**Behind Police Brutality: Public Assent**

To the extent that language provides cues for behavior, the orders that American governors, mayors, police chiefs and block association presidents have been giving cops on the beat in big cities over the past few years are unambiguous.

As James Alan Fox, dean of the College of Criminal Justice at Northeastern University, notes, these officers have been told that they form the front line in a "war" on crime and a "war" on drugs, that they have been enlisted in special "operations" and drafted for bold new "offensives."

"We use all these paramilitary terms," Fox said, "and we have promoted somewhat of a siege mentality among police: The enemy is out there, and there are more of them than we thought."

Fox paused, sighed and added, "When you have this sort of mentality, excessive brutality and improper actions are more likely to occur."

Fox's comments root out what is indisputably a dirty little secret embedded in the public angst over police brutality: many Americans have come not only to tolerate a degree of it from their police officers but also, in ways subtle and unsubtle, to encourage it.

That is not to say that Americans are untroubled by such glaring examples of excessive force as the beating of Rodney King by police officers in Los Angeles; the torture of Abner Louima by police officers in a Brooklyn station house or, most recently, the killing of Amadou Diallo, an unarmed African immigrant, in a fusillade of police fire this month in the Bronx. In each case, race became an issue.

Just about everybody would agree that if these flagrant episodes were the unintended outgrowths of aggressive policing -- and it is by no means certain that they were -- then the price for such a modus operandi is exorbitant in the extreme.

But too frequently omitted from discussions of police brutality that attend these cases is the fact that many Americans have tacitly blessed a more vigorous, invasive, belligerent brand of policing. And the line between law enforcement that is aptly forceful and law enforcement that is unduly brutal or abusive can be thin indeed.

"Sometimes, it's in the eye of the beholder," acknowledged former New York City Police Commissioner William Bratton. "That's part of the dilemma that police find themselves in."

The problem is not confined to the nation's police departments. It also confronts the politicians who help supervise them and the taxpayers who fund them. Underlying it is the age-old tension between public safety and civil liberties. The question now is, can the "zero tolerance" crime policies that have come into vogue over the last decade be executed and achieved without the trampling of innocent people's rights?

The "zero tolerance" policy, which has been given a showcase in New York City, holds that no crime -- not the breaking of a window, not the jumping of a turnstile -- is too insignificant to capture the swift, decisive attention of the police. Prosecute more petty offenders and offenses today, goes the reasoning, and you will have fewer hard-core criminals and crimes tomorrow.

But as the police were being schooled in this new religion, Bratton said, they were also being taught a new zealousness.

"In wartime, which we were engaged in for a few years in this city, it required certain strategies," Bratton said. Among those strategies, he said, was to be less timid in the investigation of crimes and the use of force, so long as the force was justified by the circumstances.

Those sorts of instructions, however, call for judgments that are bound to be imperfect. Take, for example, the statistics concerning the activities of the department's street crimes unit. In 1997 and 1998, officers with the unit frisked more than 45,000 people thought to be carrying guns, but they arrested fewer than 10,000. The rest -- the vast majority -- were mistakenly detained.

Is that acceptable? The answer depends not only on the sensibilities of the person answering the question but also, in many cases, the race. Black leaders and civil libertarians said that when the police put more emphasis on preventive strategies, they invariably lean on broad profiles in stopping and interrogating possible criminals, and those profiles are racist.

"When you rely on hunches, you rely on prejudices, and the people most likely to be stopped are black or Hispanic," said Ira Glasser, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union. "When you start throwing around phrases like zero tolerance, you get these kinds of excesses. And if the cops can stop you at will, where's the public safety in that?"

New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's predecessor, David Dinkins, said there was a certain blindness among white people who respond to the reduction in crime simply by cheering the ends without scrutinizing the means.

"That's what they'll say," Dinkins observed, "until one day, this white middle-class family has a son who comes home from Harvard or Princeton or whatever university, and he comes home with his black classmate. And they, dressed as young people will dress, get into some altercation with cops" -- and become victims of police brutality.

When it comes to force, there is not a police department in the country that expressly commands its officers to use it indiscriminately. Giuliani told police academy graduates last week that "in a very special sense, you are civil-rights workers" whose job of public protection entails an "equal emphasis on treating everyone with respect."

But the broader goals that officers are asked to pursue, the fire instilled in them and the messages that the culture outside of police departments broadcast can easily coax them toward unjustified violence.

The heroes in televised police dramas like "NYPD Blue," "Law and Order," and "Homicide: Life on the Street" regularly slam suspects against concrete walls, twists their arms behind their backs, even bloody their noses.

And yet there has not been a popular protest of the possible danger of such examples to match the outcry over, say, the chastely rendered longings of a lesbian who owns a bookstore in the situation comedy "Ellen."

Some experts say that if Americans want to glorify violence, ratchet up the mandates of police officers and cut crime rates to ever lower levels, they must own up to the trade-offs they are bound to be making.

"The more aggressive the police get, the safer the streets can be," Fox said, "but there's a price in terms of individual freedoms, civil liberties, civil rights."

"The essence of freedom is tolerance, not zero tolerance," Richard Emery, a civil-rights lawyer, wrote in an Op-Ed article in The New York Times on Friday.

Thomas Reppetto, president of the Citizens Crime Commission of New York City, a watchdog group, said he did not want to believe that the equation was that tidy.

"I see no inherent conflict between good crime control and respect for people's rights," he said.

But, he added with a note of pessimism, "it's very hard to apply in practice."