

The Los Angeles police scandal and its social roots

Part 4 of a series

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We conclude today our series on the scandal in the Los Angeles Police Department.

The revelations about corruption and frame-ups in the Rampart Division of the Los Angeles Police Department only emerged last fall because one officer faced a severe prison sentence for stealing cocaine and wanted leniency. The testimony by Rafael Perez then became the basis for a series of exposures in the *Los Angeles Times* which prevented the matter from being swept under the rug. At the time, the Los Angeles City Council, the appointed Police Commission and Mayor Richard Riordan remained mute while Chief Parks and District Attorney Gil Garcetti minimized the implications of the scandal.

In December, Parks reacted indignantly to suggestions that the LAPD was rife with corruption and abuse, declaring, “nothing could be further from the truth.” But by January too much had leaked out; Garcetti admitted that hundreds of criminal cases might have been tainted and assigned several more lawyers to the matter.

To contain the mushrooming scandal, Parks adopted the tactic of getting out in front of the investigation, claiming that the scandal was unprecedented and that the Department was taking it seriously. He began to publicly criticize Garcetti, claiming the District Attorney was dragging his feet on prosecuting cops, since only three had been criminally charged. Garcetti in turn claimed that LAPD was not providing sufficient evidence to prosecute criminal conduct by its officers.

Lame duck Mayor Riordan supported Chief Parks and began sniping at the five-member Police Commission he had appointed to oversee the Department. Those feuding currents and pointing of fingers came to a head on February 16 over a largely symbolic Commission vote as to whether to endorse Chief Parks' finding that the shooting of homeless woman Margaret Laverne Mitchell was “in policy,” regardless of the use of questionable tactics.

Parks credited testimony from the officers that Mitchell

had lunged at them with a screwdriver even though the civilian witnesses flatly contradicted the cops. LAPD Inspector General Jeffrey Eglash, a former federal prosecutor, disagreed. By a 3-2 vote the Commission found the shooting out of policy, siding with Eglash against Parks, on the basis that the officers' belief of danger was not objectively reasonable, and that alternative means of diffusing the situation existed. However, the commissioners did not question that the officers honestly believed they were in imminent danger of serious injury.

There were public calls for the federal Department of Justice and California State Attorney General to investigate the LAPD. Garcetti, Parks and local US Attorney Alejandro Mayorkas then held an awkward press conference promising to work together to investigate the scandal. However, when it came to light that the FBI was deeply involved in the Rampart CRASH (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums) unit's abuses of immigrants, the impartiality of a federal investigation was called into question as well.

Ignoring the signal failure of that prior reform effort, the ACLU and a police abuse coalition called for the formation of an outside panel along the lines of the Christopher Commission. The Police Commission voted to direct Parks to complete his “Board of Inquiry” report on the Rampart matter. On March 1 Parks released the 346-page report to great fanfare, depicting it as a thorough and searching report of what went wrong at LAPD.

Instead the report was laughable. It attributed the Rampart misconduct to “mediocrity”—lax supervision, failure to carefully review reports for discrepancies, cutting corners and outright laziness. This explains nothing at all. The report completely ignored the more fundamental causes of the brutality and corruption.

According to the report the Department's hiring practices were partially to blame for the problems at Rampart. “Significant problems” were found in the psychological screening of some of the Rampart officers. This poor man's

rehash of the Christopher Commission report called for hiring more internal affairs officers and conducting polygraph tests on all prospective officers to weed out inappropriate hires. These palliatives were so transparently weak that within a week Parks had to call for disbanding of all CRASH units.

The Los Angeles City Council has voted to give the Police Commission and Inspector General Eglash all the funding needed to analyze the Department report. Eglash now says he wants to review the Department from top to bottom and propose a complete overhaul. He has recruited prominent local attorneys to assist that effort, which is opposed by Riordan, Parks and the LAPD.

Amidst all the finger-pointing and recriminations three basic camps now exist in the city's political establishment: (1) let the LAPD clean its own stables; (2) let the Police Commission and its inspector general do the job; (3) appoint another independent commission along the lines of the Christopher Commission.

These divisions have become quite bitter. At the press conference when the Board of Inquiry report was released, Riordan ordered his staff to lock out the five city council members who support an independent investigation. The five banged on the press conference room door and were then threatened with arrest and roughed up by Riordan's security entourage.

It would be a mistake to suggest that the belated outrage at the Rampart revelations in some official quarters is either genuine or deep-seated. More immediate concerns are operative, such as a fear that the criminal justice system will cease to function because of juries skeptical of police testimony.

The role of the *Los Angeles Times*, for instance, shows that more thoughtful sections of the political establishment take seriously the threat of a wholesale discrediting of the criminal justice system. Despite the avalanche of law-and-order propaganda in recent years, masses of working people still cling to democratic principles such as due process and are instinctively hostile to the police-state tactics revealed in the LAPD. Moreover, the region's population has been swelled by immigrants from countries like El Salvador and Guatemala, who have bitter experience with the kind of death squad repression meted out in Ramparts Division.

As for those directly responsible for supervision of the LAPD, such as Chief Parks, Mayor Riordan and District Attorney Garcetti, their handwringing is the height of hypocrisy. It was their law-and-order hard-on-crime line which created the atmosphere in which the CRASH officers operated. Riordan was elected twice as Los Angeles city mayor after campaigns centered on promises to lower crime by hiring hundreds of additional street officers.

Those who advocate a new commission turn their back on the results of the Christopher Commission only eight years ago. Despite its emphasis on screening hires and training, many of the hundreds of new hires in recent years were not seriously screened.

Nearly six years after the Christopher Commission report recommended it, the Police Commission approved a set of non-binding discipline guidelines on June 24, 1997. The guidelines had recommended making officers more accountable and punishing violent and dishonest officers. But at Mayor Riordan's instigation, Chief Willie Williams, the Philadelphia cop who initially replaced Daryl Gates and was not tied directly to the LAPD hierarchy, was cashiered, and LAPD veteran Bernard Parks installed as chief in 1997. When Chief Parks took office in 1997 he swiftly brushed the new guidelines aside.

As for the underlying conditions of poverty, overcrowding, drug abuse and crumbling schools, the big business politicians and their cohorts in the city administration have no solution. On the contrary, the Los Angeles City Council has actually proposed to put aside \$150 million to pay for the anticipated raft of lawsuits over the Rampart scandal by cutting that sum from social services. That is on top of the nearly \$70 million the city paid in lawsuit settlements against the police in the five years between 1993 and 1998.

Riordan's counterproposal is that the city sell off to a private underwriter its share of a government settlement with the tobacco industry, estimated at about \$300 million over 25 years, to raise money now for the settlement of Rampart lawsuits. That means Los Angeles would not get the education, health and other programs for which the tobacco money was earmarked. One way or another, the same workers who were victims of the police abuse will pay for it.



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