



THE STATUS AND ROLE OF POLICE IN A FREE SOCIETY

The national news has been dominated for the last several months by incidents of violence and deaths in connection with actions taken by police. A great deal has now been said – sometimes unthinkingly and at other times more reasonably – about these incidents. One voice stood out for its obvious and not-so-obvious messages. Writing in the August 19th Washington Post, 17-year Los Angeles veteran police officer Sunil Dutta wrote an intimidatingly-titled opinion piece: “I’m a cop. If you don’t want to get hurt, don’t challenge me.” He wrote:

“No officer goes out in the field wishing to shoot anyone ... [but they] know they are legally vested with the authority to detain suspects ... in the overwhelming majority of cases it is not the cops, but the people they stop, who can prevent detentions from turning into tragedies. ... I can’t even count how many times I withstood curses, screaming tantrums, aggressive and menacing encroachments on my safety zone, and outright challenges to my authority. In the vast majority of such encounters, I was able to peacefully resolve the situation without using force. ... if you don’t want to get shot, tased, pepper-sprayed, struck with a baton or thrown to the ground, just do what I tell you. Don’t argue with me, don’t call me names, don’t tell me that I can’t stop you, don’t say I’m a racist pig, don’t threaten that you’ll sue me and take away my badge. Don’t scream at me that you pay my salary, and don’t even think of aggressively walking towards me. ... [even] if you believe (or know) that the cop stopping you is violating your rights or is acting like a bully, I guarantee that the situation will not become easier if you show your anger and resentment. Worse, initiating a physical confrontation is a sure recipe for getting hurt. Police are legally permitted to use deadly force when they assess a serious threat to their or someone else’s life. Save your anger for later, ... Do what the officer tells you to and it will end safely for both of you. We have a justice system in which you are presumed innocent; if a cop can do his or her job unmolested, that system can run its course. Later,

you can ask for a supervisor, lodge a complaint or contact civil rights organizations if you believe your rights were violated. Feel free to sue the police! Just don’t challenge a cop during a stop. An average person cannot comprehend the risks and has no true understanding of a cop’s job. ... An average cop is always concerned with his or her safety and tries to control every encounter. That is how we are trained. While most citizens are courteous and law abiding, the subset of people we generally interact with everyday are not the genteel types. You don’t know what is in my mind when I stop you. Did I just get a radio call of a shooting moments ago? Am I looking for a murderer or an armed fugitive? For you, this might be a ‘simple’ traffic stop, for me each traffic stop is a potentially dangerous encounter.”

Dutta acknowledges that “corrupt and bully cops” are out there. And he is in favor of video documentation of all interactions that police have with the public, which would likely encourage everyone to behave better. But his main message: that belligerence can never help, though it could hurt, is a good one. (And is true in most people’s encounters with others!) Nor will “justice” ever be the result of someone’s encounter with the police. It’s not supposed to be. That’s the job of courts and judges.

Another important subtext here is that the police are the employees of and are paid by the citizenry. This being the case, people should bear it in mind and try to be sensible and considerate bosses. None of us would think a good employer should yell and scream and curse and threaten their employees, would we? How well would employees do their jobs if they were abused in that way? To the extent that we think of ourselves as “paying the salaries” of the police, our encounters with them should reflect our appreciation of the fact that most cops are not philosophy PhD’s or psychiatrists, let alone paragons of virtue. We would have to pay them considerably more than we do if we were to expect that level of “customer service.” Even if we wanted to develop and enforce a higher standard of devotion, care and courtesy – and a lower level of job security – all of

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which might be good things – we will have to pay more for that.

It is also implicit – and therefore often overlooked! – that in a democratic society “of, by and for the people,” the idea of policing our communities is very different than in “police states” whether formal or functional. A free society should not need – should actively resist! – the idea of “being policed” by agents of the government as if people were zoo animals or prison inmates. It should be remembered that before the rise of modern municipal police departments – this was only as recently as 1845 for New York City! – the citizens themselves were called upon to assist the authorities in the job of law enforcement. It was a “mini-draft” of sorts, going back to at least the 13th Century, for a “hue and cry” to go out and all able-bodied men required to assist in the pursuit of a criminal. Hollywood westerns have familiarized many Americans with the power of a sheriff in those settings to conscript whomever he chooses to form a posse and go after the bad guys. Things don’t work that way today because part of the motivation of forming what have become modern police departments was the desire of ordinary people to escape such onerous and unpredictable demands.

It is a constant hazard of free societies for their members to lose sight of the foundations of their own way of life. As Thomas Jefferson noted not long after the American experiment began:

“The mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately.”

But it can look this way when some people are “legally vested” with authority over others, as police are. It may seem unfair and it is surely unreasonable to suppose that those whom the police detain are responsible for their own safety and bear the blame when they are injured or killed at the hands of the police. But in a free society it is not unreasonable to think that people should be aware of and bear in mind their role as the actual source of authority of the system under which they live. And with such authority comes a certain responsibility that everyone should be willing to recognize and accept.

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
 “WELCOME TO THE
 FUTURE: 2015”
 >>> Sunday, January 4th, 2015 <<<
 SHERATON GRAND DFW AIRPORT
 CORNER OF 114 AND ESTERS**

All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar , or our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at:

**- www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought -
 JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!**

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion. Today we meet at the Jason’s Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of 635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Get together to discuss today’s service topic or other conundrums of interest for Freethinkers. It happens most non-1st Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM; see the meetup site!

Game Night: The regular game night crew meets nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

Have Another Idea? Email or call us about it!

“He’s a comical old fellow,” said Scrooge’s nephew, “that’s the truth: and not so pleasant as he might be. However, his offenses carry their own punishment, and I have nothing to say against him. ... I am sorry for him; I couldn’t be angry with him if I tried. Who suffers by his ill whims? Himself, always.”
-Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol

**YOUR GENEROUS DONATIONS
 TO THE NTCOF ARE NEEDED,
 APPRECIATED,
 AND TAX-DEDUCTIBLE!!**



The North Texas Church of Freethought
 The Fellowship of Unbelievers

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