

## WE GET THE COPS WE DESERVE

*There's a big difference between working mistakes and willful misconduct*

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Crime is up, arrests are down. While Feds bay at the door, Mitzi Grasso, president of the police union, calls for citizens to take charge of LAPD's disciplinary process. Joe Domanick cites Rodney King, Rampart and Commissioner Chaleff's firing as evidence that neither the Chief nor the Mayor support institutional change. What's going on?

\* The Union. As Mitzi replays the rhetoric of civilian review, stressing its benefit of increased public confidence, she also mentions another goal: "fairer decisions for our officers". But civilian review did not grow from a concern about abused cops. Its primary goal was always to redress abuses against citizens. Do her remarks indicate that she and her peers have undergone an epiphany? Or is this just another shot across the Chief's bow, reflecting the anger that officers feel about his seemingly rigid and heavy-handed approach to discipline? Many cops - perhaps a majority - want Parks administratively handcuffed, and if civilian review is what it takes, so much the better.

\* Reform. Although Domanick agrees that crime fighting and adding more officers is important, he feels that neither "can even be remotely considered police reform." Joe dismisses the department's and the Independent Commission's reports as insubstantive. In his view, "fixing a broken culture" and "getting the troops to respect the public and the Constitution" is a "battle" that can only be won by throwing the rascals out and "democratizing" departmental oversight.

What both leave out, though, is any mention of the police workplace. As Mitzi, Joe and all the lawyers on all the commissions fiddle with the control side of the equation, no one seems particularly interested in what police actually do. In fractured Los Angeles, reeling from economic disparity, a large, restless underclass, a decaying infrastructure and grossly underfunded schools and public services, cops face inordinate challenges. And the demands keep piling on. When our City threw Rampart CRASH into the cauldron of Pico-Union, did they know the risks of asking police to solve crimes when options (such as cooperating witnesses) are unavailable?

At a political fundraiser weeks ago, my family listened to an enraged father complain that his daughter was hit with a rubber bullet during protests at the Democratic convention. His view - that police should carefully calibrate their every response so that only optimal results are achieved - is an integral part of the progressive agenda. But given the realities of urban policing, imagine the confusion that such demands provoke. L.A.'s allegedly demoralized cops were widely criticized

for letting rampaging fans burn vehicles at Staples Center. Had the out-numbered officers stepped in and been forced to shoot a few temporarily crazed Laker boosters, would they have received our support?

Unreasonable demands set up cops to fail. They also ignore the fact that in most cases it is citizen behavior that needs to be “reformed”. Spend a few months on the street taking calls, and you will be convinced that we might carry Palm-Pilots in our pockets, but we are Cro-Magnons at heart. If we want kinder and gentler cops, we need kinder and gentler citizens. Achieving that difficult end calls for a dynamic social and economic agenda, which is hopefully where L.A.’s new leadership - once it stops obsessing over the cops - will go.

Of course, adequate oversight over the police is necessary. But it cannot be accomplished by simply cranking up controls. We must learn enough about police work to distinguish between working mistakes and willful misconduct. As Mitzi Grasso knows, police who work under civilian review boards quickly discover that once citizens learn about policing, they are more likely than managers to come down on the side of the cops. Reacting disproportionately to errors causes officers to lie. It also breaks bonds between the line and supervisors, further eroding management control. A preoccupation with avoiding controversy can even encourage officers to adopt the passive, “drive by and wave” style of policing that has supposedly overtaken our formerly proactive LAPD.

Communities ultimately get the law enforcement they deserve. If we work towards an economically and intellectually vibrant, inclusive Los Angeles, the best police force will come. Or we can continue to ignore the disparity and hopelessness and suffer the consequences. Here is a promise - and a warning - that we cannot afford to ignore.