

THE RODNEY KING SYNDROME

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When police officers are unable to control suspects by normal means, the officers may become frustrated, and are at risk of using inappropriately severe levels of force, argue the authors of this article. Vance McLaughlin is Director of Training with the Savannah Police Department. Steve Smith is Commander of the Savannah Counter Narcotics Team.

INTRODUCTION

A delicate balance exists between the rights of citizens and the needs of the state in a modern democracy. The United States has a number of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies which all have the dual role of protecting the rights of citizens and maintaining order. Law enforcement officers of these agencies are the only ones who have a right to use coercive force in other than self-defense, defense of others, and citizen's arrest situations. Officers may "move forward" toward physical resistance, which is an awesome and unique power.

Police officers, at the local level, deal with a variety of situations, most of which are service calls. Yet the threat of danger to police officers is always present. The specific situation may be "non-violent", but the individuals involved may be potentially violent based on their abuse of alcohol/drugs, their lack of respect for the law, or their enmity towards police officers. In addition, class values often come into play. Often the precipitating incident between the police officer and subject involves a clash between class values. Miller (1958) has identified lower class values as emphasizing toughness, trouble, fate, excitement, and smartness. Other lower class behavior includes being confrontational, and being verbally loud. Lower class behavior has spawned a society where might makes right. Middle class values stress manners; talking in moderate tones;

and avoiding confrontation. Values that function well in the lower class milieu may cause problems when the two classes clash. If race becomes an additional element in a scenario, the situation may become more volatile. The individual police officer brings his own predispositions, respect for the law, and the departmental policies under which he operates to every situation he encounters. During his usually short training period in recruit school, an emphasis is placed on those routine tasks he will face most often and on marksmanship with the handgun. The officer's "world-view" will have a great impact on how he actually handles incidents.

There is a distinct category of police use of force which is purposeful but does not produce the results expected. We have named this category the Rodney King Syndrome. Three different scenarios will be presented, each using two actual incidents for illustration. First, a traffic stop will be examined using the Rodney King and the Joseph Williams incidents. Second, a scenario with the police being summoned by others to help with a hostile subject, using the Eleanor Bumpurs and Eulia Love incidents. Third, incidents which include the taking of hostages, using two California situations, the Henry's Pub/Durant Hotel and the Sacramento "Good Guys" incidents. After the six incidents are presented, the Rodney King Syndrome will be discussed.

Each of the six incidents have similar patterns of development, in which a police officer became frustrated with the way the incident was "not being resolved." The purpose of this initial presentation of events, relying at times on direct quotes from other authors, is to provide the facts of the six incidents.

TRAFFIC STOPS

American police perform a large number of traffic stops every year. The initial reason for the stop is to charge the driver with a traffic violation. In some cases, the police-citizen contact becomes violent.

Rodney King

According to McLaughlin (1992):

On March 3, 1991, Rodney King, a black male, was driving his car in Los Angeles. Los Angeles police officers pulled the car over, had a confrontation with Mr. King, and arrested him on a number of charges. Mr. King was severely lacerated and bruised during the confrontation. This incident may have been reported as a routine traffic arrest except for one added variable. It was being filmed by an uninvolved citizen who had just purchased a videocamera.

The citizen did not start filming until some minutes had passed, so there is no photographic record of what preceded the physical altercation. On the portion of the videotape, that was shown by the national media, the arrest incident showed King being surrounded by a group of white police officers, who struck him fifty-six times with hands, feet, side handle batons, and a Taser electrical weapon. King was not physically threatening the officers during the time that the film was taken.

According to Chief of Police Daryl Gates, this incident was an aberration and did not reflect the conduct of the 8,300 officers who work for him. Even accepting this response, the images of this videotape, being shown every night on national television, shocked most Americans.

President Bush said, “It was sickening to see the beating that was rendered, and there’s no way—there’s no way, in my view—to explain that away.” [Citations omitted]

The Rodney King Incident was much more complicated than was presented to the American people. The facts of the incident were filtered through the national media’s “political correctness” lens and presented a scenario which put the police in the worst

light possible. Rodney King was driving a car at a high rate of speed through residential districts. The police pursuit consisted of a number of vehicles with their lights flashing and sirens blaring. Rodney King refused to pull his car over for a period of time and when he did, he became belligerent. There were two other black males in the car, who surrendered to the police, and were arrested without incident. Rodney King was large and strong and threw an officer off of him and was unaffected by the use of a Taser, a device designed to bring unruly persons under control by delivering an electric shock. He never complied with police orders to stop moving and put his hands behind him to be handcuffed. The police did what they were taught in training, but it did not work. They continued to strike Rodney King until he could be handcuffed.

The Rodney King Incident became widely known primarily because of the showing of part of the videotape on nationally broadcast news programs. Other incidents have occurred that have many of the same elements as the King Incident.

Joseph Williams Incident

Joseph Williams was a black motorist who was shot by Savannah Police on September 9, 1992. An officer in a marked patrol unit saw a vehicle with a bogus license plate; the license plate said "Buckle Up For Jesus." The officer tried to get the driver to pull the car over, finally using lights and siren to try to make the stop. The car sped away at high speeds and a pursuit began. Another marked vehicle joined the pursuit for a number of miles.

The suspect car pulled over and the two marked units tried to block the vehicle. An officer got out of his car with a shotgun, and the suspect spun his car toward that officer, hitting the patrol car and knocking the officer down. The suspect then sped forward to the other car.

The fallen officer got up and thought the suspect was backing towards him. The officer fired one shotgun blast through the rear window. The suspect then drove off.

The officer who had stayed in his car, pursued Williams. The suspect finally pulled into the driveway of a residence. He got out of his car with a knife in one hand and an unknown object in the other. The pursuing officer got out of his car and retreated to the back of the vehicle as the subject ran by, throwing the unknown object at the officer.

More officers arrived and they found Joseph Williams by a fence in the backyard of the residence. Joseph Williams, who was six feet tall and weighed 210 pounds, brandished the knife, and lunged at the officer closest to him.

As he was coming at the officer, he yelled, "Kill me, kill me." The officer fired once with his .38 caliber revolver, hitting Williams, but with no apparent effect.

The officer fired again, and Mr. Williams turned to run in another direction. Another officer tackled him and he was handcuffed. The Williams incident is an example of "suicide-by-cop", in which a subject actually wants a police officer to take his life (Geberth 1993).

In both of these traffic stops, the subjects were violating the motor vehicle code and officers tried to get them to pull over. The officers pursued the subjects and neither of them would submit to a lawful arrest.

DEALING WITH HOSTILE SUBJECTS

The police frequently deal with people who are hostile. In the following two incidents involving Eleanor Bumpurs and Eulia Love, police were summoned by others who were fearful of the situation.

Eleanor Bumpurs Incident

The Eleanor Bumpurs (some authors spelled the last name Bumphurs) incident caused an uproar among some citizens because the media reported that an elderly black woman, who was immensely overweight, was shotgunned to death by police in her own apartment because she refused to be evicted.

After the media fanfare, an in-depth investigation of the incident took place and the following explanation was printed in Volume 1 of *Report to the Governor* presented by the New York State Commission on Criminal Justice and the Use of Force in May 1987.

A sixty-seven year old woman living in public housing in New York City failed to pay her July 1984 rent and utility bill of \$96.85. Following customary procedures, Housing Authority representatives demanded payment, served requisite notices preliminary to eviction proceedings, and, in phone calls and a visit to the apartment, learned that Eleanor Bumpurs had not paid the rent because her stove, the hallway light, and a pipe in her bathroom needed repair. Between July and October efforts to resolve the matter were unsuccessful.

Denying Housing representatives entry on each occasion they visited, Mrs. Bumpurs told them that “people had come through the windows, the walls, and the floor,...ripped her off... cleaned her out,” that her apartment needed repair, that Reagan was at fault, that she was paying rent to a court, that the bathroom tub was loaded with feces, and, at one point greeted the Housing representatives with a large kitchen knife, which she pointed at one man and said “I’m going to get him.” Her two daughters were unresponsive to efforts by the Housing Authority to enlist their aid to avert Mrs. Bumpurs’ eviction, as was, the Department of Social Services.

On October 25, 1984, a Department of Social Services psychiatrist went to the apartment to examine Mrs. Bumpurs, who greeted him with a knife in her hand and told him that she was harassed by people who wanted to “use the apartment as a warehouse”, that her “children had been killed by Castro and Reagan, who also lived in the building” that someone “messed in her bathtub” and that she “had not used [the knife]

recently.” Concluding that Mrs. Bumpurs was psychotic, hallucinatory, delusional, and could not manage her own affairs or distinguish reality from nonreality, the psychiatrist nonetheless concluded that he could not require her involuntary commitment. Thus, Housing Authority decided to evict Mrs. Bumpurs and have Social Services present to hospitalize her.

At 9:00 A.M., on October 29, 1984, Housing and Social Services personnel, Housing police, and a City marshal met at the project. Learning then that Mrs. Bumpurs was emotionally disturbed, extremely large, “always carried a knife” and had a “history of lye throwing”, the Housing police called for backup and an ambulance. As they reached the front door of Mrs. Bumpurs’ apartment they smelled what they thought was lye and identified and heard Mrs. Bumpurs say “Come on in motherfuckers, I have some shit for your ass.”

Unable to persuade Mrs. Bumpurs to let them into the apartment, the Housing police sought help from New York City Police Department’s Emergency Service Unit (ESU), specially trained and equipped to deal with emotionally disturbed persons. The two ESU officers who responded also failed to gain entry and told Mrs. Bumpurs to remain calm while they removed the lock. Through the hole in the door they saw a hazy cloud and smelled a strong odor they thought was lye or another caustic liquid, and realized that Mrs. Bumpurs was standing behind the door with a long knife. Four more ESU officers and a supervisor with additional equipment who responded to a call for back-up told Mrs. Bumpurs that they wanted to make sure that nobody got hurt, evoking her response that “if somebody comes through the door we’ll see who gets hurt.” The ESU supervisor decided that they would have to take Mrs. Bumpurs into custody to prevent her from harming herself or others and, when she moved from the front door to a stool at

the rear of the living room still armed with the knife, the ESU supervisor decided to go in.

Each officer who entered the apartment had a specific and predetermined assignment. The first officer had a Y bar, an instrument used to immobilize an emotionally disturbed person safely and without harm by pinning the person between prongs. However, as that officer proceeded across the living room Mrs. Bumpurs rose from the stool, knife in hand, and approached the officer slashing at him with the knife. Unable to pin Mrs. Bumpurs to the wall with the Y bar, a second officer, armed with a plastic shield, sought unsuccessfully to use the plastic shield to knock the knife from Mrs. Bumpurs' hand. She turned the knife on the officer with the plastic shield, slashing at him as he fell to his knees. The first officer tried to save the fallen officer from being slashed by pinning Mrs. Bumpurs to the wall with the Y bar but he slipped and started to fall forward, Mrs. Bumpurs slashing at him.

A third officer armed with a shotgun, whose predetermined primary responsibility was to protect the other officers, shouted "drop the knife" three or four times. When Mrs. Bumpurs continued slashing at the other officers, the officer discharged the shotgun twice, killing Mrs. Bumpurs. (page 47-50)

Eulia Love

A second incident, that had striking similarities to the Eleanor Bumpurs case, involved Eulia Love. According to Gates (1992):

Eulia Mae Love was a thirty-nine-year-old widow with three daughters, two of whom, aged twelve and fifteen, lived with her in a three-bedroom house on South Orchard Avenue, well-tended street in south central L.A. Her husband had died of sickle-cell anemia

six months before and she was paying the bills and the mortgage with a monthly Social Security check of \$680.

On the morning of January 3, John Ramirez from the Southern California Gas Company showed up at Mrs. Love's door. She was six months and \$69 overdue on her bill. Ramirez told her he would have to receive payment of at least \$22, or he would disconnect the service. Immediately, Mrs. Love began yelling profanities at him, Ramirez said. He turned and walked to the gas meter, which was located around to the side of the house, stooped down, and reached for the valve.

Mrs. Love came up behind him with a large, long-handled shovel. When he looked up, she was standing above him with the metal part of the shovel raised above her head. Telling him she wasn't going to allow him to shut off her gas, she screamed several expletives and brought the shovel down. It struck Ramirez on his left forearm, causing a contusion.

Mrs. Love raised the shovel, "frothing at the mouth," according to Ramirez, as she prepared to hit him again.

He fled. When he got back to his office, he reported to his boss. The LAPD was called and Ramirez filed an assault-with-a-deadly-weapon report. Meanwhile, Mrs. Love took her Social Security check around to Boy's Market and used it to buy a money order for \$22.09.

That afternoon, the gas company dispatched two more men. They arrived at South Orchard Avenue a little after 4:00 P.M. in two separate vehicles. One, a gas company truck, was driven by Robert Aubry, who stopped to call the police dispatcher from a pay phone and asked for an officer to accompany them. Parked several doors down the street, he waited. Mrs. Love, spotting the truck, came out and said to Aubry: "Gas man, are you here to turn my gas off?" Before he could reply, she said, "Those motherfuckers said that I owe

them eighty dollars. I'm not paying them any motherfucking eighty dollars."

"I don't know anything about your gas bill," Aubry replied.

"I'm just here taking a break."

Mrs. Love started to walk away, then turned. "You guys can suck on my ass. I'll give them twenty dollars, but I'm not going to give them no motherfucking eighty dollars—they can suck my ass." At which point she disappeared into her house. Three minutes later out she came, clutching an eleven-inch serrated boning knife. Without a word, Mrs. Love began violently slashing branches of a tree in her front lawn. Several fell to the ground.

While this was going on, a call went out from police communications: "Any unit in the vicinity, 415 business dispute, meet the gas man, 11926 South Orchard Avenue, Code 2." Driving west on 120th Street, Officer O'Callaghan reached for his radio transmitter and acknowledged the call. It was 4:15 when the patrol car rolled up beside the Chevy driven by the second gas company man, W.L. Jones.

Pointing across the street to Eulia Love's house, Jones said, "We want the lady to either pay her gas bill or we will cut it off." The officers turned and saw Mrs. Love pacing back and forth with the knife.

"One of our men was out here earlier and she hit him with a shovel when he tried to shut off the gas." Jones added, "A police report was made. Here it is."

While the officers read the report, Mrs. Love yelled, "You're not going to come down to my house and shut off my gas, motherfucking son of a bitch."

Hopson said, "What will you need from us?"

We would like you [to] stand by while we either collect the money or shut off the gas," Jones replied.

"Wait here."

Officer Hopson drove the car up to the house. Fifteen feet away stood Mrs. Love, five feet four, 175 pounds, flailing a knife. They observed froth coming out of her mouth. As they got out, Hopson, who is black, and O'Callaghan, who is white, both drew their service revolvers.

"You're not coming up on my lawn motherfuckers," Mrs. Love screamed. "You're not going to shut off my gas."

As she continued to yell obscenities, the officers repeatedly shouted, "Police officers. Drop the knife, lady. We're not here to harm you."

Hopson and O'Callaghan pleaded with her for five minutes, but Mrs. Love wouldn't drop the knife. She began walking toward her house which was set back along a walk. The officers followed, both with their guns pointing at the ground. They kept repeating, "We won't harm you. Drop the knife."

She turned and began walking backward yelling, "Fuck you! Ain't no motherfucker going to shut off my gas."

Then she stood still. Hopson stopped ten feet from her and raised his gun in both hands, arms outstretched, in a semi-crouched position. O'Callaghan, nearer, stopped too, baton in his left hand, gun in his right hand, pointed at Love. For several seconds they formed this tableau. Then O'Callaghan, using his baton, struck Mrs. Love on her right hand, forcing her to drop the knife. Before he could scramble for it, Mrs. Love swooped down and grabbed it. Holding the blade in her fingers now, she raised her arm and faced O'Callaghan. He was about six feet from her. Hopson, roughly eight. She reared back to throw the knife.

"Don't do it, lady, don't do it!" Hopson shouted.

Eulia Love threw the knife. And that's when they shot her.

I don't know how close the knife came to hitting O'Callaghan, but it sailed sixty-eight feet. I do know it took less than three seconds for the two officers to empty their weapons.

Eight bullets struck her. When the ambulance arrived moments later, she was pronounced dead.

"It was not a medal of valor shooting," Chuck Higbie concluded.

And all I could say was "Oh, shit." (pp. 192-94)

The five deputy chiefs on the Shooting Review Board voted 4 to 1 that the shooting was in compliance with department policy and the officers had fired in self-defense. The two officers had emptied their guns, a result of "rapid fire syndrome," which is, in fact, the way they had been trained for life threatening encounters occurring at short distances. The district attorney, after doing his own investigation, did not file criminal charges against the officers (Gates, 1992). The Los Angeles Police Commission disputed the police version of the shooting. The police department said that the incident lasted seven minutes, while the findings of the Police Commission estimated the time at two-and-a-half minutes. This incident prompted an investigation by the Police Commission of past shootings by Los Angeles police officers (Hill 1979).

Both the Eleanor Bumpurs and Eulia Love incident were reported initially by the media much like the Rodney King incident. Because of the outcome of these events, the media reports emphasized the tragic outcome, and provided only a selective version of the facts.

HOSTAGE SITUATIONS

Henry's Pub

The first hostage incident we will examine took place in Berkeley, California and began before midnight on September 26, 1990. A heavily-armed Iranian male, Mehrdad Dashti, entered Henry's Pub, located within the Durant Hotel. Dashti

was armed with a Smith & Wesson .44 magnum revolver, a Ruger 9mm handgun, and a Cobray .380 caliber weapon that had been illegally converted to a machine gun. He opened fire on patrons in the bar, hitting some while others escaped. In the first five minutes, seven people had been shot and thirty-seven had been taken hostage.

A patrol officer saw people running from the hotel and recognized the sound of gunfire. He radioed for assistance. Patrol officers arrived and the Berkeley Police Department Barricaded Subject Hostage Negotiation Team (BSHNT) was put in place to contain the situation. Patrol officers aided victims and questioned those that had escaped.

Ten minutes after the incident began, a male and female hostage came out. Initially, BSHNT members thought it was the hostage taker and a female hostage. A sergeant rushed to save the woman when Dashti fired from a window, creasing the sergeant's forehead. Other officers gave covering fire and the two hostages and sergeant were taken to safety.

The situation stabilized until just after 3:00 A.M. The police used suppressed fire weapons to put out some street lights. Dashti heard this and fired some fully automatic bursts from his Cobray. Around 3:30 A.M. a female hostage escaped and said that Dashti was watching this event on television and became upset when a news reporter stated that one of the shooting victims had died.

Negotiators tried to get Dashti to come to the phone, but he would not budge from his position. He used an intermediary to talk for him. Dashti demanded a number of things, one of which was \$16 trillion dollars for "mental telepathy" services. At 4:30 A.M., the BSHNT had made their preparations; at 5:15 A.M. a scout team was deployed; and at 6:15 the negotiators advised there was no expectation of a settlement. At 7:23 A.M. the team was given a go signal.

As the police entered, they saw the hostages up against the windows and doorways. Dashti had put himself behind furniture and when the flash-bang grenades went off, fired two shots. Police came in at top speed shouting at the hostages to get down.

Dashti then turned, moving toward a group of hostages with his gun leveled at them. Two members of the BSHNT identified Dashti and put him down with fire from their MP-5 submachine guns (Holland & Cortin 1991).

Good Guys Incident

This incident occurred on April 4, 1991, in Sacramento, California. When the call came in at 13:35, the Sacramento County Sheriff's Department Special Enforcement Detail (SED) was already geared up in anticipation of going on a drug raid. They immediately rushed to the scene. The area had been secured and initial reports were that four armed Asian males had botched a robbery and had taken hostages in a Good Guys electronics store. As the SED team interviewed employees about the floor plan of the store, it was determined that around fifty hostages had been taken.

The SED team felt there was only one entrance to the store that did not have alarms on it. They would have to come in through a fabrics store on the north side of the building. The subjects heard movement by the police and barricaded that entrance from the other side. A pinhole camera was installed by the police, but was of limited use because of the design of the store.

Negotiations went on for over two hours with the department's Critical Incident Negotiating Team. Demands varied from four million dollars, to forty 1,000-year-old ginseng plants, to a military helicopter, to transporting everyone to Asia. A demand that was continuous was for bullet resistant vests. Hostages had been exchanged for bullet resistant vests, and some felt that the exchanges might lead to a negotiated settlement. Another cause for optimism was the generally high rate of success in negotiating with armed robbers.

Hostages had been tied up and been arranged in front of the glass doors in standing and kneeling positions. Eight hours into the incident, the subjects shot a male hostage in the leg and let him drag himself out.

The police attempted to have all the subjects move to the television area of the store by putting the hostage on the news. This did not work.

When an elderly hostage was shot in the leg, a decision was made to move. A tethered female hostage was sent out to receive another vest and a hostage told the police by phone that the subjects were going to start executing hostages.

A police precision marksman was able to line up a head shot as the door swung open to let the female retrieve the vest. In a fraction of a second the door was pulled shut and the bullet hit the doorframe. The SED team hit the door immediately and in the next few seconds flashbangs were thrown and the assault began. The subjects fired at police and at the bound hostages. All four subjects were neutralized.

Eleven hostages were wounded by the subjects, three hostages were killed by the subjects, and three hostages were injured by broken glass. Three of the subjects were killed and one of the subjects was wounded. None of the police officers was shot.

THE RODNEY KING SYNDROME

Rodney King has become what we have termed a “condensed symbol.” Just as “Willie Horton” was emblematic of the indefensible parole of violent offenders that wrought terror on unsuspecting and vulnerable citizens, “Rodney King” has become the symbol for police brutality as an element of order maintenance.

Each of the six incidents discussed involved high levels of police use of force, but the phases through which the incidents evolved can occur in other police–citizen contacts. A key element is frustration of the officers at their inability to resolve these situations. It has been postulated (Dollard, Miller, Doob, Mower & Sears, 1939) that aggression is always the result of frustration. Certainly, as officers are frustrated in their attempts to bring a situation to closure, their efforts will escalate to the use of force. We hope this use of force will be legitimate and

necessary to the situation. There is always the concern that the frustration will produce more force than required.

While empirical evidence is lacking on how stress affects decision-making in real situations, laboratory studies have measured individual decision making under stress. Keinan (1987) found that a key element in decision making—evaluating all alternatives—was impaired when subjects were exposed to uncontrollable stress. Some studies show that stress affects decision making *after* exposure to the stressor, rather than during exposure to the stressor. Two of Schaeffer's (1989) findings were that subjects exposed to stress use shortcutting strategies in decision making and have increased confidence in the decisions that are made.

Groups are affected by decision making under stress differently than individuals. According to Driskell and Salas (1991):

Some researchers have observed an increased tendency for subordinate group members to acquiesce to authority when under stress. For example, Foushee and Helmreich (1988) note that subordinate flight-crew members are more hesitant to question the captain under emergency conditions, sometimes deferring to the extent of not offering valuable task information. One explanation for this phenomena is derived from the organizational literature and holds that organizations respond to stress by a centralization of authority so that control and authority for decision making is concentrated at higher levels of the organizational hierarchy (Hermann 1963; Staw, Sandelands & Dutton 1981).

However, this hypothesis has not been directly tested at the small-group level of analysis. Furthermore, some research suggests a competing explanation: Group member under stress (both high and low status) become more receptive to task information from others (Lanzetta 1955; Torrance 1967). The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of stress on group status and

decision making and to provide a test of those alternative hypotheses. (p.473)

Driskell and Salas found that group leaders and group members became more receptive to information provided by others. In the discussion of the findings, these researchers recognized the limitations of projecting their findings on specific groups.

Law enforcement officers have been called “solitary actors” because they operate alone and with little direct supervision (Skolnick 1966). Officers are rarely taught to operate in groups, except as members of teams serving warrants to potentially violent individuals, a drug strike force, or special weapons and tactics.

The following are seven common elements of the Rodney King Syndrome. All the elements mentioned do not have to exist for this syndrome to be present; there must simply be enough elements to produce high levels of frustration.

1. Spontaneous, precipitating incident. There was no warning that this specific incident was going to happen.

2. Affront to the authority of the police. A chance was given to the perpetrator(s) to surrender to police authority and the offer was rejected.

3. Elongated time phase. At least twenty minutes passed between the time of police involvement and resolution of incident. This stands in contrast to a situation where an officer is physically attacked, immediately responds, and the incident is concluded.

4. Subject is not under control. The subject is still perceived by the officer as a threat.

5. Continued affront to authority, coupled with the frustration of the reasonable expectations of the police (failure

of conventional police tactics and equipment to bring about the expected result of control).

6. Changing and dynamic nature of situation frustrates formulating an effective plan of action (each police action neutralized by subject reaction)

7. Incident resolution includes:

- a. Elements of frustration, excitement, and fear develop in officers
- b. Officers now acting as independent functionaries
- c. Officers refuse to yield until resolution is achieved

Each of the six incidents is included in the chart titled *Police Use of Force-Examples of the "Rodney King Syndrome."* (See pages 70-71.)

This chart illustrates which elements of the Rodney King Syndrome are found in each incident.

DISCUSSION

The chart indicates that while incidents varied in time (from 7 minutes to 7 hours and 30 minutes) and varied in content of incident (stopping an inebriated motorist to quasi-military action against armed terrorists), certain elements existed that lead to increased frustration on the part of the police.

Three specific areas will be discussed in relation to their specific impact on some of these incidents. First, the failure of agencies other than the police lead to some of these situations. Second, frustration on the part of the police is examined. Finally, improved response by the police is suggested.

Failure of Other Agencies

The social service/criminal justice system had interacted with Rodney King, Mehrdad Dashti, and Eleanor Bumphurs in varying degrees before the incidents occurred. Rodney King was a convicted burglar who was out on parole. He had an alcohol

problem, which exacerbated his problems with law enforcement. Eleanor Bumpurs had been contacted by a number of social service agencies that were supposed to work with her. The agencies' failure to aid Mrs. Bumphurs is evident by the demotion of two city employees as a result of her death as stated in the following magazine article. According to *Jet* (1984):

[T]wo supervisors in New York City's welfare agency were demoted recently for not providing the proper social service counseling for the elderly woman.

The supervisors demoted were Marie Franco, the Bronx Borough manager of the General Social Services Division, and Eleanor Walton, the director of the agency's division where Mrs. Bumphurs' case was reviewed. Mrs. Franco failed to obtain emergency rent payment and more psychiatric counseling for Mrs. Bumphurs, according to Human Resources Administrator George Gross.

Ms. Walton did not properly review the case, he said.

N.Y. Mayor Ed Koch said at a news conference that Mrs. Bumphurs died, "not it appears because of brutality but because of something more complex—a chain of mistakes and circumstances that came together in the worst possible way with the worst possible circumstances." (p. 30-31)

Police confronted Eleanor Bumpurs because no other social service agency had been effective in helping her.

Mehrdad Dashti had heard voices that said he owned the state of California. He was known to authorities in Albany, San Francisco, and Berkeley. Motamedi, Taylor, & Wallace (1990) stated:

According to investigators, Dashti used a variety of fake identities, occasionally masqueraded as a police officer and had several run-ins with the law before

yesterday's violent outburst. Alameda County social service officials classified Dashti as a paranoid schizophrenic in April 1988, according to a document found in his apartment. (p. 1)

That the police is the agency of last resort cannot be overstressed. The military can only be used when it is obvious that the duly elected government has a situation beyond its control. Thus, except in rare cases, the police are called in to handle situations that the "experts" cannot handle. If a psychiatrist has a patient that is violent, a social worker has an assaultive client, or a teacher has a homicidal student, the police can be summoned by a phone call. The police have nobody to call, except other law enforcement people, when they are frustrated by a bizarre set of circumstances.

In the incidents discussed involving hostage situations, specially trained SWAT teams still encumbered by civilian rules attempted to deal with highly dangerous situations using military tactics and military weapons.

Frustration

Frustration is the prime cause of Rodney King Syndrome; the police fail in their initial attempts to bring a subject under control using tactics which are usually successful. The officer finds that his physical skills, with or without weapons, and tactical knowledge are not equal to these unusual incidents. The mind-set that develops within a police officer is formed by the police subculture, training, and commercial video representations (television and movies) about the police. A central belief in this mind-set is that the police must take control of all situations.

If we hypothesize three facts, the dilemma becomes clear. First, in all six of these incidents, it would be improper for the police to ignore the situation and not to become involved. Second, the officers all gave a good faith effort to bring the situation to a close without using force. Third, despite these efforts, the subject(s) were either killed or severely injured.

Perhaps, in all of these incidents, the subject's resistance was the main cause of his or her injuries. On the other hand, could the police have done better?

Improving Police Response

The response of any organization to a problem within its purview can always be improved. In the case of the police, they have a monopoly on most legal use of force for other than self-defense reasons. The rest of society is dependent on police to use force prudently, at the lowest reasonable level, to accomplish the legitimate goals of law enforcement.

The first improvement may be simply the realization by the police officer that he may not be able to resolve all situations cleanly and quickly for a number of reasons. First, his training may be inadequate for a specific situation. Second, in some situations, there may be no "proper" response, just a "best" response. Third, he must control himself before he can control others. One officer commented, after reading a rough draft of this article, that the term frustration was synonymous to anger in the six incidents. This is probably true.

The second improvement is, during police training, to present incidents like the ones discussed here. These incidents could also be presented in special training for supervisors.

The third improvement is to make sure that the police have the best training and meet measurable standards based on this training. Equipment that would help bring these situations to a satisfactory conclusion must be readily available to the officer.

CONCLUSION

Each of these incidents mentioned have some common elements. At the moment before the police used the final force that brought the subject under control, many of officers would have been happy—if in the same situation—to have been as successful. But, in retrospect, at the start of the incident, a different type of response may have allowed avoidance of a final, sometimes fatal, confrontation. The heavy use of force

might still have been necessary in some of the above situations, but if even a small percentage of violent confrontations can be handled more humanely, it is a goal for the police to strive for. It is primarily because of the role of police in a democracy and the trust that *must* exist between them and the citizenry, that the citizens need to believe that police have used the best judgement and tactics available.

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