

The BJA Executive Session on

Police Leadership

2015

The BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership is a multi-year endeavor started in 2010 with the goal of developing innovative thinking that would help create police leaders uniquely qualified to meet the challenges of a changing public safety landscape.

In support of an integrated approach to creating safe and viable communities across America, the project directors recruited 20+ principals from a range of disciplines. The principals, in turn, led national field teams of practitioners focused on the work of policing and the organization of the future.

To gain new insights on leadership, the *BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership* engaged police chiefs in documenting their own paths and invited leaders to participate in various audio and video forums to tell their stories and discuss the future of policing and police leadership.

Please visit our website, <http://bjaleader.org>, to learn more about this project and to access a broad array of interactive, multimedia resources.

The principals are supported in their work by a team that includes project director Darrel W. Stephens, project strategist Nancy McKeon, and BJA Senior Policy Advisor Steve Edwards.

From time to time the Metropolitan Nashville Police Department Chief Steve Anderson sends his employees email messages to share his thoughts on current issues in policing. In this email Chief Anderson made his employees aware of a speech on race relations by FBI Director James Comey. He also provided his perspective on the challenges police continue to face in developing and sustaining the trust and confidence of the public. The BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership received permission to publish excerpts from one of those emails on its website. We have divided Chief Anderson's email into two parts.

Part 1: The Power of a Single Officer to Influence Police Race Relations

by

**Chief Steve Anderson – Metropolitan
Nashville PD - March 10, 2015**

So why would the Director of the FBI concern himself with race relations in

America.¹ This is what many might describe as a “social issue” best addressed by “the government” and not by law enforcement personnel. Why can’t we just leave it to those who are “in charge” to bring about change? Why is it our responsibility? These are legitimate questions but with a somewhat apparent answer.

In essence, as a matter of public perception, we are “the government”. And, beyond any perception the public may have, we are certainly the most visible representatives of the government. We are the people the public depends on to solve their problems. And, we are good at solving problems. That’s why we signed up for this job and that’s why we keep doing the job day after day. In many ways, the officer on the street is better positioned to shape history than the mayor, the governor or the president. A single act by a law enforcement officer can define us, and the government, for years to come.

Since Ferguson we have become keenly aware of the racial tensions across America. What we must not forget is that Ferguson did not create those tensions. Ferguson merely unclenched the discontent and distrust that has been lying, just below the surface, for decades. Actually, for centuries.

All is quiet at this time. As we speak, there is no burning; there are no violent protests. It would be very easy to slip back into our comfort zones, pull those comfortable covers snugly around us and convince ourselves that all is well and that Ferguson is behind us. As a best case scenario, the tensions that existed, just below the surface, prior to Ferguson, are again, just below the surface. As Director Comey suggests, now is the time “to have an open and honest discussion about what our relationship is today—what it should be, and what it could be, and what it needs to be—if we took more time to better understand one another.”

Actually, here in Nashville, this process started long before Ferguson. It’s just that after Ferguson people here in Nashville noticed what you were doing. How you handled, even facilitated, the demonstrations in a calm and professional manner. They started to take note of how you interacted with the public and how you treat all persons with respect. In this time of national unrest, social media has been flooded with accounts, and even videos, of police officers being depicted in a very bad light. In the middle of all of this, two of our officers received nationwide praise for the calm and professional manner with which they conducted themselves while making an arrest under very contentious circumstances and while being challenged by a crowd that had gathered. All of your hard work, along with the respectful and professional manner you conduct your day to day activities, create deposits in the public “bank of good will and credibility” that we can draw against. Even when one of our veteran officers was caught on video losing control, creating a potential for negative national exposure, the public has been understanding. At present, the “withdrawals” have not exceeded the “deposits” you have made.

But, as professional as you are every day, we have a lot of history to overcome. In past years, here, and in other places, we, have not been as professional as we should have or could have been. Unfortunately, it is human nature to not only judge us by our history,

¹ FBI Director James Comey’s speech can be found here. <http://www.fbi.gov/news/speeches/hard-truths-law-enforcement-and-race>

but to also judge us by the actions of officers in other places. According to the Department of Justice, there are 17,985 law enforcement agencies in the United States, employing more than 1.1 million full time law enforcement officers. Unfortunately, any single act of any law enforcement officer is, in the public's eye, imputed to us.

As my friend, Milwaukee Chief of Police Ed Flynn, so aptly points out, most people talk about “the police” as if the more than 17,000 law enforcement agencies across the United States are one and the same, and as if every police officer is just like any other police officer anywhere. Again, this is human nature. As unfair as it may be, it is reality.

As to things that happen elsewhere, all we can do is to work hard every day to let the Nashville public know that we are professionals worthy of their respect. As to the history we have to overcome, we cannot change the history, but we can change the future. We must acknowledge the history and let it be a constant reminder of where we need to be tomorrow. One thing that will not help us is to fail to recognize that we are not far removed, either in time or distance, from events that we had no part of but remain imputed to us. We did not take part in the events occurring on “Bloody Sunday” in Selma and in many places across America. Unfortunately, we carry on our shoulders the legacy of those who served as law enforcement officers before us—a legacy that is still fresh in the minds of many. This is a legacy of mistrust and resentment that we must work each and every day to heal. We are not responsible for those acts. We are responsible, however, to continue regaining the public credibility and confidence that was lost long before you and I began to serve.

Part 2: Selma - The Nashville Connection and The Long Path to Change

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<http://bjaleader.org>

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