

In Service to Others

A Personal Reflection on Guiding Principles for Policing in Our Nation's Capital

BY CHARLES H. RAMSEY

Policing has always been one of our country's most complex and challenging professions. When other systems, institutions and resources fail, the police are the ones called in to repair — or at least, lessen — the damage. We typically inherit problems that have already had considerable time and momentum to develop.

In recent years, the already complex nature of policing has become further complicated by a number of trends. For one thing, the public's expectations of the police have grown. Whereas in the past, police may have been viewed as little more than after-the-fact report takers and investigators, today the public expects — indeed, demands — that the police make a direct and measurable impact on crime.

In addition, the emergence of new and more sophisticated technology has dramatically changed the landscape for both criminals and the police. While offenders are constantly finding new ways to use technology for their gain, the development of technology also presents tremendous opportunities for the police to identify and apprehend criminals and to prevent crime. Staying on top of technological trends and leveraging their potential require new resources and skill sets for the police.

And, of course, there is the ongoing threat of terrorism. The attacks of September 11, 2001, redefined “normal” in our country, just as they redefined the mission and operation of the Metropolitan Police Department. On top of all of our traditional “hometown” security responsibilities, we must now deal with a range of complex “homeland” security imperatives as well.



These and other trends have had a particularly dramatic impact on the District of Columbia and the Metropolitan Police Department. Here, the special challenges associated with the presence of the federal government further complicate our core mission of serving and protecting our residents. In recent years, our city has encountered — and successfully managed — a number of events of historic proportions: the post-Seattle IMF and World Bank protests, Y2K, the 2001 and 2005 Presidential Inaugurations, September 11th, the anthrax attacks, the DC-area sniper spree and any number of other major cases. These are just a few examples of the unpredictability of our profession and the incredible and varied demands placed on our Department.

And the reality is that there will be even more change — and more complexity — in the future.

But throughout it all, there remain some bedrock principles of our profession. These principles represent the foundation upon which all of our philosophies, strategies, tactics and activities are built. These things may change, but our principles are enduring. They have “survived” the changes of the past century, and they will live on through the changes and challenges of the 21st Century as well.

This document attempts to articulate these principles, especially as they relate to policing in Washington, DC. These are the principles on which we, as a profession, stand — and on which we serve the community. They are the core values we need to internalize, institutionalize, and build upon for the future.

A Call to Service

Even with all of the changes that have taken place over the last century — and certainly in the last decade — policing has been, and always will be, about one fundamental pursuit: helping people. Technology has dramatically enhanced our ability to recognize crime patterns, to collect and analyze evidence, and to solve crimes and prosecute offenders. But when all is said and done, our work still boils down to serving others.

Policing is often referred to as a job or a profession. In reality, it is much more. Policing is a calling. It is a pledge to dedicate our professional lives to serving other people and to protecting those things our citizens hold dearest: life and liberty.

To be a police officer is to make a lifelong commitment to put our own feelings and our own needs aside, and to focus on how we can serve others. Policing is a pledge — a promise — to do everything we can, as individuals and as a profession, to make other peoples' circumstances better than they were before.

Here in our Nation's Capital, this call to service brings with it a number of unique challenges. One of these is the sheer number of people who live in, work in, and visit our city every year. And because what happens in Washington, DC, so often attracts nationwide — even worldwide — attention, there is extremely close scrutiny of the police and tremendous pressure on us to perform. And, of course, the District of Columbia faces the same difficult challenges of most other urban areas: poverty, educational failure, disease, and the like.

But as challenging as policing in our Nation's Capital can be, it also brings tremendous potential and opportunity. For the men and women of the Metropolitan Police Department, it means a chance to display — for the city, the nation, and the world — our pride, our dedication, our compassion, and our courageous and steadfast service to the community.

Service with Purpose

In a city of so many different government services and resources, the Metropolitan Police Department plays a unique role. Unlike most other agencies, we operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week. By design, we have a round-the-clock presence out on the streets, and we are always just a free, three-digit phone call away from responding to a call for help. Even more importantly, the public has placed its trust in us that we will always answer the call, quickly and diligently, and without regard for our comfort or safety.

The public has come to know that we will rush headlong toward danger, and will put ourselves in harm's way, to protect total strangers. And even if some of our own should fall in the process, the public knows that there will be others to fill in. The heroes who responded to the terror attacks of 9/11 will forever serve as shining examples of this type of service with purpose and service with courage.

But our oath to “serve and protect” means much more than protecting life and property. Our oath also carries with it the unique and awesome responsibility of protecting the Constitutional rights of *all* Americans — of safeguarding the very freedoms that we cherish and which set us apart from so many other people in the world.

Several years ago, I started a new and different training program at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The purpose was not so much to teach the specifics of the Holocaust. Rather, the purpose was to use the Holocaust as a backdrop — a graphic and disturbing backdrop — for teaching an important lesson about serving others by protecting their individual rights and their dignity. For I believe the Holocaust serves as a warning to a democratic society of what can happen when the police lose sight of their commitment to serve others.

The fact of the matter is that our profession has not always had an exemplary record in this regard. And it's not just the local German police turning a blind eye toward — and then actively participating in — the atrocities of the Holocaust. Right here in the United States, police officers over the years have been called upon to enforce any number of discriminatory laws against African-Americans and other minorities. Because history seems to have a way of repeating itself if we're not careful, it is important for us to constantly remember and reinforce our solemn responsibility to safeguard the civil rights of everyone.

Since 9/11, police officers are often described as “first responders” — and that is certainly appropriate.

Whenever there is a shooting, a fire, or any other type of natural or man-made catastrophe, we are usually the first to rush in, even as everyone else is running away.

But as police officers, we need to be “first responders” in another way. When the individual rights and liberties of other people are being challenged or threatened, we need to be the first — the *very* first — to rush in and respond, just as we would to a shooting or a burning building. That is a fundamental duty of police officers everywhere. And it is especially critical here in Washington, DC — the cradle of democracy in the free world. Service with purpose means having courage and strength in the face of physical danger. It also means having the courage of conviction — to stand up and vigorously defend the rights of others, when those rights are threatened or endangered.

CORE VALUES OF THE MPDC

Our Department's acronym — MPDC — captures some of the core values on which we stand and which guide our service to others.

Motivation . . . to go out every day, confronting any number of challenges and obstacles, and do whatever it takes to serve and protect our community — and then go out and do it again the next day.

Pride . . . in yourself, in our Department, in the uniform and badge you wear, and in the noble calling you have accepted.

Devotion . . . to following the principles and values that define our profession, and to maintaining the highest levels of integrity at all times.

Courage . . . to rush toward danger when others flee, and to stand up for other peoples' civil and Constitutional rights when those rights are threatened.

Service with Compassion

In our daily routines as police officers, we spend the vast majority of our time with the most vulnerable in our society: people who are poor, undereducated, and vulnerable; people who may be newly arrived in our country and may speak a different language; people who are afraid and sometimes hopeless; people who may not appreciate, understand or trust the police. Who but these people have the greatest need of our help?

In serving these and other people, we as police officers must always be mindful of one obvious but sometimes forgotten fact: we are dealing with fellow human beings, not icons on a computer-generated map or numbers in a statistical report. Technology has done wonders for helping police record and analyze crime. But when we start to look at crime victims, witnesses and others as merely icons or statistics — and stop seeing them as human beings, as people in trouble or in need — then we have lost our way.

Service with compassion means understanding that when someone is the victim of a robbery, a burglary, a sexual assault, or any other type of crime, his or her life may very well have been changed forever. It means treating each and every one of these individuals with empathy, dignity, and respect. It means working tirelessly to help bring some sense of closure to the victims of crime. And it means doing everything in our power to ensure that others don't suffer the same fate.

That action — that commitment — is all part of service with compassion.

Service with Equality and Unity

For decades, the police have been described as the “thin blue line” — as a fragile, but somehow necessary demarcation between good and evil in our communities. While that metaphor sounds appealing, I think it fails to capture the true role of police in our society.

The problem with being a “line” is that you have to put each and every individual you encounter on one side or the other of that line — either the side of “good” or the side of “evil.” In many cases, it requires officers to make snap



judgments about people, based not always on their behavior, but sometimes on their appearances, their attitudes, where they live, who they associate with.

In the Holocaust, we saw political leaders and the police turn this type of “profiling” into a cruel and systematic science — gauging everything from peoples’ eye color to hair texture to facial features. Today, in far too many communities, we see large segments of the community concerned about perceived profiling by the police based on race, ethnicity, and, more recently, national origin and religion. The fact that all of the 9/11 hijackers were Arab Muslims does not mean that all Arab Muslims are terrorists, nor does it mean that all Arab Muslims should be treated with distrust or suspicion.

One of the primary goals of terrorists is to get our society to alter our values and sacrifice our principles, all in the name of improving security. We must never allow that to happen. The fact is that we can be a secure society *and* a free society at the same time. As police officers, we must set the example and lead the way.

But we cannot lead the way if we continue to think of ourselves as a “line” — thin, blue, or otherwise. We are not now — nor should we ever be — something that divides and separates our communities. In fact, we need to be a force that unites and strengthens our communities.

Instead of a line, I believe the police should be viewed as a *thread* — a thread that is woven throughout the communities we serve. Indeed, the police should strive to be the thread that holds together the very fabric of our democracy. In taking on that role, we can not possibly engage in, or tolerate, discrimination of any type.

When the community hurts, the police officer should hurt. When the community celebrates, the officer should celebrate. And when the community is threatened — by crime and violence or by intolerance and discrimination — then the police officer must be the one to stand up and be counted. That is what it means to be a thread within the community. That is what it means to provide service with equality and unity.

Service with Integrity

Every one of our police officers is given a badge as a way to identify him or her as a member of the MPDC and of the policing profession in general. But our badges are much, much more than a piece of equipment — a fancy “name tag” — this is used to identify individual police officers. The badge is a symbol — a

bright and highly visible symbol — of the authority and the trust that the public has placed in each one of us.

The community does not place that level of authority and trust in very many people. But they have placed it in all of us. And every day that we get up and pin on the badge, we must do everything we can to use our authority wisely and to earn the trust that the community has given us. Our oath of office is represented in the badge, and the badge represents the oath. It serves as a constant reminder of the values and principles on which we serve.

One day, each of us will leave the Metropolitan Police Department, and our badges will be passed on to someone else. In the grander scheme of things, each of us will possess that badge for only a brief period of time.

But during the time when we *do* have that badge, it is incumbent on each of us to keep it shining brightly, as a symbol not just of authority, but also of pride and integrity. As police officers, we can never afford to do anything that would tarnish our badge or bring dishonor upon ourselves, our families, or this great department. Service with integrity means never compromising our pledge to put the needs of others first.

Passing the Torch ... Building the Legacy

The ultimate goal of the police is to create a society that is free of crime and where everyone's rights are safe and secure. That is the ideal — something to reach for, but something that we will probably never fully achieve.

There will always be challenges and obstacles that get in the way. That is to be expected and, to the extent possible, anticipated. Today, the threat of terrorism creates challenges to our physical safety and security, as well as to our tradition of fairness and equality.

Policing is such a noble profession because we always seem to rise up and meet the challenges of our time, overcome the obstacles, and continue moving forward — all the while, staying true to our values and principles. While our ultimate goal is a society that is free of crime and violence, our more immediate objective is to move our Department and our city closer to that goal.

The Metropolitan Police Department was created in 1861 by President Abraham Lincoln. Our history is long and rich, and our legacy is something that is precious and deserves our constant care and attention.

One hundred years from now, most people are unlikely to remember any of us as individuals. But collectively, we will have made an imprint. What will that imprint look like? What legacy will we leave behind — as individuals and as an organization? In terms of meeting the challenges of our time, how will we as a Department be remembered?



Those are not rhetorical questions. They are the central issues of our Department and our profession at this particular time in our history.

I have every confidence that we will be remembered positively — and our imprint will be honorable, memorable and lasting — so long as we remain true to the principles of our profession and to our calling of service to others.

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