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## GOOD COP / BAD COP

*NYPD's handling of a student protest may have missed its mark*



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By *Julius (Jay) Wachtel*. April 10, 2009 was a blustery day in Gotham. During the early morning hours about twenty members of the “[New School in Exile](#)” burst into a building at 65 5th. Avenue, New York City. Carrying rucksacks, chains and padlocks they shoved aside a startled security guard, bound themselves together and pledged not to leave until the New School’s embattled president stepped down. A banner on the roof announced the takeover. Dozens more protesters staged a noisy rally outside.

It wasn’t the first time. [In December 2008](#) angry students occupied a cafeteria (conveniently, one might think) for three days. Again, Bob Kerrey was the target. Hired in 2001 to bring order and financial stability to the liberally-minded campus, the former U.S. Senator and Medal of Honor recipient was planning to increase tuition. After going through five Provosts in seven years, he had also appointed himself the school’s chief academic officer, an odd move considering that he lacked a Ph.D. Temporarily humbled by a [faculty no-confidence vote](#), Kerrey defused things by promising that everyone, students included, would have a say in charting the school’s future. He also started a [blog](#).

Now, five months later, things were back to square one, and this time Kerrey called in the cops. That’s when the “fun” began.

NYPD deployed two contingents of officers, one to enter the building and another to clear its exterior. An official video depicts what happened inside. Everyone seems almost eerily composed. Although students refused to leave voluntarily, they didn’t resist and were cooperative to a fault. Led by a captain who exuded calm, officers

crisply went about their business. A city videographer captured everything and promptly uploaded it to You Tube. It's a brave new world, indeed!

But as an unsanctioned amateur video reveals, things were going down far less smoothly on the outside.



[Click here to link to video](#)

The video begins with a shot of officers forcefully blocking a side door to keep protesters from leaving. Officers also repeatedly doused students with pepper spray, an action that an NYPD spokesman said didn't happen until shown the video. Meanwhile, off camera, some demonstrators reportedly flung portable barricades at police and ran off. Cops **chased them** down the street, catching one and wrestling him to the ground. A demonstrator is also depicted exchanging angry words with an officer, who swats at him, causing the youth to lose his balance. As the cop disinterestedly walks away other officers jump on and handcuff the man.

Overall the impression is hardly favorable. Police seem disorganized. Officers are reacting impulsively, dashing to and fro and tangling with protesters who try to leave. If someone is in charge (all we see are a few sergeants) their influence seems negligible. Precious minutes passed before cops simmered down and got organized. By then a lot of force had already been used.

Nowadays much of what cops do winds up on You Tube. Lacking context, what gets depicted is often inflammatory. Just like making sausage, policing is a messy business. Despite what many might think, cops really *are* human, and when provoked they're likely to lash out. As a **retired NYPD sergeant** who watched the New School videos aptly put it, "Lots of times some skell [New Yoak lingo meaning a mope] is fighting a cop tooth and nail, then a cop loses control, which is easy to do, and then you lose your temper and somebody videotapes you, and the next thing you know you're losing your job."

That, of course, is no excuse for doing a lousy job. We spend huge amounts on our police forces, in part so that trained professionals are available to defuse potentially explosive situations. That, of course, is when a steady hand is most needed. Consider the striking contrast between the videos. It was the chaotic exterior, with uncooperative “skells”, where the police nearly fell apart.

Like the good sergeant suggests, getting stressed-out cops to react appropriately is no easy task. Here are some things to think about for the next time:

- Command and control are crucial. Sergeants aren't enough. Having a captain actively participate was an excellent idea; had one been outside it might have helped immensely.
- There are times for crime-fighting and times for peacekeeping. Student demonstrations definitely fall in the latter. No “crimes” of any significance were committed, and for all the yelling and tumult there was precious little damage. Yet officers intent on making arrests chased after delinquents and bottled others up, escalating tensions and needlessly raising the temperature. It was precisely the wrong thing to do.
- Training and more training are key. It's not just about public relations: *it's about money*. Processing scores of protesters through the criminal justice system is a phenomenally expensive distraction. Accidentally crippling some bobble-headed youth or running him into the path of a car can easily cost a department the equivalent of a precinct's yearly payroll. One need only consider the multi-million dollar settlements resulting from LAPD's [MacArthur Park](#) fiasco to appreciate the consequences of mishandling demonstrations. Staging regular, quality instruction only sounds expensive until one is confronted with the alternative.

Getting cops to ignore provocations and make good decisions while under stress may be a tall order, but it's why society shoulders the phenomenal expense of fielding police forces in the first place. We can't just sit around and wait for evolution to provide a more civil society. It's up to the police to take the first step.