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BEFORE JETBLUE* THERE WAS MAJOR DYMOVSKY

A Russian cop bails out (figuratively) over corruption. Should we pay attention?

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. [Aleksei Aleksandrovich Dymovsky](#) was fed up. During his years as a cop in Novorossiysk the 32-year old chief of detectives had grown weary of the moral depravity that pervades Russian policing. It wasn't just about taking twenty bucks here and there to supplement the meager pay, a temptation to which even he had succumbed. No – it was about a lot more, from staging arrests and searches for the sole purpose of extorting cash, to brutalizing suspects, to “solving” crimes by forcing innocent persons to confess.

Major Dymovsky didn't have an inflatable escape slide, nor an airplane galley stocked with beer. So last November he did the next best thing. After (presumably) pouring himself a tall glass of vodka he recorded a video clip and posted it on YouTube. “Dear Vladimir Vladimirovich...” he said, respectfully addressing Premier Putin by his patronymic.

Really, he did. Click on the image to watch a subtitled version.

One can guess the official response, and, as well, its career consequences. But before we get too smug about American cops here's a news flash: for all the cultural differences, when it comes to misconduct our officers give the Russians no quarter.

No, this isn't a story about Russia, where one might expect the worst, but about the good old U.S.A., where police corruption is supposedly a distant memory.

The Bad Old Days

New York City (time immemorial – mid 1990's). Audiotapes secretly recorded by [Frank Serpico](#), a disillusioned American cop who went undercover, were used by the 1972 [Knapp Commission](#) to expose entrenched, widespread corruption in the NYPD, ranging from shaking down citizens to stealing and reselling drugs. Two decades later the [Mollen Commission](#) reported that if anything things were worse. Indeed, by the mid-1990's the situation was so dire that one particularly greedy precinct, the 30th., was referred to as “[The Dirty Thirty](#).”

Miami (1980's). It began with extorting drug peddlers. Before long a hundred-odd “[River Cops](#)” were cruising the Miami shoreline, but instead of arresting smugglers they grabbed the cocaine to sell later and threw the suspects overboard.

Los Angeles (1980's – 1990's). Deputies assigned to the L.A. Sheriff's Department **Majors Squad** started out by skimming seized cash to buy supplies and incidentals. Soon they were using the loot to buy boats, cars and vacation homes. A decade later officers in LAPD's **Rampart Division** took an anti-gang crusade to new heights, planting evidence, lying on reports and covering up bad shootings. Numerous cops lost their jobs, some were prosecuted, more than 150 felony convictions were tossed and suspects were awarded \$70 million-plus in civil judgments.

New Orleans (1990's). And who can forget **The Big Sleazy**, where in a single three-year period sixty officers were charged with crimes ranging from drug dealing to murder. In a chilling example two rookies robbed a restaurant while on duty, and when an off-duty cop tried to intervene they shot him dead, along with two employees. But they forgot something. When the triggerman (actually, a female cop) returned to the crime scene an employee who hid during the robbery identified her. And there was the **brutal cop** who hired a hit man to kill a pesky complainant (he wound up on death row.)

Whew, those were pretty bad days, all right. But that was then, this is now. Haven't things gotten a lot better?

The Great New Days

Camden (2007 – 2009). "It's going to be a headache for a lot of people for a long time." That's what a former New Jersey police captain said about the scandal unfolding in Camden, where two cops recently admitted that their squad regularly planted evidence and stole money and drugs. More than 200 criminal cases have been dismissed and several prison inmates have been freed. Two other officers and the supervisor are under investigation and will presumably face charges.

New York City (1992 – 2010). **Internal affairs case files** recently obtained by the ACLU reveal that more than one-hundred NYPD officers are arrested each year for crimes ranging from consorting with prostitutes to running a gambling empire connected with organized crime. One officer was charged last December with distributing cocaine. Two more were arrested this February for using their badges and guns to rob a warehouse.

Philadelphia (? – 2010). In a startling press conference only days ago, Police Commissioner Charles Ramsey **announced** that he was embarking on a "crusade" to eliminate a culture of corruption that forced him to fire *fifty-one* officers, half for criminal conduct, since he took over as chief in January 2008.

New Orleans (time immemorial – 2010.) “I have inherited a police force that has been described by many as one of the worst police departments in the country.” Since May, when freshly elected [New Orleans mayor Mitch Landrieu’s](#) plea for help landed on the U.S. Attorney General’s desk, *thirteen* NOPD officers have been indicted for needlessly killing four citizens during the chaos of Hurricane Katrina. They allegedly tried to cover their tracks by burning olne of the bodies, planting a gun and spinning tales of fictitious eyewitnesses.

Chicago (1999 – 2008). In May the City of Chicago [agreed to pay](#) a total of \$16.5 million to as many as *twelve-thousand* persons who were arrested for felonies without adequate cause, and were then brutally treated while in custody, ostensibly to get them to confess.

Houston (2010). In June [four police officers were indicted](#), three were fired and five were suspended over their roles in the vicious beating of a handcuffed 16-year old burglary suspect. Caught by security cameras, the incident inflamed a city that was already reeling from the acquittal of an officer who shot and killed a black motorist he had mistakenly suspected of car theft.

Tulsa (2007 – 2009). Oklahoma’s placid burgh is [reeling from news](#) that five current and former police officers and an ATF agent ran a years-long criminal enterprise, lying on search warrants, stealing cash and narcotics, framing suspects and selling drugs. The agent and a cop have pled guilty; four officers are awaiting trial. Several wrongfully convicted persons have been let go, including one serving *two Federal life sentences*.

Well, you get the picture. So what’s to be done? All the usual suspects – poor hiring practices, lousy training, inadequate supervision, a loose moral climate – have been exhaustively addressed in public reports (e.g., the Knapp Commission) and decades of criminal justice literature. Of all these issues inadequate candidate screening seems perhaps the simplest to rectify. [LAPD’s investigation](#) into the causes of Rampart laid much of the blame on hiring candidates with significant drug and criminal histories. Years later a major hiring push by the L.A. Sheriff’s Department was followed by a wave of significant disciplinary problems among rookie deputies. An [independent assessment](#) concluded that in striving for numbers the standards crumbled, with predictable consequences.

It can’t be said that police are ignorant of the risks of feeding from the bottom. Former Miami police executives blame the [River Cops](#) scandal on a hiring binge that gave guns and badges to poorly educated, undisciplined youths, including former thieves and gang members. “Our reference to them as time bombs was exactly that.

Sooner or later, they're going to go off. We just don't know which of them are time bombs or when they're set to go off."

Considering what's expected of a cop, many agencies have long required more than just a high school diploma. Serious problems have led some that didn't, like [Washington, D.C.](#) and [Chicago](#), to tighten their standards. Both now require either two years of college, significant military experience or a combination. Even the hidebound NYPD [boasts](#) that more than half of a recent academy class had four-year degrees. Yet the supposedly progressive [LAPD](#) and [L.A. Sheriff's Department](#) continue welcoming applicants with nothing beyond a G.E.D. or a passing score on the California high school proficiency exam, a test of English and math that can be aced by a reasonably bright sixteen-year old.

One would think that after all the ethical meltdowns police entry standards would be commensurate with the grave responsibilities that go along with the job. Alas, one would be wrong. If at this very moment Major Dymovsky were to parachute into any large American city he would probably feel right at home.

And that's not a good thing.

* In a recent incident aboard an arriving flight, a JetBlue attendant fed up with rude passengers grabbed a beer from the galley, activated the emergency slide and slid to freedom. He's now a folk hero.