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POLICE SCIENCE

IMPROVING THE LAW ENFORCEMENT IMAGE

MICHAEL J. MURPHY

Michael J. Murphy was appointed police commissioner of the New York Police Department in February, 1961, the eighth career policeman to rise from the ranks to head of this department. Commissioner Murphy holds a law degree from Brooklyn College and a masters degree in public administration from City College of New York. From 1955 to 1959 while on leave of absence from the New York Police Department he served as Executive Director of the Waterfront Commission. On August 30th of this year, the New York State Board of Higher Education appointed Commissioner Murphy as Acting President of the new College of Police Science of City University, duties which he will carry on in addition to his duties as Police Commissioner. His present paper was presented at the closing session of the Conference of the National District Attorneys' Association which was held during August in New York City.—EDITOR

Improving the law enforcement image is a matter which, despite its Madison Avenue overtones, is of basic and vital concern in our nation today. The improvement of the law enforcement image is not solely a police responsibility, it is not primarily the District Attorney's concern, it is not only the obligation of the courts. It is basically the obligation of the citizens of the community, collectively and individually.

Our people seek and have a right to effective law enforcement to the end that they may be secure in their homes, their persons, and their property from the ravages of the criminal element. They note with concern the rising crime rate and expect the agencies of government, from law enforcement through social work groups, to solve these problems. Yet too many expect us to furnish a miracle cure and to restore order and tranquility by the mere waving of some magical wand. There is no miracle cure, as you all know. There can be no ultimate solutions until all of us, law enforcement and public alike, work together to correct the illnesses of society.

The public too often fails to realize that they must play a part in law enforcement. Their role must be active rather than passive, constructive rather than irresponsibly critical, cooperative rather than negative. In this connection, I am reminded of the oft-told but rather pointed story about the sick man racked with pain and suffering who visits his physician. At the outset his doctor asks, "What are your symptoms, where is your pain?" and the reply: "That's for you to find out, you're the doctor." That is what we are experiencing more and more; the negative and uncooperative attitudes of segments of our population who

ignore their responsibility and the vital stake they have in improving and supporting the forces of law and order.

Unfortunately, the true image of law enforcement—particularly as it applies to police in our nation—is being unfairly distorted and smeared today as never before in our history. At a time when the need for justice under law was never more apparent or necessary, those who enforce and administer the law find themselves the targets of ridicule and contempt. The serious consequences of this type of attack cannot be overestimated. It strikes at the very foundation of our democratic process and could, if successful, so weaken the structure of our government that the rights of all citizens to the pursuit of life and liberty would be jeopardized.

Although part of the distortion is being created by certain groups determined to weaken the democratic process, a greater proportion unconsciously emanates from a lack of knowledge of the role and attitude of law enforcement officers. In a way we are to blame for the latter, for a failure to drive home our message that the vast majority of men in the police and law enforcement professions are honest and devoted public servants, dedicated only to the public welfare.

The distortions become the smears. Sadly enough, those who are responsible for providing the material for the smears are the small number of men within the police ranks who have betrayed their trust out of greed, unconcern for their oath of office and the public welfare, and with cynical disregard for the fine records established by thousands and thousands of devoted police officers.

This type of man must be weeded out and

brought to justice—quickly and effectively. It must be made emphatic that law enforcement, as well as the public, will not tolerate this type of misbehavior. In this city the teamwork between the Police Department and the various District Attorneys has been excellent in exposing and punishing those found guilty of misconduct. Such cooperation does much to increase public confidence in law enforcement.

In these days we hear more and more reference to “the police image”. This is but another term for the police reputation. The “image” is the outer reflection of the standing of the department based on its performance and service. It is the reaction which emanates from the public and which is based on the public’s expression of confidence and respect in a police department or a lack of such confidence and respect.

In my opinion, the police have never won a greater respect nor worked so hard to deserve it. Yet, the police reputation is like the quicksilver in a thermometer—up today and down tomorrow. The quality of police work must be constant. It must be emphasized again and again that public respect must not only be earned but maintained.

Most of the lack of confidence and respect is based on a lack of knowledge. Greater efforts must be made to inform the public of our aims and accomplishments; particularly at this time.

Never before have the police been under such sharp and continuous public scrutiny. The spotlight has been focused on police around the country since the surge of the civil rights struggle catapulted them onto the front lines of a conflict not of their starting, not of their choosing, and definitely not to their liking.

In this city they have won mixed notices—some raves; some boos. They have been praised in most quarters for their impartial attitude and restraint under fire. They have been criticized and condemned in other quarters as bullies and brutes and have become the principal target of a misdirected hatred born of frustration. The small group of critics, however, are more vocal and vociferous than the police supporters, so that the first impression is one of widespread condemnation of police. This is not true, but the campaign of vilification has left policemen puzzled, bitter, and deeply resentful.

Whatever the voices speaking out at this time, their comments about police have brought reams of newspaper space, hours of airtime, and miles of photographs of and about the men in blue. Such attention has made many people realize that they

know very little about the men they pay to protect them.

To most people the policeman is part of the scenery; they see him but seldom have any dealings with him. Occasionally, a citizen is shocked by the intrusion of a policeman into what he regards as his private life—an intrusion he deeply resents—when stopped for jay walking or when given a summons for a traffic violation. For the most part, however, even at this point the policeman is regarded as a necessary but annoying part of the modern municipal picture.

Most conceptions, and misconceptions, of law enforcement are derived from motion pictures, television shows, and mystery stories. There have been many times, certainly, when law enforcement officials have gritted their teeth at the televised inadequacies of Mr. Hamilton Burger. Because of these fictional portrayals, the best thing any person can do is to forget what he has seen and heard and just start afresh. It should be pointed out that the Keystone Kop was just the figment of a film director’s imagination; that the loud-mouthed, red-faced, fat bully in uniform—if he ever existed—is a thing of the past. Even on the constructive side, the new, clean-cut, clever sleuth of the television crime series is a streamlined and over-simplified portrayal of the modern detective. Yet the myths persist, and the over-dramatized portrayals of the past, plus the few misfits of the present, have succeeded in cruelly smearing the ordinary policeman, in fact the entire police service. The misdeeds of one policeman stains all policemen. No other group in civil service or industry carries the shame of a member longer and strives so earnestly to win back the loss in public confidence such an act causes.

First of all, it should be remembered that a policeman too is a human being. Like any other member of a minority group, he should not be fitted into a convenient stereotype. He is an ordinary guy from any and all of the various backgrounds of the hundreds of national, religious, and ethnic groups which make up this wonderful nation. He is just like the rest of us—yet with one vast difference. For when he takes the oath of office and is trained for duty and equipped with shield, uniform, and revolver, he becomes a different man—a man apart. He is no longer an ordinary citizen; he is a representative of government, he is an arm of the law, and the legal powers that we have given him are tremendous and awesome.

No one realizes the extent of these powers and

their implications more than the conscientious policeman—and even more importantly from the public viewpoint—the modern, professional and conscientious police administrator. It is as a result of this realization that the handling of “the job” and the nature of the men in it has improved in the last decade in most modern cities, particularly in New York.

To bring this improvement, the accent in the New York Police Department and in most departments throughout the United States, has been more and more on selection and training. To become a policeman in this city involves much more than merely passing a physical and civil service mental examination. It means surviving one of the most intensive character investigations given by any governmental agency, an investigation which generally takes at least three months and which probes the police applicant's background from the date of his birth through his last position. It is in this process that most men deemed unqualified to become New York policemen are dropped. The department accepts about one man in twelve, and this is one of the reasons for the recruitment problem which constantly faces the Police Department. But despite this, the standards of this department will not be lowered.

Once accepted, the police rookie undergoes a thorough training at the Police Academy which is of four months' duration, and which earns him ten college credits towards a degree in Police Science. After graduation and through the program conducted jointly with the Baruch School of City College, he can continue his college education when not on duty. His courses are geared so as not to conflict with his working hours. At least 552 men have earned associate, bachelors, and masters degrees and about 1,200 others are now attending such courses. This is all part of the department's program to bring a professional viewpoint to police work. During his Academy training period, the recruit learns more than merely the police rules and regulations. He is drilled in the law, in civil rights, and in human relations. He is taught to understand people for he deals only in people, and he cannot help but wonder why people do not understand him.

Too often, people seem to forget that the policeman places his life on the line almost every time he encounters a violation of law. Of course, we may argue, this is what he is paid for, and not one policeman will disagree with us, nor will he cry on our shoulder about it. But he does expect us to

realize that police work is not a game; it is a grim and deadly business.

In the face of a rising crime rate, he asks and needs your support. He points out that five policemen have been killed in the line of duty since January 1st of this year and that 1,616 others were injured, 508 in assaults. These included five policemen who were shot, 38 who were stabbed, 88 who were bitten, 134 who were punched, 63 who were kicked, 88 struck by thrown objects, and 92 others hurt during scuffles with lawbreakers they were seeking to arrest.

The policeman of today is confronted with scores of new problems; problems his police ancestors never heard of, and were not trained to handle. The police officer of fifty years ago had little vehicle traffic to contend with, never heard of juvenile delinquency or narcotics, knew nothing about demonstrations, and would be shocked at the disrespect and flouting of the law which is so prevalent these days, not only in New York but throughout the nation.

When you see a patrolman walking his post, you may get the idea that he has a soft job and has nothing to do but absorb the fresh air and the sunshine and chase a crook if he stumbles on one. But this is not the case. While he seems to be doing nothing, his eyes are ever scanning the street and the persons on it.

The foot patrolman is responsible for all conditions on his beat, and only a few are listed to try to give an idea as to the extent of his responsibility. He must keep an eye out for known criminals, for known gamblers, for suspicious persons, for lost and mentally ill persons, for truants, for wayward minors, for youth gangs, for youths on bridges or highways or railroad overpasses, for loiterers, known degenerates, prostitutes, and dissolute persons. He must keep his other eye on fire alarm boxes to prevent false alarms; on areaways and alleys; on business places after closing hours; on vacant lots; on sidewalks and gutters to see that they are clean and that snow is removed; on banks, particularly at opening and closing hours; on schools to prevent vandalism; and on playgrounds where conflicts might occur. He must be on the lookout for dangerous conditions, such as holes in the streets; abandoned refrigerators; for dangerous or weakened signs of building cornices; for street lights, to see that they are working; for parking meters, to see whether they have been damaged or broken. He is also responsible for enforcing the laws against unnecessary noise, on the ordinances

pertaining to air pollution and violations of the Health and Administrative Codes. He must notify the station house if there are any dead animals on his post or any abandoned automobiles. And he is responsible for enforcement of all traffic regulations. In between times, he must be aware of everything else that is going on in his area and be ever alert for a call for help.

He does this all within his eight-hour day, with an hour off for lunch, and he does it around the clock. For this, he starts at \$6,355 a year and gets \$7,806 after three years. Even when off duty, he is still held accountable as a policeman, both in his own behavior and in his official capacity. He is required to take action when off duty if he sees a crime committed and must carry his revolver whenever he leaves his house. He is, in effect, on duty twenty-four hours a day.

When our policeman of fifty years ago walked his post, he was a figure of respect and authority in the eyes of all who beheld him, including the criminal element. He walked his post with a pride and a manner which the officer of today still maintains but which, unfortunately, is not reflected by those who observe him. A word from our cop of 1914 was enough to break up a crowd and to bring apologies from the criminal. Today, the tendency seems to be for the citizen as well as the criminal to regard the policeman as an enemy rather than a friend. This attitude, unfortunately, is reflected by children and adolescents who observe and hear the disparaging remarks of their parents. The police officer does not mind being regarded as the enemy by the criminal—because this is his enemy and our enemy—but he is puzzled when

the people he is trying to protect side with the hoodlum who preys upon the public.

The policeman realizes he is always in the public spotlight and that his behavior is carefully weighed. He is aware that he is answerable to his superiors and the Police Commissioner for his actions. He is bound by the rules and regulations of the department to the strictest code of behavior in any organization. He understands that when he is remiss in his duty or takes advantage of his status to either profit from it financially or use force beyond that necessary to meet force, he is answerable immediately under procedures set up by law. He knows that if he is false to his oath of office, he properly faces the scrutiny of the district attorney's office and the grand jury. Thus, he cannot help but wonder about the calls for, or the necessity of, a Civilian Review Board. He asks your support when he is right; he knows he does not deserve it when he is wrong.

Fundamentally, we must convince the community that we are exercising the authority they vested in us for their welfare and their protection. The community, however, must drop its arms-folded, "show me" attitude and join forces with us against the common enemy. They must recognize that our problems are their problems and realize that we are their first line of domestic defense against the criminal enemy.

Only in such a climate of mutual respect and understanding can law and order flourish. Only in this manner can law enforcement truly and fully serve and protect the community and maintain the great democratic traditions which are so precious and vital if we are to survive as a great nation and a great people.