

The Progressive

A police chief's call for reform

By David C. Couper



Shortly after Sen. Barack Obama became President-elect, I sent him a letter warning about the increasing militarization of our nation's police.

“Nothing is more endangering to a democracy as the militarization of its local police,” the letter said. “Our police play a vital role in who we are as a nation. We will not have justice in our courts unless it is first a working value of our nation's police.”

The letter also urged Obama toward “a reexamination of where our nation's police are today, where they need to be, the kind of people we need to police our communities, and how police should be educated, trained, and deployed. This must be done before it is too late.”

Today, the use of deadly force by police across the country has become a national disgrace. We have been overwhelmed and stunned by the all too frequent deaths of black men and persons with mental illness at the hands of police. It has happened in Ferguson, Staten Island, Cleveland, Albuquerque, North Charleston, and even Madison, Wisconsin, where I served as chief of police for more than 20 years.

Were it not for the advent of new technologies, like cell phones that take video, many of the incidents documented above would have been lost in doctored police reports, organizational denial and cries of “support our police.” It is difficult to not to be stunned after viewing the videos most of us know only too well.

I have come to the conclusion that the problem is not bad cops, but rather a bad system of training. It is a vast problem. The good news: It is a correctable one. But solving the problem must start now.

Since 9/11, our nation has lived in a climate of low-grade fear. Our decade-long military adventures abroad have led to the creeping militarization of our nation's police at home. Police have gone from being the guardians of our democracy to being our homespun warriors. It is not an appropriate shift: Police guard and protect us; a warrior's job is to kill our declared enemies.

Our nation's Constitution declares the values of life and liberty, and our Bill of Rights asserts we are not to be deprived of life or liberty without due process. While we affirm these values as a people, we have always practiced them as well as we should.

The questionable killings by police drive home the point. Police in some communities have lost the confidence of those they are sworn to protect and serve. They are seen as threats to justice, not agents of it. That is bad for everyone, including cops.

If police commit to rebuild the trust they have lost, they will be more effective, their work will be personally rewarding, and they will be safer. But this will not begin to happen until their

system of using deadly force is fixed and our police make a commitment to the preservation of life.

It is impossible to have this discussion without acknowledging the role of race. Police in America practice often two styles of policing: one for people of means, mainly whites, and another for those who are poor, a racial minorities, immigrants, or mentally ill.

When I talk publicly about the problem of deadly force and disrespect, many white people look at me with puzzled eyes. They don't know what I am talking about because, as it turns out, they have had little, if any, contact with police. Not so for those men and women of color in my audience. They know. And they know all too well. Recent discussions have helped us understand that "unconscious bias" is inherent in our species; what is needed is being able to identify and manage it.

I came to Madison in 1972 as a young, reform-minded police chief. The department I inherited was mostly white, traditional, and at war with students and young people over the war in Vietnam. Of 300 officers, one was African American. Within the patrol ranks there were no women. The seven women we did have were unarmed juvenile policewomen, who were required to have a four-year college degree. Policemen, on the other hand were required only to have a high school diploma.

One of my most important improvements, along with trying out new and softer ways of handling almost daily protests, was to integrate the department. I announced that one-half of the new officers we hired must be women and officers of color. This became our hiring standard for the two decades I led the department.

When I retired, 21 years later, ten percent of Madison police officers were African American and twenty-five percent were women. It took that long and that level of commitment. We also saw to it that women and minorities were afforded fresh opportunities within the department with regard to assignment and promotion. I believed in diversity because I knew it would be an organizational strength; that a diverse police department will do a better job working with the community and be safer for its officers.

Transforming the police is just like management guru Peter Drucker once [said](#): Leaders have to be "monomaniacs with a mission." They must also be persistent, patient, and passionate. One of my mantras in those early days was, "Let's make the changes we need and not have the court make them for us."

While I am glad to see many of our nation's larger departments forced to change through "consent decrees," I remain concerned that this is which it took for change to occur. To me, that's what leaders do: identify what needs to be fixed or improved and then get on with doing it.

Looking at Ferguson and the need for many police departments in our nation to better represent those they serve, I worry if they will have the long-term tenacity to do what we did.

Leading an organization-wide transformation is a difficult and often painful process. When I proposed the changes that I believed were necessary, they were met with resistance. Many of the old guard employees were not happy. They felt I was giving up control of the organization. Of the ten top commanders, I had the support of three of them.

I remember speaking about this with an executive from a Milwaukee company who I met at a management seminar. He told me: "David, if you have 25 percent of your command staff on board, that's enough. More forward. Tell them you need them to come with you. Tell them it's

like a one-way boat. You want everyone on board even if they are hesitant. You will help them be successful in this new direction, but you need them on board with you.”

The next day I called a meeting of my management team and told them the boat story. I needed them to come with me. I would help them be successful in this new venture. But they needed to come on board now. I determined we needed to open up the department, to listen to our employees, and empower them as neighborhood-oriented police officers.

Many were reluctant. They were afraid to ask and listen to their employees, to be collaborative with them, but they moved forward. And during the next ten years, we made remarkable organizational improvements. Today, the president of the police officer's union still is a member of the department management team and an elected officer's council still meets monthly with Madison's chief of police to give him both input and support.

Yes, transformation is difficult and painful, yet necessary if an organization is to improve. But that's what leaders do: They lead change, no matter how many others are in the boat with them.

How did we get to where we are today? It seems we unknowingly fell into a system of criminal justice in America that became more and more oriented toward domination than problem-solving, more toward arrest and incarceration than prevention and treatment, more toward using coercion rather than earned authority to get their work done.

Systems of domination exist whenever and wherever one group of people works to control another group for their advantage. In order for this system to continue, those who work in a domination system must be trained to think and act in ways that support that system. That's why changing them is so difficult. For those inside, and those outside the system who benefit by it, all this seems normal and the way it should be.

I am not the first person to identify systems of social and economic domination, collective actions that favor the wealthy and powerful at the expense of those who are not. The criminal justice system is just one of our many domination systems.

It is my opinion that in order to restore trust between police and the communities they serve, we need to begin to heal the relationships between blacks and police. It is the only way to move past events of Ferguson, Staten Island, Cleveland, and the residual effects we all have inherited from slavery, Jim Crow, and pernicious and residual racial discrimination.

If this fails to happen, our present system of policing will continue to erode away the foundational values of our great society, and we will end up with police who look and act like those in non-democratic countries. It will forestall building the trust, respect, and support that police in a free society need in order to operate fairly and effectively. It is that important. If we fail to take action at this important national crossroad, our anger and suffering will continue.

While policing is a dangerous occupation, it is not as dangerous as many people think. The incidence of fatal injuries for police is [much lower](#) than for other professions, including loggers, fishers, roofers and airline pilots. Sadly, over the last decade, an average of 150 police officers have [lost their lives](#) each year in the line of duty, to [causes](#) ranging from gunfire to traffic accidents.

In contrast, it is [estimated](#) that an average of more than 900 U.S. citizens a year are killed by police; that is between two and three people per day. While more whites than nonwhites are killed by police, a recent [analysis](#) found that blacks are three times more likely to meet this fate

than whites. Tracking these numbers is difficult because, at present, there is [no federal requirement](#) for police to report information on the people they kill.

One problem is the legal standard for the use of deadly force, as established by a 1989 U.S. Supreme Court decision, [Graham v. Connor](#). The court's ruling is quite broad. It permits a police officer to use deadly force when, in the mind of the officer, the person poses an "immediate threat to the safety of the officers or others."

Making matters worse is the questionable instruction given to police recruits. They are [taught](#) that a person armed with an edged weapon and within a 21-foot distance can kill them before they can discharge their firearm. (Ever notice why suspects with knives, standing far away from police, are suddenly shot down?) And police, when confronted with situations they believe merit the use of deadly force, are taught to shoot and keep shooting multiple times at a person's "center mass" — the chest and heart.

A much better approach would be for police leaders to affirm their department's commitment to the sanctity of life, and discuss how they are going to change their policies and practice to reduce the use of deadly force. The public needs to know that their police are committed to preserving life; that they are trained to de-escalate and manage conflict situations; that they are able to control their fear, and be respectful to everyone with whom they come in contact, regardless of their station in life.

Police are to represent us. They may tell us that using deadly force in these situations is legal and, therefore, permissible. However, if they do that, we need to tell them that even if it is permissible, it is not moral, and it is no longer acceptable.

In 1829, when setting forth the [principles](#) of policing a democracy, Sir Robert Peel declared, "the police are the public and the public are the police." That gives we the people the right to say: "Let's fix this. And fix it now."

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