**Police Reform Redux: Why is it not Happening?**

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The inexplicable murder of Tyre Nichols by five Memphis, Tennessee police officers brought home again the question of why instances of police brutality continue to occur in America. In April 2021, this column ran a piece titled Lessons for the Police from the Military: Focus on Training and Rules of Engagement. Despite all the pleas for reform and the need for corrective action since then, little seems to have been accomplished and Congress has failed to pass any policing legislation.

After the killing of George Floyd in 2020, thirty states and the District of Columbia produced police reforms. The U.S. employs nearly 18,000 police forces nationwide and about 700,000 full-time police. Making improvements throughout this collective body divided across states and cities, often with competing jurisdictions, is a massive undertaking especially if these incidents reflect systemic and institutional flaws and failures in many of these departments and indeed of society as a whole. If it is the society that is largely at fault, then reforming individual police departments, however necessary, will be insufficient to correct misconduct and excessive use of force.

Crime now ranks much higher in public awareness of national problems although statistically, 2022 set no new records and, in some areas, crime was reduced. The ubiquity of guns and what appears to be a more violent society if the absence of civility and the more commonplace presence of anger even in basic interactions among people are indicators, police understandably are more sensitive to the prospect of greater personal danger and vulnerability. And, likewise, the public is more apprehensive around police, particularly people of colour.

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This raises the race issue. Studies show that proportionally white officers are more prone to using force than those of colour. Is this a problem of statistics or fact? If the latter, can training and education, as well as diversification of police forces, be corrective measures?

While training and education are part of any solution, is that enough? American police officers undergo on average between 20 and 27 months of training followed by a probation period of several months. By comparison, German police training takes two and a half to four years; in the UK two to three years. Clearly, more research is needed here.

After the Korean War when a surprisingly large number of American POWs succumbed to what was called “brainwashing,” the U.S. military created a Code of Conduct that defined acceptable levels of behaviour both in war and peace. During the Vietnam War when U.S. pilots were being outfought by the North Vietnamese, the U.S. Navy invented the “Top Gun” Fighter Weapons School made famous in two movies of that name. The kill ratio reversed to 15 to 1 in favour of U.S. pilots.

Would a national code of conduct, properly constructed for police make a difference? Similarly, would a national police academy akin to “Top Gun” provide an additional level of education and training for local and state police forces? It would seem that both military inventions would be helpful in raising the level of police professionalism, particularly in crisis or life-threatening situations such as air-to-air combat.

Another factor may be relevant. Over 75 per cent of Americans believe the nation is headed in the wrong direction. And an equal amount is dissatisfied with their lives. If the national mood is sour, that will affect society at large. The precipitous increase in drug overdose deaths and the lethality of fentanyl puts additional burdens on policing. The military mission over many decades expanded from fighting the armies of enemies. Today, some enemies lack armies. Others that do have armies also rely on terrorism and non-kinetic weapons such as cyber. Similarly, police forces have broader missions and responsibilities as well as liabilities.

America confronts a massive list of challenges and problems from Chinese balloons and the war in Ukraine to a public deeply divided on most issues including huge debts, drugs, immigration, equality and fairness. Against that background, policing must take a higher priority. Since the U.S. Government seems unable to address police policy in a satisfactory method, perhaps the Associations of Governors and Mayors would be appropriate fora. And using the examples of a code of conduct and a police Top gun could be excellent starting points for this effort.

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