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The Vision that Changed American Policing

We have lost a great voice for human rights and decency that spoke to us always in dignified, intelligent, measured, and eloquent tones. Among so many things, Warren Christopher's death reminds us that 20 years have passed since the Christopher Commission, created by Mayor Tom Bradley on the heels of the Rodney King incident, issued its report. In addition to prompting a sweeping overhaul of the Los Angeles Police Department, the Report has become the essence of police best practice and the starting point for all serious discussions of police reform. Of all the different ways in which he made the world a better place, Warren Christopher's work in helping to bring fairness, effectiveness, and proportionality to policing in America will be among his most enduring legacies.

Christopher's vision for American policing began with key observations about the King incident and led ultimately to a collection of first principles or guiding rules for effective law enforcement, including these propositions:

- It is possible, without compromising the safety of police officers or the public at large, to manage the risk of police error and misconduct, thereby diminishing excessive force, corruption, biased policing, and unnecessary police shootings.
- The police have an affirmative obligation to ensure constitutional policing and to ferret out those few police officers unwilling to police in that manner.
- The police must operate under vigilant, purposeful, responsible, confident, and well-informed civilian oversight to which the Chief of Police is accountable, whether it be in the form of a police commission and Inspector General, as in Los Angeles, a review board, or an appointed monitor. A proper balance must be struck so that the Chief of Police is neither given carte blanche nor micromanaged; neither given life tenure nor fired on a political whim.
- If police are permitted to police themselves and to investigate fellow officers, they must understand and agree that it is a privilege, not a right.

- The process for resolving personnel complaints, whether generated internally or externally, must be transparent, fair, thorough, and complete. Every complaint deserves some form of investigation and principled resolution.
- Police officers are accountable to all their constituent communities, be they of color or not, be they wealthy or not. The police must acknowledge and take responsibility for the fact that certain constituent communities have been victimized in the past by instances of harsh and unconstitutional policing. These communities must be made to feel that those days are over and that the police are now committed to protect all and serve all, the core of community-based policing.
- A Police Department should be broadly diverse, both at the rank-and-file and command levels. In a multicultural environment, the police themselves must reflect and give voice to all of its constituencies.
- Policing is a profession, not unlike medicine, law, or any other principled and learned discipline. The police are not judges, jurors, nor surrogates for those charged with meting out punishment. Their job—their only job-- is to protect and serve and to bring those who violate the law to the bar of justice calmly, purposefully, intelligently, and constitutionally.

With Warren Christopher's passing, we have lost an authentic American hero. One is reminded of WH Auden's poetic observation, "For every day they die among us/those who were doing us some good/ who knew it was never enough/ but hoped to improve a little by living."

By Merrick Bobb and John Spiegel

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