46 Years of Change

Philosophy, Tactics and Culture

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As I prepare to retire, I have been asked to submit one more article to the *ILEA Journal*. Tim Cain, our law instructor and new coordinator for the *Journal*, has requested that I give my thoughts on how law enforcement, training and our society have changed over those years. Wow! That is an assignment.

I do not know if I can do an adequate job on this massive subject, mostly because there has been so much change, but I will try my best to render a perspectives on these things that will benefit those who are just entering law enforcement. These are, after all, the people who will take law enforcement into the next 20, 30 and 40 years and who are the most removed from the system I experienced in the 1960s and early 1970s.

For at least ten years now, I have realized that I am a dinosaur. This is a feeling familiar to nearly all officers who are at the twenty-plus year mark in their careers. Law enforcement is and has always been a young person’s career. Consequently, law enforcement has always been very receptive to tactical and strategic changes regardless of what many outsiders say.

The type of person attracted to law enforcement, however, remains doggedly constant. This is the person who craves excitement, variety, uniformity, and stability. It is also the person who believes strongly in service.

Society, however, has not maintained that level of constancy over the last 46½ years of my experience. In some ways, we are now arriving back, full circle, to an environment very much like the time when I came into law enforcement.

When I started in law enforcement, we too had riots, burnings, civil disturbances and a breakdown of the social fabric. At that time—in the 1960s and early 1970s—it was the first such era like that since the unionization riots of the early 20th Century, but it was much worse. Entire cities burned. Demonstrators did not number in the thousands then, they numbered in the tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands at a single event. Some cities like Detroit, once prosperous, never fully recovered.

Riot formation drills were routinely taught at basic training academies all across the country. I remember one of the two riots in which I was involved resulted in an MP Major, one of my superiors, being seriously injured when someone dropped a large brick on his head from a second story window. He was retired on medically disability after that event, and I remember when he looked at me after being released from the hospital, one eye focused on me and the other looked out at a 45 degree angle.

The Bible characterizes change in the modern era as birth pangs! That is, occurring more frequently and with increasing waves of intensity. I think this absolute truth has again manifest in the recent incident in Las Vegas where a man shot at hundreds of revelers, killing 50 or more people.

The good news of our present era is that today’s riots are nowhere near as large or as vicious as they were. The bad news is that, like birth pangs, we will likely have many more waves of demonstrations in the immediate future that will become increasingly frequent and be more ferocious. To this culture, we now submit those who join our profession.

When comparing today’s recruits with the recruits of the 1970’s, one significant difference, in my opinion, is that a higher percentage of our recruits today are not mentally prepared to assume the demanding duties of the job. Even though society has changed greatly, the challenges we call law enforcement have not changed much over the decades. The traumas and stresses are still many and substantial.

Much has been said and written about the Millennial Generation. It may be the most researched generation in history. Because of “helicopter parents,” a redefinition of education, and a slipping of moral standards, this generation comes to the academy without much engrained as to what is right or wrong, and without a real sense of career.

When I started at the Indiana Law Enforcement Academy in 1986, we had about 14,000 full-time officers in the state. Our total number has not changed much since then. Ah, but the number of recruits trained has. Classes of 60 to 80 recruits were usual in those years. Today, we regularly invite 170 or more to the physical assessment. Obviously, we are no longer keeping officers for those 20, 30 and 40-year careers.

In fact, I am told that we are not keeping many new officers much past the first couple of years. I talked recently with a Sheriff’s employee from my home county who told me that they had lost the last five officers sent to the Academy. In years past, that job was highly prized and, once hired, most held on for at least a 30-year career. It does not take a Ph.D. to recognize that this changes policing significantly.

The changes that have occurred in our society in the last couple of years seemed unimaginable to me just five years ago. Transgender officers (we just received word that we now have one in Indiana), homosexuals with a Constitutional right to marry, racial discrimination claims being interjected into every public issue imaginable, and home-grown radical Islamists all seem inconceivable to me, even as I see it all occurring.

The waves of change are likely to come even faster and more forcibly in the next few years, and the chasm between society’s norms and what is required for becoming a high quality law enforcement officer is widening by the week.

Of course, there will always be a remnant of our society that is primed for service no matter how turbulent America becomes. We are again getting a substantial number of military veterans into our ranks. These men and women we embrace! They have been hardened by the forge of war and are our foundation.

So, what should we do to convert those other recruits who have not had the benefit of—some would now say the scourge of—being raised within a strongly disciplined educational system, participating in morality-confirming organizations like the Boy Scouts, having military service or being exposed to a religious philosophy?

Well, one thing that has happened here at the Academy is that there is a renewed stress on character and honesty. Staff instructors routinely discuss lapses in student bearing as well as outright rule violations. In some academies, the pendulum is swinging back to discipline as a major component of the curriculum.

Those who think that effective police training can be done within a community college system—as compared to an academy—are wrong! Those who say that there should be a new, more liberal direction in police recruit training—with society now slipping ever more quickly towards a condition of chaos—are also wrong! That mindset just perpetuates this thrust even more into uncertainty and instability for our entire society.

The military and the police have long been the champions of stability and the status quo. Nonetheless, the military and law enforcement have changed substantially since I began in the 1970s, but these changes have always been at least one step behind what became settled American mores. Today, nothing is settled.

The instructors at our academy now constantly consider how to “bring up” these new recruits to a minimum maturity level, how to establish a belief system for them, how to instill standards, and how to create a sense of dedication in addition to the more traditional dialogues having to do with how to handle a domestic or how to intervene in an active shooter situation.

Indiana has always been a leader in pairing tactical skills with ethical inclination. *Facere lure*, Do It Right! To further this philosophy, the academy basic curriculum needs to be expanded by at least a couple of weeks. As much resistance as local chiefs and sheriffs may have to this, properly indoctrinating these recruits is undoubtedly better than losing them twelve months into their careers and then rehiring for the same position, over and over again. We in law enforcement cannot control in what direction society veers or will veer. But we can control, at least to a degree, our own professional standards.

Along this line, there is a well-known story that no one is certain is true. It could just be an idealistic legend. But the story of King Arthur portrays a kingdom founded upon noble principles. This kingdom was the bedrock of chivalry, with noble knights of the Roundtable administering justice throughout the land. All historians seem in agreement, however, that if the legend of King Arthur is true, he lived in the ending days of the Fifth Century at a time when Roman control over Britain had crumbled. Arthur may have even been a Roman.

As most know, Rome did not collapse through being conquered by an outside military forces that then took over all of Rome’s territories. It decayed and crumbled slowly from within. When this slow collapse occurred, it created a vacuum in the Western Roman Empire, not a succession. King Arthur apparently filled this vacuum in Britain and in some of the Celtic regions.

This model with its noble knights committed to justice in a violent transition-society could be a good model to emulate for our present recruits. History shows that when governments collapse, it is nearly always the top level that falls first. Local government continues in some form simply because it is necessary.

I believe—from consulting my crystal ball—that local police could be the key here. No matter what occurs in our country, we will always need local police officers to protect us. Whether we really need a highway patrol or an FBI is more debatable. The critical element that is needed then for local officers to succeed in under-funded, under-staffed departments will be the ability to internalize their moral standards and a belief system. This internalization process establishes character, and those with a well-developed character not only will be able to endure but will likely be able to excel in such a climate.

Speaking on character, General Charles De Gaulle once said, “A man of character finds a special attractiveness in difficulty, since it is only by coming to grips with difficulty that he can realize his potentialities.”

These officers must recognize a higher calling—like St. Christopher eventually did (another hero of antiquity whose legend may or may not be true). St. Christopher doggedly performed his duties because of a commitment to his religious principles, not because outside authorities defined what these duties were and not because outside influences paved the way.

In the days to come, these officers may not find any real support from the governments they represent or praise from the people they serve. They will need to have this ethic of service and protection buried deep in their souls or even pushing through the simple stresses like working midnight shifts, weekends and nearly all holidays, tolerating abusive people who hate the uniform, living with no-win situations, and existing on low pay will become difficult. Ah, but equipped with this armor of character, even the coming chaotic events of the future will ricochet off their breast plates like blunt arrows.

This is the task then. How do we instill those knightly values when the entire society seems destined to move continuously in the opposite direction? How do we find and recruit those core members for our profession that will become our foundation? And, how do we retain these officers when the policing environment is likely to become even more corrosive?

As grim of a future as I seem to project, I can say from my 1970 experiences—which were very similar to many of the events of today—that there was a very strong comradery between officers, even across department lines, that I have not noticed since. The police were a family group then as well as an occupational group.

And, there is no doubt that the officers of that day also initiated the biggest leap in police professionalism that we have ever seen, before or since. We felt like we were making huge strides every time we introduced a new program, completed a project or made an additional connection with the community. We got through those challenging days, and society and law enforcement were better because of them.

Our Millennial generation is keenly attuned to injustice, and they are well educated. They are just the group that could reinitiate that feeling of dedication if we instruct them properly. They are, in fact, that proverbial clean slate. Consequently, we will need to start from the very beginning with them, more foundational than we have been for any previous generation.

We have had many instances within the human experience where history has repeated itself. This could be one of them. We are not likely to change the pool from which we draw recruits, so the mission becomes how do we shape the strengths this generation possesses to the requirements for becoming guardians, servants, legal scholars, great communicators, and knights? How do we convert these often naïve plebs to durable veteran officers, who will, in the long run, save our society!

These are the questions!

In my 46½ years of law enforcement, I have seen change-a-plenty; most of which, I am proud to say, I have embraced and perpetuated. I feel as if I have lived in the golden era of law enforcement. The next Academy administration, however, will likely see more change in a decade than I have seen in all of the years of my career.

I strongly suspect that the only way our democratic system will survive is through inspiration and providence, as manifested through a highly dedicated cadre of modern-day knights. Can we develop those knights so that they too will want to stay in the profession for 46½ years?

Ah, but the answer to this is an entirely new article altogether.