



Why Professional Appearance Matters for Senators and Cops

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On September 28, after a much-publicized move away from a long-held unwritten dress code on the U.S. Senate floor, a bipartisan reaction resulted in the unanimous passage of a formal dress code. Over the course of the preceding days, some Senators had signaled support for allowing casual attire on the Senate floor, prompted, in large part, by Senator John Fetterman of Pennsylvania who argued that he was more comfortable wearing shorts and a hoodie than a suit and tie.

On September 18—just 10 days before the Senate unanimously adopted a formal dress code—the Associated Press reported on Senator Fetterman’s reaction to those critical of his casual attire: *“They’re freaking out, I don’t understand it,” he said. “Like, aren’t there more important things we should be working on right now instead of, you know, that I might be dressing like a slob?”*

In the end, both sides of the political divide decided that it *does* matter if a Senator “dresses like a slob” when casting votes that impact the functioning of the U.S. government—even if it risked his discomfort at the confines of business attire.

So, what does this story from the U.S. Senate have to do with cops? Well, for years now, I have made no secret of my concern that too many departments have opted to prioritize officer comfort, self-expression and other concerns above a professional appearance. **The arguments expressed by Senator Fetterman are eerily similar to the push back I’ve received as the old-school police chief in the room concerned about what I refer to as “cops wearing their pajamas to work.”**

These arguments from law enforcement officers in favor of more casual attire generally fall into the category of, as Senator Fetterman argued, “Aren’t there more important things we should be

working on?” The cop version of the argument is often more like, “People don’t care what I look like, as long as I can do the job.” Or, even more important to contend with is the argument, “If I have to go hands-on with somebody, I need to be comfortable and ready to go.” Let’s address these two arguments.

“People Don’t Care What I Look Like as Long as I can Do the Job”

I often ask officers, “What did you wear to your job interview with your police department? Did you dress comfortably and casually?” Inevitably, the answer is something to the effect of “No, I wore a suit and tie” for male officers, or “No, I wore a business suit” for female officers. I always then respond by asking, “Why did you wear professional attire to your job interview? Was it because you wanted to make a good impression?” They inevitably nod yes. “So, what changed? When did you stop caring about giving a good impression by your attire?”

To put this in a different context, if you had to appear in court and the prosecutor was wearing sweatpants and a tee shirt, would you care? After all, the prosecutor has more important things to worry about than attire. Maybe their causal dress is a sign that they are so consumed with preparation for the case in which your testifying that they didn’t have time to worry about dressing professionally? Of course, that would *not* be your immediate impression—it would be the opposite. You would likely think, “Who is this clown? He comes to court in sweats? We are screwed.” Similarly, stories of police applicants coming to their interview in casual attire is often cited by officers illustrating the problems they encounter in finding qualified candidates with common sense these days.

The same would likely be true of a priest or pastor officiating your wedding or the funeral director overseeing the ceremony for a passed loved one. In the most important moments of our lives, the vast majority of us want to put our trust in people who look professional and trustworthy. That is precisely what members of the public want from their police.

In their time of need, citizens want to see a police officer who looks like a police officer. Your professional appearance signals to citizens that you take enough pride in your work to look the part—and if you don’t care enough to look professional, why should they expect professionalism from you in your work?

You want to be able to quickly and clearly communicate to the public, especially during times of stress and confusion, your authority and legitimacy. Beyond the increased effectiveness in verbal communication that comes with “looking the part”, there are physical dangers associated with law enforcement officers who are not clearly recognizable as such, particularly in a society filled with law-abiding citizens who are lawfully carrying firearms.

“If I Have to Go Hands On, I Need to be Comfortable and Ready to Go”

I am not arguing that every department needs to maintain the Raleigh Police Department appearance standards that I was introduced to in 1981—dress slacks, dress shoes, garrison hat, and a tie. Law enforcement leaders have to make their own decisions as to the practicality of various uniform choices. However, even within the context of reasonable disagreements about uniform details, we should all agree that an officer’s dress should make them readily identifiable as a real police officer.

But as for officer safety when having to use physical force, **how does a baseball cap improve one’s defensive tactics capabilities, much less a baseball cap flipped backwards?** Can someone please explain to me how wearing an untucked tee shirt makes you a better fighter? In fact, I would argue such attire makes it harder for an officer to reach his or her weapons or handcuff in a scuffle. Lastly, can someone please explain to me how wearing a clean and ironed police uniform makes it harder for you to defend yourself?

A professional uniform appearance is a critical tool for law enforcement officers to convey their professionalism and authority right out of the gate, thus often reducing the necessity of the use of force in the first place. A recent research studies conducted in California and Maine showed members of the public photographs of police officers with various types of uniform accessories. When the officers were shown wearing military style uniforms, especially BDU-style uniforms and load-bearing vests or external body armor, members of the public rated them lower in approachability, friendliness, and honesty, and higher in aggressiveness, hostility, and dishonesty.ⁱ Why would any law enforcement officer want to enter a police-citizen encounter with the psychological cards already stacked against him or her?

Conclusion

There are many occupations in which your appearance simply does not matter. Millions of people work remotely from their homes, or in offices where they are guaranteed to never see a customer. In these environments there is a strong argument to be made that professional attire is simply unnecessary. Similarly, when a Senator is taking phone calls, or being briefed on upcoming votes on a Sunday evening from their home office, appearance seems largely unimportant. But when a member of the Senate walks onto the floor in Capital Hill to debate, discuss, or vote on matters that will affect the lives of millions of Americans, people on both sides of the political divide justifiably view shorts and a sweatshirt as a blatant sign of disrespect. More precisely, it is a sign that my comfort is more important than any respect I may owe the task at hand or the voters that I represent.

Just as cops across the country see the short-lived mess in the Senate as an embarrassment, we should also regard it as a reminder that “looking the part” and projecting legitimacy and respect with how we dress still matters in the communities where we protect and serve.

About the Author

Harry P. Dolan is a 32-year police veteran who served as a Chief of Police since 1987. As one of the nation's most experienced police chiefs, he brings 25 years of public safety executive experience to Dolan Consulting Group. He retired in October 2012 as Chief of Police of the Raleigh (N.C.) Police Department, an agency comprised of nearly 900 employees in America's 42nd largest city.

Chief Dolan began his law enforcement career in 1980 as a deputy sheriff in Asheville, North Carolina and served there until early 1982, when he joined the Raleigh Police Department, where he served as a patrol officer. In 1987, he was appointed Chief of Police for the N.C. Department of Human Resources Police Department, located in Black Mountain. He served as Chief of Police in Lumberton, N.C. from 1992 until 1998, when he became Chief of Police of the Grand Rapids, Michigan Police Department. He served in that capacity for nearly ten years before becoming Chief of the Raleigh Police Department in September 2007. As Chief, he raised the bar at every organization and left each in a better position to both achieve and sustain success.

Harry Dolan has lectured throughout the United States and has trained thousands of public safety professionals in the fields of Leadership & Management, Communications Skills, and Community Policing. Past participants have consistently described Chief Dolan's presentations as career changing, characterized by his sense of humor and unique ability to maintain participants' interest throughout his training sessions. Chief Dolan's demonstrated ability to connect with his clientele and deliver insightful instruction all with uncompromising principles will be of tremendous value in the private sector.

Chief Dolan's unbridled passion to achieve service-excellence is a driving force behind Dolan Consulting Group. He is a graduate of Western Carolina University and holds a Master's Degree in Organizational Leadership and Management from the University of North Carolina at Pembroke.

His training courses include [Verbal De-escalation Training: Surviving Verbal Conflict®](#), [Verbal De-escalation Train The Trainer Program: Surviving Verbal Conflict®](#), [Community Policing Training](#), [Taking the Lead: Courageous Leadership for Today's Public Safety](#), and [Street Sergeant®: Evidence-Based First-Line Supervision Training](#).

References

ⁱ Hallett, L. J. (2017). *Citizen Perceptions of Minor Changes to the Police Uniform*. Unpublished Master's Thesis: University of Southern Maine; Simpson, R. (2020). Officer appearance and perceptions of the police: accoutrements as signals of intent. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, 14(1), 243-257.