

1943

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### Recommended Citation

Bruce Smith, The Great Years of American Police Development, 34 J. Crim. L. & Criminology 127 (1943-1944)

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# THE GREAT YEARS OF AMERICAN POLICE DEVELOPMENT

Bruce Smith†

In most respects the last twenty-five years were remarkably unproductive. They witnessed our recovery from the effects of one world war and our preparations for another. Unprecedented prosperity was followed by a decade of bleak depression. We had labor shortages and we had widespread unemployment. Our economic life moved through a cycle of inflation, deflation, and "reflation." These stirring years were also highlighted by unsuccessful social experiments and by scores of emergencies, both real and imaginary. At various times we paid homage to Channel swimmers, Atlantic hoppers, tree sitters, gold fish swallows, and stock market tipsters. Prohibition was at first enthusiastically espoused, then tolerated or ignored, and finally destroyed.

In short, they were years of futility, of backing and filling, and sharp reversals of trend. Yet the period was also marked throughout by consistent improvement in many of our public services. Among them all, police scored the greatest and most impressive advances. But whereas other public services built modestly upon professional and technical foundations that had been securely laid, police by a series of dizzy leaps brought their difficult calling to new levels of accomplishment, without much regard for the defective foundations upon which such achievements rested.

### *Progressive Advances Terminated by the War*

With fresh enthusiasm, with impatience for concrete results, and a contempt for obstacles, great clearing houses for identification and crime reporting, and intricate networks of radio and teletype communication were quickly established. Systematic training for the rank and file is now widely acclaimed, though still inadequately applied to the practice of the policeman's art. Organization structures have been vastly improved, motorized patrols and two-way radio communication are the merest commonplaces of police routine, scientific criminal investigation with the aid of test tube and microscope enjoys increasing attention, and police are rapidly acquiring a conscious pride in their calling.

Such a record of progress, springing from such modest beginnings, and achieved in so short a time, merits our respectful regard. Yet the fact remains that the fundamentals of our police systems have not changed. Recruitment, promotional, and disciplinary procedures have made only timid and uncertain advances, while the basic pattern of 40,000 police jurisdictions comprehending 160,000

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law enforcers has changed not at all. Thus there is some danger that the interlude in police progress forced upon us by the ever-tightening ring of wartime restrictions may result in partially dismantling mechanical police aids and equipment, with consequent deterioration in some of the superficial improvements effected during the inter-war period.

Consider for a moment the situation with which police throughout the United States are now confronted. As this is written, the country has been at war for eighteen months. The effects upon police problems are already clear. Most categories of criminal acts are going to be greatly reduced in number, highway traffic and traffic accidents are dropping towards surprising lows, gasoline shortages repeatedly immobilize motor patrols, an exasperating system of priorities balks police in securing many essential items of material, while the younger and more vigorous of policemen change uniforms and insignia and march off to war. Police are no longer preoccupied with crime waves—there are no crime waves, nor even high plateaus of crime. Traffic regulation and accident control, once absorbing the energies of so much manpower, are declining in importance; men and equipment are becoming scarcer; the prewar problems and the prewar resources both are narrowed down.

Meanwhile police have had new problems thrust upon them. They are now concerned with a multitude of war-connected investigations, and with coordinating their own routine duties with those of military police and shore patrols. Under pressures applied by federal agencies they are taking positive action—so often avoided in the past—to suppress commercialized vice and to prevent the further spread of venereal disease, while the demands of military motor convoys require constant attention in expediting the transport of men and munitions. So at every turn we find major dislocations in the time-honored police routines.

The new duties demand and receive immediate precedence, and in thus turning to the cultivation of unfamiliar fields of activity, police have less and less need for the tools to which they have become accustomed. They depend less upon the common facilities for identification and crime reporting, the far-flung networks of interforce and intraforce communication, the plethora of motor transport, the resources of crime laboratories, and a variety of mechanical devices. They depend much more upon the initiative and resourcefulness of trained manpower, and upon its ability to learn new techniques and procedures.

#### *The Critical Importance of Police Manpower*

Under these circumstances, the continuing importance of police manpower becomes more apparent than at any time since World

War I. Meanwhile the issue of sheer numbers is thrown into even higher relief by the dispersal of police strength among the armed services. Some forces have temporarily lost a mere 5 per cent or so of their numbers in this manner, whereas state police and others maintaining a low average age in the ranks suffer attrition that reduces their effectives by 25 per cent, 30 per cent, and in extreme cases even more.

It is no light matter to lose so many young and vigorous policemen at such a time. Hence some forces are revising their manpower distribution by cutting down here and adding there, to make necessary adjustments and obtain greater effectiveness from those still available for duty. Others have sought, thus far in vain, to secure mass deferments for police of draft age, and as the year advances and the tempo of war is stepped up higher and higher, it seems increasingly doubtful that police will win a preferred position in the draft. On the contrary, the trend here will probably follow that in Britain, where police are being called to the colors in ever greater numbers. Finally, there are forces in which the chief concern is to maintain the authorized strength at whatever cost, by recruiting over-age and physically substandard men, either for the duration of the emergency, or on full and permanent status. The implications of this recourse are rather grave.

Everyone recognizes the difficult situation with which some, but by no means a major portion, of our police forces are faced. Although 10 or 15 per cent of manpower loss may be absorbed by various administrative devices, reductions that approach 50 per cent seem to impose the need for more radical action. Before the standards of recruitment and of tenure are lowered, however, the bearing of the following factors should be carefully considered:

1. The actual need for more police in a community in which crime, traffic flow, and traffic accidents are undergoing a marked decline;
2. The possibility that substandard temporary recruits will acquire permanent status after the war;
3. The effect of this upon the quality of police service during the next twenty-five years, plus the extraordinary burdens that an influx of over-age recruits will impose upon even our sound police pension systems;
4. The general effect upon the carefully nurtured program for professionalization. This has been featured by higher salary scales, and in some cases by insistence upon personnel of high quality. Are these standards now to be abandoned, and if so, when and how can they be restored?

The application of such factors will vary from community to community, and from state to state. Where police have not yet succeeded in raising themselves from the level of casual and unskilled labor, little concern need be had for possible disturbance of the *status quo*. If there are no personnel standards now, there cannot be even a temporary abandonment of them. But wherever the professional trend in all of its varied manifestations has had an influence upon police development, the possible—even probable—effect of a diversion from the clearly marked road to further improve-

ment needs to be carefully examined. The present standing and future prospects of police are undergoing a severe test. For if personnel standards are thrown overboard, and if quality is sacrificed to quantity, the police outlook in our own time will be greatly diminished and darkened.

Far better would it be frankly to temporize by filling police ranks with part-time volunteers, paying them if need be, giving them a rudimentary training and assigning them to the less exacting duties, and then, when the emergency is past, by relieving them of their law enforcement powers with the thanks of the community and of its government. As part-time police aids they can be deprived more easily of their official status, than if they have been wholly dependent upon it as a means of livelihood.

There are admitted dangers in the use of this device that should be faced uncompromisingly. For if part-time temporary recruits are not adequately investigated and culled before appointment, if they are not then trained and disciplined for the job in hand, they may become a grave menace to public order. Armed and commissioned to act with vigor, they may undermine lawful law enforcement as did the vigilantes of by-gone days. But these dangers, however real, are familiar dangers and perhaps may be avoided more easily for that reason.

If the alternative is now adopted, and police dilute whatever qualitative characteristics they may have by watering them down with inferior additions, several generations of slow advance in professional status, and of gradually increasing police self-esteem, may vanish overnight.

With this danger avoided—if it is avoided—police will be able to approach a difficult future with more confidence. In order to assay that prospect one must examine tea-leaves in a cup, the entrails of birds, the conjunction of planets, or peer into the depths of a crystal ball.

### *The Impending Tax Squeeze*

Personally, I prefer the crystal ball. Even a quick glance discloses that it is not so clouded as you might anticipate, though the outlook is far from reassuring. For there, staring you in the face, is the burden of public debt assumed in a decade of depression, and in no one yet knows how many years of this war. The personal resources of coupon-clippers, employers, and wage-earners—all of them now direct taxpayers—will be strained to the utmost to meet the postwar demands of the federal government. States, cities, counties, townships, and villages are already losing out in this competition for a share of the tax dollar, and even heavier pressures are indicated. Many factors will combine to put the tax squeeze on our state and local governments, which in turn will raise new

and sometimes baffling problems of retrenchment for the police administrator.

Per capita costs for municipal police more than doubled during the past twenty-five years, while the cost of state and federal police, due to influences peculiar to themselves, rose even more rapidly. Against the general background here but roughly sketched, who believes that this mighty upward surge can be projected into the future? Not, surely, by any predictable amount of financial support to be derived from the state and local governments. But always there is the chance that the federal government may be prevailed upon to come across with a grant-in-aid or other subvention. By that stratagem police might sneak under the sides of the big tent, and there enjoy along with welfare, highways, and other local activities, the three-ring circus maintained by federal funds.

Highly tentative moves in this direction were made by the national government in 1933. Again in 1940 the Police Mobilization Planning Conference sponsored by the International Association of Chiefs of Police, on a test poll of the delegates, approved by a closely-divided vote a proposal to call upon the federal government for financial aid to state and local police in the prewar emergency.

Although no federal aid thus far has been provided, the prospect of such a windfall will continue to be alluring. So it may be taken for granted that when the tax squeeze begins to pinch state and local resources, new proposals to the same end will be made. Once police succeed in attracting federal support, however, a chain of circumstance will be forged that will bind and restrict their free development with increasing rigor. Right at the outset the federal government will attach conditions to its grants, and may impose various rules and standards for the conduct of each force, enforceable if need be by field inspectors representing the central government.

Lest it be concluded forthwith that such a police regime would be all to the good, certain further generalizations should hastily be added. For each state and local police force would thereupon become subject to the dictates of two masters—that is, to control not only by its own government but also by the federal government. Furthermore, the special standards imposed by the central agency, no matter how realistic they might prove to be in the first instance, would degenerate as time went on. This is the disdistinguishing fault of all bureaucratic control when exercised from a distance. Ultimately the freedom to experiment and to adapt to local conditions, which is almost the sole technical advantage of our present highly decentralized system, would surely and irretrievably be lost. So we should one day wind up not only with more expensive police forces, but with a misshapen, crossbred, and anomalous system combining both centralized and decentralized features, with

the vices of both and the virtues of neither. No matter how irridescent the federal rainbow may be, do we want to travel down that road in search of a perhaps illusory pot of gold? If we do not, then we are thrown back upon the harsh alternatives that retrenchment presents.

There appear to be only two of these, because police costs are chiefly the product of salary scales when multiplied by numerical strength. Retrenchment must hit one or the other, and possibly both. Confronted by a choice between these alternatives, to which one will police, from chiefs to patrolmen, throw their weight and support when budget-making time rolls 'round? Will they plump for the maintenance and future improvement of present salary scales, and accept necessary restrictions of numerical strength; or will they complacently face salary cuts in order that quotas of police may be jacked up to prewar levels? Comes the answer, as with one voice, "Don't be silly!"

#### *Retrenchment Through Improved Personnel*

Well, then, how is the law enforcement task to be satisfactorily performed under the new conditions, even assuming that the task itself will not be even more difficult than during prewar years? By what major readjustments can we hope to do the job with fewer men? Here the crystal ball suddenly darkens, and what follows is largely derived from the writer's personal observations, tintured with not a little of hope, and from a projection of current trends into the postwar years. It seems to him that the obvious answer to a declining quantity of police service is to be found in an improved quality of such service. The soundness of this proposition has amply been demonstrated in certain jurisdictions that he could name—but he will not name them here, for fear of impairing his case with someone he might inadvertently fail to mention!

Improved quality in police service can be secured through superior recruitment, promotion, and disciplinary procedures, and through more and better training for officers and men. As matters stand today, and looking at the country as a whole, our personnel standards seem sadly defective. Although there are some brilliant exceptions, police do not usually seek their recruits wherever they may be found. On the contrary, prior local residence is a common requirement, thus arbitrarily narrowing the field of choice. Nor are the personal characters of recruits vigorously investigated. High physical standards are increasingly observed, it is true, but the permissible age range is often unduly wide, while mental qualifications are still measured by tests that are puerile or worse. In some instances appointments are made without any attempt whatever at systematic screening, and with political support employed as the sole criterion.

Promotions usually rest upon written examinations and seniority, rather than demonstrated capacity and performance. Disciplinary powers are often lodged in agencies having no responsibility for police operations, and are seldom exercised with vigor and courage. With the facts as they are, who will deny the wide range of possibilities for securing more and better service from smaller police establishments?

Take also the matter of systematic training. Here the outlook is more favorable, because no one can any longer be found who is in active opposition to it. Yet despite unanimous lip-service, only a small proportion of our police recruits receive really adequate training for their duties. A few hours, a few days, or a few weeks of inexpert instruction are considered sufficient preparation for this unusually important and difficult public task.

Great national, state, and local police schools are now in operation, so the effective means for better training are already at hand. It remains for the state governments to intercede at this juncture, and by law to require that all police hereafter recruited shall attend and successfully complete a course of preliminary instruction meeting certain definite qualitative and quantitative standards. With improved training will come greater familiarity with the criminal law and a more general observance of civil rights. Nothing could more quickly and more surely stimulate the advance towards professional status.

#### *Retrenchment Through Structural Improvements*

Finally, the whole decentralized basis of our police system invites critical attention. We require, and will continue to need, three levels of police jurisdiction—federal, state and local; but we do not need, and may find ways of dispensing with five or six strata of police forces, together with the numerous duplications and occasional gaps in police service that they involve. Here lie fine opportunities for saving manpower and improving the quality of service at one and the same time.

We can begin this phase by abandoning many thousands of our microscopic rural "forces" outright. We can deprive township constables and most sheriffs of their criminal law enforcement powers and turn the sole protection of rural areas over to state police. We can delimit the scope of other thousands of village, town, and small city forces, by confining their operations to administrative inspections, the enforcement of ordinances, the protection of school crossings and other special and local services, and likewise turning general law enforcement in such minor corporate areas over to state jurisdiction. Thereby we shall not only save manpower, through elimination of duplicating activity and conservation of coordinating effort among all these discontinued agencies, but we shall at

the same time enlarge the sphere and operating influence of forces that have demonstrated their capacity for more challenging tasks. Ultimately some way may be found for really consolidating our police resources in such fashion that the varied physical and administrative police instrumentalities now necessarily denied to small towns and the open country will be available to all on something like equal terms.

Any such large-scale program for the integration of police strength reaches far beyond the capacity of police to bring it to pass. Other agencies of state and local government also will be vitally concerned and certain major questions of public policy will have to be threshed out. Meanwhile police will do well to consider the practical limits of integration, to assess the advantages and disadvantages to be derived from it and to outline plans for giving it effect. Some day they will be called upon to produce such plans, and they must not allow themselves to be caught unprepared for the grand re-orientation.

#### *The Challenge of the Postwar Years*

Thus no matter how impressive the advances of the past twenty-five years may be, the opportunities now about to unfold hold even greater promise. The trend of the times will compel adoption of more efficient devices, because the old days of open-handed expenditure for police service are gone, perhaps forever. Some will be so concerned with this development that they will not give full appraisal to the opportunities that a difficult era may hold for police. In this connection it is worth while to glance back over the past two decades, and to observe how much of our vaunted progress has depended upon liberal additions to police budgets. Increased numbers, higher salaries, central services operated by the federal and state governments and by regional associations, modern police transport and communications, laboratories—all were predicated upon the means to defray rising police costs.

On the other hand, how much have we done, or even attempted to do, by way of personnel and structural improvements that cost nothing and even open the way to substantial economies? Here are opportunities that for too long have been unexploited. All indices point to them as the most promising for postwar cultivation. Those who will grasp their thorny questions with a firm hand may play a decisive role in raising the usefulness and dignity of police work to the levels towards which so many earnestly but vainly aspire.

The past twenty-five years have been the great years in police development, but the postwar period now unfolding will present new opportunities for even larger and more lasting achievements by police who can direct their best efforts back to the fundamentals of all successful law enforcement.