

Our Boys in Blue

by Gunnar Swanson

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WHENEVER NEWS REPORTS DISCUSS “in depth” the problem of human rights abuse in any of those dingy little countries afflicted with a paucity of white faces and frozen yogurt, the perpetrators of crimes are generally identified as “the military and para-military police forces.” It seems that the phrase para-military almost defines the problem—the separation of police from military functions and attitudes is one of the ways that good guys (forces of democracy) are separated from bad guys (totalitarians of all types). It is only in extraordinary circumstances such as civil unrest (or perhaps the need to advance William Bennett’s career) that we would allow a breakdown of that all-important separation.

Which brings us to the LAPD. The Los Angeles Police Department was, in the days of Raymond Chandler novels, one of the most dishonest police forces in the country—every bit as corrupt as Philip Marlowe found it. It is now, by many estimates, one of the least corrupt. Most of the credit for the transformation should go to William Parker. As police chief, he applied military standards and discipline to a motley department, an action arguably as important in the annals of public management as the creation of Galveston’s city council/manager system.

In the most literal sense of the word, Parker’s legacy shows. The LAPD’s uniform is modern military garb. This is not the ceremonial bric-a-brac of dress

uniforms, the atavistic residue of armor. The LAPD costume epitomizes the phrase “no nonsense.” The hat is the shape of an army officer’s with no Smokey the Bear/cowboy/LBJ Stetson regionalism and none of the checkered hatbands or ornamentation of other police forces. The remnants of Sir Robert Peel’s 19th Century London “bobbies” are few. Special teams such as SWAT dress in “baseball” caps and a blue version of army fatigues—military combat uniforms. The important difference from army uniforms is the elimination of camouflage—the SWAT team doesn’t blend into the environment. Its purpose is not to hide, but to impress.

Angelenos traveling to other cities are often surprised by the look of the police. It is not just the quaint look of uniforms, but the un-military physiques. One would have to check the lobby of Jenny Craig to find a Los Angeles crowd as overweight as an average group of Chicago policemen. L.A.’s police have to meet height and weight requirements that assure that any bulge you notice is caused by the bulletproof vests they wear under their uniform shirts. The LAPD does not look like a group of civil servants, it looks like a “mean, lean fighting machine.” This is a group to be taken seriously.

The other blue uniforms here (the Oakwood ghetto of Venice, in the western part of the City of Los Angeles) belong to the Crips. The Crips are not a “gang” as most people define the word, but rather a loose affiliation of neighborhood gangs or “sets” as they call themselves. Each set has a name appended to “Crips,” often a reference to the main street of their neighborhood: Front Street Watts Crips, 65th South Crips, 66th South Crips, Rolling Nineties Crips, OGC (the first Crips set—O.G. stands for “original gangster”), etc. Although all Crips are from the same gang, sharing as a common enemy other gangs (especially the Bloods) they are like Lebanese militia in that factional fighting is nearly as common as war against the “enemy.” Crips from Venice taking a tour through the ‘hood of another Crip set would have just about the same welcome as would members of a Bloods set spending a leisurely afternoon studying the sights of Venice (which is just about as friendly as the welcome a group of Israeli soldiers would receive if they decided to take a tour of the shrines in Medina).

Currently one of the chief definers of street gangs is their colors. In the 1960s, among gangs the word “colors” was used in the same metonymical sense that the military uses the word: synonymous with “flag.” (“These colors don’t run” boasts one common jingoistic bumper sticker.) “Colors” generally meant the club insignia on a jacket, often a sleeveless one. Now the term is used literally—blue, red, purple, black...the wearing of clothing of a given hue constitutes the most obvious statement of gang loyalty. The majority of Los Angeles’ African-American “gang banger” sets are Crips; they wear blue. The second largest affiliation, the Crips’ arch-

enemies in the various Bloods sets, wear red.

Symbolism plays a big role in the life of a gangster. Wearing the wrong hue in an L.A. ghetto neighborhood is as much of an incitement to violence as is burning an American flag is in some other places. Violence caused by the wrong hue is not just the result of mistaking the wearer for “the enemy.” People who are clearly not in gangs (evidenced by age, race, or dress) have found themselves physically attacked for wearing the wrong colored sweater or the wrong brand of athletic shoes. (British Knights brand is favored by the Crips. The BK monogram also stands for “blood killer,” making it a dangerous brand to wear on Bloods turf.) What seems at first as if it could be a realistic response to a possible threat (not dissimilar to a soldier firing at the sight of someone in an enemy uniform) is apparently a response to a sign that is completely removed from the physical reality of its referent (more like a Vietnam War veteran firing at a funeral party because the Viet Cong also wore black).

Wearing red or burning a flag not only states the loyalty or lack thereof of the wearer or burner, but seems to compel the loyal observer to action. Both situations speak to a basic focus for allegiance—nationalism may seem to be the “natural” site for group loyalty to many Americans, but to many of the youth of our ghettos first loyalty goes to the ’hood and the homeboys. The gangsters generally seem as convinced that they are protecting their neighborhoods as the Army is that it is protecting the country.

Gang members’ symbols of identity go beyond positive statement of belonging—pants worn low on the hips, bandanas, L.A. Raiders caps or jackets to indicate their gang banger status, colors to indicate affiliation—but extend strongly to negative statements regarding affiliation. Crips do not just refrain from wearing red, they refrain from using the letter “B.” The term of address of “brother” used by many Blacks is eschewed by Crips in favor of “cuz” (short for cousin) and when they must write a B they draw a line through it. (Bloods change all Cs in their writing to Bs.)

The “lining out” of their Bs constitutes not just a rejection but a challenge. In gang-related graffiti, lining out a person’s name on extant graffiti is a challenge or threat; lining out a set’s name is a war declaration. (Ten years ago I saw evidence that the Socialist Workers Party’s many years of effort to organize the Black underclass had not resulted in the kind of solidarity the SWP might have hoped for. Driving through south central Los Angeles, I saw a doctrinaire Marxist slogan with a call to join the SWP that had been spray-painted on a wall. Someone had lined out “Socialist Workers Party” and written a local gang name. I’ve always wondered whether the SWP showed up to shoot it out for ghetto turf.)

Graffiti can function as artistic expression, a personal statement of importance, and “Kilroy was here” prank, but its main function for gangs seems to be territorial demarcation. This point is not missed by the Los Angeles Police. When they raided a reputed gang headquarters a few months back, they spray painted the walls with slogans such as “LAPD Rules.” Perhaps it’s an effort to shed their “para-military” image. Chief Parker wouldn’t have approved, but here in the land of Democracy, the police are starting to use the semiotics of the people. Soon we might see cops wearing bandanas, L.A. Raiders caps, and their trousers low on their hips. Then we’ll know who’s here to look out for the ’hood, and nobody dare dis’ the LAPD.

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