the next three years, numerous riots occurred in other US cities,<sup>21</sup> including the 1968 riot in Chicago at the Democratic National Convention. Media coverage of the event made the reality of police brutality harder to ignore. Excessive force was no longer hidden in the dark alleys of urban ghettos but was now fully displayed on the television sets in middle-class White living rooms across America.<sup>22</sup>

In 1967, President Johnson created the Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice. The commission made several recommendations, but its most important contribution was in noting that “community relations . . . were especially strained in minority communities,” and identifying the need for “improved community relations” and “the need to recruit minority officers.”<sup>23</sup> Additionally, President Johnson appointed the Kerner Commission in 1968 to investigate the causes, occurrences, and potential solutions to the riots.<sup>24</sup> This

commission arrived at a similar conclusion, but expressed the problem with greater clarity. Vila and Morris explain, “The main conclusion reached by the commission in its report disseminated in 1968, was that ‘Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black and one white—separate and unequal.’”<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the commission determined that the racial divide was a serious problem between police officers and minorities in impoverished communities, and the hostility between the groups was contributing to the tension and violence.<sup>26</sup>

Time and again, the crime commissions of the 1960s concluded that police action during the decade’s riots demonstrated police brutality, which further heightened hostility between the police and African Americans in impoverished communities.

This decade also included three significant Supreme Court rulings that impacted the operations of the police: *Mapp v. Ohio* (1961); *Miranda v. Arizona* (1966); and *Terry v. Ohio* (1968). The first two limited police power by excluding evidence from prosecution that was obtained illegally by the police and ensuring victims were read their rights before custodial interrogations.<sup>27</sup> *Terry v. Ohio*, however, formally expanded police power by extending the right for police to stop and frisk people who appear suspicious, even if they have not committed a crime.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps most challenging for police was the anti-establishment mindset of the 1960s. In the early twentieth century, students formed socialist groups, focusing on issues related to higher education and the World Wars.<sup>29</sup> By the 1960s a “New Left” had emerged with a similar agenda focusing on the war in Vietnam, social and racial issues, and authority

structures.<sup>30</sup> Herbert Marcuse had a significant impact on this movement, arguing that free speech does not lead to change because of the lack of power. Therefore, the voices of those in power should be silenced, or at least reduced—even by force—or those without power will never be heard.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, many rejected their parents' values, worldview, and the established norms set by preceding generations.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the focus on peace, the protests and actions of the younger generation precipitated violence.<sup>33</sup> The dynamic, changing world of the 1960s, oppositional mindsets against society, and the criminal justice system as a whole presented the police with difficult challenges.<sup>34</sup> These factors certainly contributed to the outbreak of violence in this turbulent decade. Nonetheless, police brutality still became a recognized problem, and leaders in law enforcement understood the real need to provide solutions,<sup>35</sup> which fueled a new interest in law enforcement research that led to new findings in the 1970s that led to new police strategies in the 1980s.<sup>36</sup> Finally, the police began to understand the need for problem-oriented policing and cooperation with citizens, and new philosophies of policing would set the stage for community policing in the 1990s.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, after the events of September 11, 2001, policing once again embraced an enforcement-centric strategy, and authentic community policing faded and dwindled.<sup>38</sup>

Nonetheless, as forward progress took place in the criminal justice system during the latter half of the twentieth century, public notice waned toward law enforcement's use of excessive force. That all changed, however, after an event in the

early 1990s brought police brutality back into the living rooms of America and captured the attention of the country once again.

### **1990–2023: INCREASING TENSION AND AWARENESS**

In 1991, Rodney King led the Los Angeles Police Department on a vehicle pursuit until he was eventually apprehended. During his arrest, King was tasered and beaten repeatedly with batons. The incident drew national attention because it was captured on video and led to local rioting and civil unrest.<sup>39</sup> Once again, America was unable to look away. The conjecture and rumors of police brutality were now on full display for all to see, with tangible evidence supporting the claims of generations of people of color. It simply could not be dismissed, nor could the civil unrest that followed.

The resulting Christopher Commission found that policing needed reform, and its recommendations not only fueled change throughout the Los Angeles police but resulted in reforms in law enforcement nationwide.<sup>40</sup> Yet despite the efforts and progress, incidents of police brutality continued, receiving national attention from the late nineties and into the twenty-first century. In 1997, Abner Louima, a Haitian immigrant, was assaulted and sodomized with a toilet plunger by the police.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, the controversial 2006 police shooting of Sean Bell, an African American man, reached national headlines.<sup>42</sup> These cases and many others illustrate that, despite the reform sparked by the Christopher Commission, police brutality against racial minorities, especially African American males, remained a grave problem.

In the last decade, the issue of police brutality has become a matter of serious public concern.<sup>43</sup> Several incidents have ignited the long-standing tension between the police and racial minorities, specifically African Americans, leading to civil unrest and violent protests.<sup>44</sup> The year 2014 bore witness to four particularly horrific events: Michael Brown, unarmed at the time, was shot and killed by a White police officer in Ferguson, Missouri; Eric Garner died from a choke hold applied by a White police officer in New York; Ezell Ford, also unarmed, was shot and killed by Los Angeles police officers; and twelve-year-old Tamir Rice was shot and killed by a White Cleveland police officer while holding a pellet gun. Then in 2015, Freddie Gray died from a crushed voice box and spinal injuries at a hospital after being taken into custody by Baltimore police officers.<sup>45</sup> Each of the victims was an African American male.

And then came 2020.

Amid a pandemic and a polarizing presidential election, the deaths of Breonna Taylor, Daniel Prude, and George Floyd triggered a wave of nationwide protests and widespread civil unrest. Additionally, the “defund the police” movement emerged, as well as growing support for the Black Lives Matter movement, both clearly related to the mistrust of the police emanating from encounters between White police officers and people of color.

As many were still trying to reckon with the racial implications of 2020 concerning the police and African Americans, in 2023 communities were confronted with the disturbing video of Tyre Nichols’s death at the hands of five African American police officers. More will be said later on this, once I explain

the police culture and its influence; but for now, what can we conclude from this brief survey? The tension between the police and communities of color is at an all-time high, and despite the move away from corruption in the 1930s and the meaningful external reforms in the 1970s through the 1990s, incidents of police brutality continued and may have even increased. Why? Because despite the steady move away from corruption and needed external reforms, an internal factor remained at work decade after decade. The police were steadily drifting away from the public socially, particularly in communities of color. The catastrophic consequences of this ever-growing social distance will be highlighted in the next chapter as we explore police culture.

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