

Former Los Angeles County sheriff pleads guilty in jail scandal

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13 February 2016

Former Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca pled guilty on Wednesday to allegations that he lied during a federal investigation into the abuse of inmates in the massive Los Angeles jail system. Under the plea agreement he may be sentenced to no more than six months in custody.

The Los Angeles Sheriff's Department (LASD) is the largest in a country. Bloated with "war on terror" funding, it enjoys a \$2.5 billion budget and employs 18,000 officers and other personnel. The Los Angeles jail system has a reputation for being one of most brutal and overcrowded in the country.

The ongoing federal investigation into conditions in the jails reveals levels of corruption and gangsterism that would make an old-fashioned mafia don blush. While the media promotes the police as "America's finest," in reality the country's law enforcement agencies function essentially as organized criminal enterprises, where murder, mayhem and perjury are standard operating procedure.

The federal investigation has its origins in a lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union in 1975, which documented inhuman conditions in the jails and resulted in closer federal oversight. In September 2011, the ACLU submitted 70 sworn declarations in court, which described an ongoing "reign of terror," with guards beating, torturing and humiliating inmates with impunity.

Subsequently, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) recruited a prisoner to be a confidential informant. This informant was able to bribe a prison guard with \$1,500 to obtain a cell phone, which he used to provide information to the FBI. When prison guards discovered the cellphone, they caused the inmate to "disappear" in order to prevent the FBI from meeting with him. A sordid game of hide-and-seek followed, during which the LASD secretly moved the inmate from place to place while the FBI tried to locate him.

In one of the most outrageous moments of the investigation, LASD deputies turned up at the home of an FBI agent and tried to intimidate and threaten her. The FBI responded by arresting the deputies.

Baca's guilty plea "demonstrates that the illegal behavior in the Sheriff's Department went to the very top of this organization," federal prosecutor Eileen Decker said. "More importantly, it illustrates that those who foster and then try to hide a corrupt culture will be held accountable."

"During this interview, Sheriff Baca lied," Decker continued. "He lied when he stated that he did not know that members of the Sheriff's Department had approached an FBI agent outside her home, and he lied when he stated he was unaware of efforts within the Sheriff's Department to keep the FBI informant away from the FBI."

In the final analysis, the prosecution of Baca likely had more to do with a turf war between the FBI and the LASD than the decades of LASD corruption and brutality. However, the episode provides a rare glimpse into the real conditions inside American law enforcement agencies, behind the puffed-up image promoted by Hollywood television dramas and the establishment media.

Hailed as a "reformer" and champion of progressive "community policing," Baca held the position of sheriff from 1998 to 2014. In 2013, he was named "Sheriff of the Year" by the National Sheriffs' Association, which represents about 2,700 sheriffs' departments throughout the country.

In naming Baca "Sheriff of the Year," Fred Wilson, the director of operations for the National Association of Sheriffs, said the award "looks at what the sheriff has done in their community but also what the sheriff has done to advance the office of sheriff nationally. Sheriff Baca certainly embodies that. He is an exemplary sheriff."

Baca was elected in 1998 when his opponent, the incumbent Sheriff Sherman Block, died shortly before the election. Under Block's administration, violent criminal gangs flourished within the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, including, in perhaps the most infamous case, the "Lynwood Vikings," which a federal district judge labeled a "neo-Nazi, white-supremacist gang." Baca failed to curtail the gangs, and even promoted Paul Tanaka, who founded the Vikings as a watch lieutenant in Lynwood, to the rank of Undersheriff.

Tanaka is presently under federal indictment, and Baca may be called as a witness to testify against his former second in command.

New deputy gangs emerged during Baca's tenure, including the Jump Out Boys, exposed in 2012 as a secret society of deputy sheriffs who awarded themselves morbid tattoos to "celebrate" shooting civilians.

A recruiting pamphlet for the Jump Out Boys reads, "We are alpha dogs who think and act like the wolf, but never become the wolf," and "We are not afraid to get our hands dirty without any disgrace, dishonor or hesitation ... sometimes (members) need to do the things they don't want to in order to get where they want to be."

Frederick Engels described the police as belonging to the category of "special bodies of armed men" that constitute the coercive power of the state, the essential function of which are to uphold the capitalist system by force. "This public power exists in every state," Engels explained; "it consists not merely of armed men but also of material adjuncts, prisons and institutions of coercion of all kinds." The essential function of the police in capitalist society remains the same in the 21st century.

As social tensions rise, the police in American cities—armed to the teeth, militarized, dehumanized, and steeped in a thuggish culture that celebrates brutality—are poised to unleash violence against the population at the slightest provocation. This is why the capitalist political establishment, behind public displays of handwringing, is unwilling and unable to undertake any substantial measures to stem the tide of police violence.

Law enforcement officers in Los Angeles County kill an average of one person per week. A 2014 report by the Los Angeles Youth Justice Coalition documented the deaths of at least 589 people since the year 2000.

One of those deaths, by way of example, was Carlos Oliva Sola, who was shot by LASD deputies Nicolas Castellanos and Anthony Forlano in September 2013. It subsequently emerged that this represented Forlano's seventh shooting. The 23-year-old's family alleged that

the police planted a gun at the scene in order to try to cover up the shooting. An eyewitness reported that the youth had said, "No! No!" in a tearful voice before he was shot in the back.

A well-known phrase employed by LASD when an unarmed person is shot is that the person was "reaching for his waistband," as if reaching for a gun, thus supposedly justifying the shooting. According to a 2011 study, almost half the people LASD sheriff's deputies shot at after they allegedly "reached toward their waistbands" were unarmed.

Baca is a prominent and well-connected figure in the military-intelligence-political apparatus. In 2010, he testified before the Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing, And Terrorism Risk Assessment of the Committee on Homeland Security in the House of Representatives, then controlled by the Democratic Party.

Most of Baca's testimony was dedicated to the importance of establishing networks of informants to detect "radicalization," a subject in which he claimed to be an expert. "To maintain a safe and free society of terrorist attacks, police need to establish public-trust policing techniques that lead to appropriate channels of communication and participation by the public," Baca said.

Baca returned to the theme in a statement in 2011. "All of these agencies recognize that you cannot arrest or enforce your way out of the radicalization issue. Outreach to community members and the building of relationships will lead to a trusted network for sharing of information and contacts. These relationships are crucial to mitigate a threat, or more importantly, recognize the threat at a stage where a person, or a group, on the wrong path can be righted."

The sheriff in neighboring Orange County, Mike Carona, was indicted on corruption charges in 2007, together with his wife and his alleged longtime mistress. He resigned in 2008 and was convicted on one count of witness tampering. He was sentenced to 66 months in prison, but actually served four years.

Baca resigned as Sheriff in January 2014. According to *The Los Angeles Times*, Baca's guilty plea will not affect his \$328,000 annual pension.



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