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LAPD GOT IT RIGHT

Ousting Occupiers on its own schedule, with sensitivity and attention to detail

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. “You have to agree that this is not your grandfather’s LAPD.” [Connie Rice’s reaction](#) undoubtedly perplexed some of her admirers. After all, only a short time earlier, during the early morning hours of November 30, more than a thousand cops swarmed over the City Hall lawn, shut down the Occupy encampment and arrested nearly 300 protesters.

Yet the well-known civil rights activist and long-time LAPD critic couldn’t be more pleased. Her feelings were shared by legal observers, ministers and rabbis who circulated through the site, keeping a wary eye on cops as they hauled campers away. Pam Noles, a protester and onsite monitor for the National Lawyers Guild, which supports the Occupy movement, praised everyone for keeping it peaceful: “The LAPD had their A game on....Both sides did what they had to do.”

Just what this “game” would be was decided well in advance. Determined not to emulate the [chaos in Oakland](#), where cops hammered protesters with clubs, rubber bullets and tear gas, or the [debacle at the University at California at Davis](#), where a campus police Lieutenant doused a line of students with pepper spray, Chief Charlie Beck resisted City Hall pressures to dismantle the camp while officers dialogued with protesters. LAPD resorted to arrests on only one occasion, when a crowd of Occupiers left their encampment, swarmed over an intersection and blocked traffic.

Most of L.A.’s politicians had come out in support of the protest early on. But after nearly two months it became increasingly clear that some protesters intended to camp out indefinitely. With efforts to come to a mutually acceptable solution floundering – Occupiers couldn’t agree amongst themselves to accept free office space from the city in exchange for clearing the lawn – LAPD declared the campout an unlawful assembly and set November 29 as the deadline for protesters to leave or face arrest.

Still, Monday morning came and went with nothing more than a couple of cops [placidly walking through the camp](#). Of course, what they were doing – inventorying tents – presaged that the end was near. By then those who would leave had done so, leaving behind a core that vowed to remain until arrested. Yet even they gave assurances that they would submit peacefully. It was going exactly how Chief Beck intended.

Not quite five years earlier it was a different story. On May 1, 2007 thousands of activists and ordinary citizens [assembled at MacArthur Park](#), in Los Angeles’ Pico-Union district, to protest Federal immigration policy. Although permits had been secured to hold the event, dozens of protesters turned rowdy, spilling into the streets, blocking traffic and throwing objects. Officers were caught unprepared. They declared an unlawful assembly and chased their quarry into the park, where families and members of the media had gathered. Video footage depicts cops indiscriminately flailing batons, firing rubber bullets and knocking down innocent persons who had no idea that anything had gone wrong.

It was an ugly incident. Then-chief Bill Bratton, who wasn't present (he chose to attend a party and left the matter to subordinates) [took blame for the undisciplined response](#). More than dozen cops received departmental sanctions. [Los Angeles paid out more than \\$13 million](#) to settle claims of excessive force.

Fast forward to 2011. Memories of the 2007 mêlée and the mishandling of Occupiers elsewhere convinced Chief Beck to take it slow and easy. He directed managers to establish a working relationship with protesters and plan for the day when officers might have to move in. Thanks to a good script and plenty of rehearsals both cops and protesters enjoyed a Hollywood ending.

If only all policing could be done this way. As we pointed out in "[Making Time](#)," the urge to act quickly has repeatedly led officers to make poor decisions, occasionally with tragic consequences. In the case of the Wall Street protests that swept the country, pressures to give Occupiers the bum's rush came from many sources, both inside and outside the police. Even in Los Angeles, where protesters were received favorably, impatience quickly set in. One day before LAPD moved in a story in the *L.A. Times* suggested that police delays emboldened protesters and made their eventual expulsion more risky. Chief Beck felt obliged to respond:

This is the Los Angeles Police Department. No one is more capable of laying down the law than we are. No one should have any illusions that this will be a difficult crowd management [task] for us. No one should have any illusions that this [the delay] is a sign of weakness, inability or lack of will from the Police Department.

Most Occupiers are ordinary citizens, fed up like the rest of us with the economic inequality that has ripped at the nation's social fabric. If they choose to protest while others grin and bear it, that's their privilege, and the attention that they've brought to the underlying problem may be well worth sacrificing a City Hall lawn or two. In any case, however one feels about the efficacy of their methods, it really doesn't have to be police versus protesters, and for reminding us of that we have the good chief to thank.

As history has repeatedly demonstrated, things could have turned out quite differently. Cops go on duty to solve problems, not back away. They quickly learn that even the most "ordinary" citizens can be dangerous, and that gaining voluntary compliance – a must, as no one can fight their way through a shift – requires a certain fortitude of purpose. Officers are nearly always outnumbered, often massively so, and they know that timidity and indecision can encourage adversaries to take advantage, with potentially lethal consequences.

To be sure, officer personalities differ, and identical factual circumstances can lead to completely different outcomes. Still, the lessons that cops learn on patrol produce a working personality that is attuned to the unpredictable, stress-inducing contingencies of making stops and taking calls. Such skills aren't optimized for handling demonstrations, where First Amendment rights and political realities require that officers shrug off levels of rowdiness and disrespect for authority that they wouldn't (and perhaps shouldn't) tolerate elsewhere.

Chief Beck's singular accomplishment was to hold down the temperature. Officers got to know protesters, reducing the fear factor and making it less likely that, come D-Day, one side would misread the other's intentions. Regularly placing uniformed cops onsite made their presence less threatening. And when it came time to clear the encampment, Chief Beck gave days of notice, then delayed as the deadline

passed to give everyone plenty of time to leave. At execution officers entered well-mapped territory in small, controlled groups, with civilian monitors present to remind everyone to mind their p's and q's. Everyone – police and protesters alike – knew what to expect and misunderstandings were relatively few.

Successfully managing a politically-charged event of this scale requires time, sensitivity and superb attention to detail. LAPD took their time and did it right. And in the tinderbox that is American society that's not a little thing.