



Historic Professionalism by Cops on the Front Lines: Taking a Moment to Assess the Progress of American Law Enforcement

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In the last several days, tens of thousands of law enforcement officers across the country have been subjected to unrelenting verbal abuse and physical assaults. Early on, many sustained injuries as they were attacked with rocks, feces, water bottles filled with urine and other objects that have been hurled their way by demonstrators. **In light of the vast numbers of these interactions between officers and enraged demonstrators, it is staggering to note that the overwhelming majority of officers did not retaliate in the face of the abuse that they have received.** It is yet another clear indicator of how far the profession has come that front-line officers exhibit such historic levels of professional discipline.

There will certainly be plenty of time in the near future to debrief and debate the actions of political and police leaders concerning specific actions taken or *not* taken to stem the tide of violence and ensure that rioters were criminally prosecuted. But officers on the front lines don't make political decisions or establish rules of engagement. **Across the country, officers were asked to hold the line and deflect abuse that most civilians would find unimaginable and to do so for hours on end without retaliating. And,**

with very rare exceptions, they met the challenge with commendable professionalism consistent with their training.

Massive protests in past generations led to acts of massive retaliation and use of force by officers that were seared into the public's memory. In the 1960s, protests surrounding the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War often resulted in massively forceful responses by officers causing significant injuries to protestors—many of whom appeared to be peacefully demonstrating. In light of the protests in recent days, what reasonable person would fail to conclude that the profession has advanced considerably?

Perhaps most striking is the obvious paradox represented by the violent actions of rioters who are protesting police brutality, all the while being confronted by a new generation of front-line officers who are the most professional, disciplined and well-trained in the history of American policing. **Accusations of “systemic” and “widespread” police brutality ring hollow as the nation watches the men and women in blue stoically and professionally standing resolute in their peace keeping mission as rioters make threats and engage in assaultive acts.** Ironically, they do so with the security of knowing that American law enforcement officers are extremely unlikely to react in kind.

Is police misconduct, including instances of brutality, a sad reality that must be confronted by law enforcement leaders? Absolutely. But is it systemic to the whole of the profession? It is not. Every available study that we have seen indicates that a small percentage of bad cops bring disrepute and distrust to their departments and to their profession. Consistent with those studies, we see countless officers exhibiting discipline and professionalism in the face of abuse across the country. **What other profession could withstand such public scrutiny and hostility with such overwhelming professionalism?**

Demonstrations like the ones that have caused so much damage in recent days are generally unheard of in countries where police brutality **actually is** pervasive and systemic. In many parts of the world, public demonstrations against the police are met

with swift and overwhelming brutality. In the United States, civilians clearly feel secure in hurling abuse at officers because they know that police professionals are extremely unlikely to retaliate violently.

We live in a country where demonstrators can spit and scream at officers for hours, take selfies while they damage property and tweet about their criminal acts with minimal fear of abusive police retribution. **Reports of officers sustaining life-threatening injuries at the hands of rioters continue to come in and yet we do not see massive retaliatory action that might have been expected in past generations of American policing.**

There are difficult conversations to be had about the unintended consequences of a non-confrontational “hands off” approach to addressing these types of demonstrations. In moving forward, **we must grapple with the prospect that these tactical decisions embolden property crime and allowed the contagion of violence to spread.**

But one thing is abundantly clear—the men and women on the front lines should take great pride and be commended for their honorable steadfast service exhibited in the most trying of times.