Making Police Truly ‘Protect and Serve’

As President Trump suggests police should be rougher with suspects, other voices from the police community say the behavior should go in the opposite direction, treating the public with more respect, reports Dennis J Bernstein.
By Dennis J Bernstein

Former Seattle Police Chief Norm Stamper, who laments that many Americans have experienced police as “an overly aggressive, militarized enemy of the people,” believes “the police in America [should] belong to the people – not the other way around.”

In a recent interview Stamper asserted that “Policing is the public’s business, and the public has the full right and responsibility to work collaboratively with local law enforcement.”

Stamper is calling for fundamental changes “in the federal government’s role in local policing as well as citizen participation in all aspects of police operations: policy-making, program development, crime fighting and service delivery, entry-level and ongoing education and training, oversight of police conduct, and—especially relevant to today’s challenges—joint community-police crisis management.” Says Stamper, “nothing will ever change until the system itself is radically restructured.”

Norm Stamper was a cop for 34 years, the first 28 in San Diego, the last six as Seattle’s police chief from 1994-2000. He resigned in the immediate wake of the so-called “Battle in Seattle” of 1999, where police famously confronted the first major international protests against the World Trade Organization with extreme and excessive force.

Chief Stamper took full responsibility for the breakdown and police overreaction and resigned directly following the confrontations. He has since devoted himself to reforming police actions and procedures through extensive community involvement in policing affairs. His most recent book is *To Protect and Serve: How to Fix America’s Police*. I spoke to Stamper in Oakland, California on July 26.

Dennis Bernstein: I’d like you to begin by telling us how you went from police chief in Seattle to globally-known police reformer?

Norm Stamper: It came with a recognition for me that not only is what we are doing not working but it is causing great damage to the community/police relationship. My position is that policing in this country needs to be radically reformed.

DB: Are you heartened by the formation of groups like Black Lives Matter to take back their communities? Do you support that kind of organization to restrain the police during this transition you are envisioning?

NS: Not only do I support it, I believe that a massive grassroots citizen strategy for educating and mobilizing is essential. Based on my 34 years of experience, I just don't see the institution reforming itself. It may make modest incremental improvements but then slide backwards in terms of progress. We need citizens leading this movement.

DB: Why did you resign your position as Chief of the Seattle police?

NS: Most people would say I resigned in the immediate wake of the "Battle in Seattle." I was extremely unhappy with the police response to what had begun as a nonviolent protest against globalization. We thought we were ready, we were not. We felt prepared to meet the challenges associated with a new and different form of organizing, a sort of early equivalent of social media, using cell phones, etc. But we were wrong on pretty much all accounts.

On the second day I made the worst decision of my career in authorizing the use of chemical agents against non-violent, non-threatening protesters. At that point I realized that my time was up and that the best way to begin a process of soul-searching and critiquing was to remove myself and end my tenure.

DB: Tell us a little more about what was going through your mind when you came to acknowledge your error.

NS: On top of the list was the realization that I was using militarized tactics against young people who had the courage and wisdom to oppose globalization in so many of its manifestations, to call into question such issues as intellectual property rights, child labor laws, and also criminal justice issues. How do we achieve a truly just society that is accessible to all people, not just here, but all around the world? It was very troubling to me to know that I was leading a militarized response to those conditions.

DB: Since that time we have witnessed the militarization of police departments and some very brutal killings committed by police. What is your impression of what we have seen since your resignation?

NS: First, it is obvious that police forces haven't learned the lessons we learned here in Seattle with respect to handling mass protests. But let's look at the catalysts for those protests: the Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson, the cold-blooded murder of Laquan McDonald in Chicago, the murder of Walter Scott in Charleston, the tragic death of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland. What would possess a police officer to shoot a fleeing man in the back, in some cases

someone completely unarmed? Then to lie about it, have fellow officers join in the cover-up, to have police executives and sometimes civic executives pretend that nothing happened.

We are never going to make progress until we learn what it takes to de-escalate conflict situations, to avoid them if possible, and to engage in crisis intervention tactics that have proven to work in the mental health field, for example. And why is it so hard to figure out a way to discipline police officers so that when they encounter these situations the outcomes are not fatal? This speaks to the need for fundamental reform. Not tinkering with the system but rather fundamentally reconfiguring American police work.

DB: It has come to the point where officers can simply say that they fear for their lives and then proceed to execute.

NS: If a police officer has undergone the proper training and enough of it, and is supervised and led by people who understand the sanctity of human life, we can put an end to this kind of behavior. I am tired of police chiefs standing in front of a bank of microphones and talking about the tragedy, for the victim and the victim's family, for the community and for the police officers. The question is, how do we prevent such tragedies in the future? The answer is definitely not to continue what we are doing these days.

DB: There was a terrible case here in Northern California where a sheriff's trainer named Erick Gelhaus shot a thirteen-year-old boy [Andy Lopez] who he supposedly thought had a real gun. Gelhaus fired something like seven shots in ten seconds. We learned later that Gelhaus was writing a column for Soldier of Fortune and was giving advice along the lines of "If you do shoot a thirteen-year-old holding a BB gun, you have to be able to show that you were really afraid." This is a guy who had just got back from Iraq where he was taking out "insurgents." He had twenty years of training for the sheriff's department. Not only was Gelhaus not indicted, he was promoted!

NS: That story is repeated in jurisdiction after jurisdiction in this country. And we will continue to make those mistakes until we adopt a number of reform measures that I am advocating.

DB: Describe a few of those measures. What is your prescription for change?

NS: Three major recommendations would go a long way toward preventing the kinds of things we are talking about. Number one, end this drug war which has made police officers foot soldiers in a war against their own people, against people who are disproportionately young, poor, and of color.

The war against drugs has caused far more harm than good. It has cost one and a

half trillion dollars thus far and, today, drugs are more readily available, at lower prices and higher levels of potency, than ever before. And, as we learned in the 1920s and 1930s, prohibition doesn't work, it is a lousy organizing mechanism for US drug policy and should be replaced with a regulatory system.

Second, license every police officer in the country, making sure that every officer thoroughly understands and is able to apply the Constitution of the United States. Think of "stop and frisk," think of laws of arrest, think of the use of lethal force, think of the gathering and preservation of evidence.

Build standards around every procedural justice set of tasks and then insist that every officer in the country, from Ferguson to the NYPD, understands and meets those standards. And if an officer gets fired, they don't get picked up anywhere else in the country because they don't have a license, they cannot practice law enforcement.

Thirdly, we must put the community in the driver's seat. Citizens should be involved as partners in policy-making, program development and crisis management. They should have a say in hiring decisions. Credible citizen oversight mechanisms must be implemented, including subpoena power and the capacity to investigate and reach decisions regarding alleged police misconduct and lethal force issues.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.