

# Bloody Christmas and the Irony of Police Professionalism: The Los Angeles Police Department, Mexican Americans, and Police Reform in the 1950s

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*On December 25, 1951, approximately fifty Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers brutally beat seven young men in their custody, including five Mexican Americans. The ensuing controversy became known as Bloody Christmas. Mexican American activists demanded investigations into allegations of police brutality and LAPD accountability to civilian control. The LAPD's new chief, William Parker, however, had just launched a reform campaign based on the police professionalism model, which stressed police autonomy, particularly about internal discipline. Parker and his allies in city government stifled external investigations into department matters, vilified LAPD critics, and even ignored perjury by officers. They thus helped create an organizational culture that valued LAPD independence above the rule of law and led to the LAPD's estrangement from Mexican American and other minority communities.*

Early on the morning of December 25, 1951, officers of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) severely beat seven young men, five of whom were of Mexican descent. All the beatings took place after officers had the victims in custody. Much of the violence occurred at the central city jail where over 100 had gathered for a Christmas party. Responding to false rumors that a fellow officer had lost an eye in a brawl with the young men, drunken policemen fought with each other and slipped on the victims' blood to beat, batter, knee, and kick the prisoners. One of the victims later testified that officers kicked him so hard on the temple that the whole side

of his head became temporarily paralyzed. Others suffered punctured bladders and kidneys.<sup>1</sup> All survived, but disclosure of the beatings created a controversy over the issues of police brutality and accountability to civilian control that captivated Los Angeles for almost a year. The Christmas morning beatings and the discord that followed became known in the oral traditions of both the Los Angeles Mexican American community and the LAPD as “Bloody Christmas” and were dramatized in the 1998 motion picture *L.A. Confidential*.

The Bloody Christmas controversy resulted from a confluence of forces that were at work in Los Angeles at mid-century. As a result of the appointment of William H. Parker as chief of police, the LAPD had just embarked on a reform campaign based on the police professionalism model that stressed police autonomy in internal disciplinary matters. At the same time, a newly insurgent Mexican American civil rights movement had made ending police misconduct and holding the LAPD more publicly accountable among its highest priorities. Mexican American community leaders therefore moved to force a thorough and impartial investigation into the Christmas morning beatings. Those efforts proved at least partially successful. The county grand jury investigated the beatings and brought indictments against eight officers. Human relations groups, which municipalities had developed in the previous decade to deal with inter-ethnic conflict, held public hearings and issued reports calling for civilian control over LAPD discipline. Local newspapers took up the issue of police brutality, and, for a time, the negative publicity seemingly threatened both the administration of recently appointed Chief Parker and the as-yet untested autonomy of the LAPD.

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1. *Los Angeles Times* (hereafter *Times*), March 11, 1952; *Los Angeles Herald Express* (hereafter *Herald Express*), March 20, 1952; *Hollywood Citizen-News* (hereafter *Citizen-News*), March 20, 1952; *Times*, March 21, 1952; *Herald Express*, March 25, 1952; *Christian Science Monitor*, April 24, 1952; *Times*, May 14, 1952; *Herald Express*, Oct. 6, 1952; *Los Angeles Mirror* (hereafter *Mirror*), Oct. 15, 1952; *Los Angeles Daily News* (hereafter *Daily News*), July 1, 1952; see also Daryl F. Gates and Dianne K. Shah, *Chief: My Life in the LAPD* (New York, 1992), 35–36, and Joseph Gerald Woods, “The Progressives and the Police: Urban Reform and the Professionalization of the Los Angeles Police” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1973), 437–439, for interesting but incomplete and somewhat inaccurate descriptions of Bloody Christmas. Most of the newspaper citations in this article are available in the form of newspaper clippings in the Los Angeles City Archives located at the Los Angeles City Records Center, Los Angeles, California. I have used standard newspaper citations in the notes to assist scholars who may not have easy access to this collection.

Parker's job and the LAPD's independence were, however, safe. Los Angeles government leaders, including the mayor, the district attorney, the overwhelming majority of the city council, and even members of the judiciary, valued a strong, independent, and professional police department that maintained order and stability above one that strictly adhered to the rule of law.<sup>2</sup> Non-governmental elites, such as members of the business community and segments of the press, concurred. What seems to have happened is that a broad consensus developed among these community leaders, and ultimately among a large segment of white Angelinos, that an aggressive, forceful, and independent LAPD was vital to maintaining the city free of crime and ensuring its future economic well-being. That consensus developed largely out of the department's public relations campaign, which touted the LAPD's crucial role in keeping the city crime-free, which portrayed the department as the protector of the white middle and working classes from the growing minority populations, and which sought to vilify the department's critics.

Los Angeles elites thus supported Parker's efforts to limit the damage from Bloody Christmas. Those efforts fell into three categories. First, Parker and his allies thwarted some investigations and limited the scope of others. Second, they failed to uphold the rule of law by ignoring obvious cases of perjury and obstruction of justice by officers involved in the beatings. Finally, in keeping with Cold War sensibilities, local leaders tried to discredit the LAPD's critics by questioning their motivations and by arguing that charges of police brutality damaged police morale.

The Bloody Christmas beatings and the LAPD's defensive posture are certainly not unique in the department's history. Beginning with early twentieth-century police attacks on Mexican immigrants, through efforts to destroy Mexican American labor unions in the 1930s, the Zoot Suit riots of World War II, the attempts to suppress the Chicano movement of the 1960s, and culminating with the most recent Rampart scandal, the LAPD has a lengthy history of harassment, physical abuse, and civil rights violations against Mexican Americans and other minority individuals. Not only has the depart-

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2. At its simplest, the theory of the rule of law states that in a democratic society the law is an end in itself. No one, whether the President of the country or a police officer, is above the law. More specifically, officers cannot break one law in attempting to enforce another. See Jerome H. Skolnick, *Justice Without Trial: Law Enforcement in a Democratic Society* (Berkeley, 1975), 17–21.

ment engaged in such activities, it has managed to pass through most of the resultant controversies seemingly unscathed.<sup>3</sup> Within this context, the Christmas morning beatings and the subsequent cover-up would seem just another case of police brutality against Mexican Americans.

Bloody Christmas, however, has significance beyond a physical attack, no matter how vicious, on a group of young men. It proved to be a watershed event. Bloody Christmas coincided with the emergence of the modern, "professional" LAPD and, in fact, helped institutionalize the police professionalism model in Los Angeles by developing a system by which the department insulated itself from external control. In subsequent years, the department would gain the reputation as not only the most professional and independent, but as simply the best police department in the nation. The LAPD's influence thus spread eastward to affect big city police departments throughout the country.

Locally, Bloody Christmas solidified Parker's hold not only on the department but also on the city as a whole. It brought into sharp relief the logical consequences of the LAPD's belief that Mexican American youth were a criminal element within the community, initiating a fifty-year period in which the department's identity emerged as the protector of the white middle and working classes from the city's minority communities. At the same time, Mexican Americans' vigorous response to Bloody Christmas demonstrated

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3. For early twentieth-century examples of LAPD misconduct, see Edward J. Escobar, *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity: Mexican Americans and the Los Angeles Police Department, 1900–1945* (Berkeley, 1999), 34–36, 172–185; for conflict between the LAPD and Chicanos in the 1960s, see Edward J. Escobar, "The Dialectics of Repression: The Los Angeles Police Department and the Chicano Movement, 1968–1971," *Journal of American History*, 79 (1993), 1483–1514; for the most recent Rampart scandal, see the *Los Angeles Times* beginning Sept. 15, 1999; Los Angeles Police Department, "Board Of Inquiry Into the Rampart Area Corruption Incident Public Report," 2000; Independent Review Panel, "A Report to the Los Angeles Board of Police Commissioners Concerning the Operations, Policies, and Procedures of the Los Angeles Police Department in the Wake of the Rampart Scandal," Los Angeles Police Department, 2000. As the 1965 Watts rebellion and the Rodney King beating demonstrate, African Americans have also been frequent victims of LAPD misconduct; for Watts, see Robert M. Fogelson, ed., *The Los Angeles Riots* (New York, 1969), which contains the McCone Commission Report and critiques of it; see also Robert Conot, *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness: The Unforgettable Classic Account of the Watts Riot* (New York, 1967); finally, Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department, "Report of the Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department" (Los Angeles, 1991) provides late twentieth-century examples of LAPD treatment of African Americans and Latinos as well as details on the King beating.

that community's growing political power and sophistication. The way that the LAPD and Parker in particular successfully responded set the pattern for how the department would deal with public criticism in the decades to come. Finally and ironically, Bloody Christmas helped establish an organizational culture that prized the department's independence above all other values, including the rule of law, thus legitimizing patterns of behavior that ran counter to aspects of the professional model itself as well as to fundamental principles of law enforcement in a democratic society.

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In the dozen years before 1951, the LAPD went through a tumultuous period in which it was literally re-formed. During the first third of the twentieth century, the department had been exceedingly corrupt. Large numbers of officers received bribes from liquor, gambling, and prostitution interests, which in turn were allowed to conduct their business freely. Brutality against citizens, unlawful arrests, the "third degree," and other forms of misconduct ran rampant throughout the department. Civic leaders condoned this state of affairs because the department also served as a tool of local business interests in suppressing organized labor.<sup>4</sup>

By the 1950s, however, the LAPD had become the model for the modern, reformed, "professional" police force. The process began in 1938, when voters recalled Mayor Frank Shaw on the issue of police corruption. During the 1940s reform of the department continued with a purge of corrupt officers, the establishment of high standards for entrance into the force, a rigorous training program, better pay for officers, and more modern equipment and administrative procedures. The reform forces gained full control of the department at mid-century when Police Chief C. B. Horrall retired because of yet another scandal. A retired Marine general, William Worton, temporarily replaced him, but since only a career police officer could become the permanent chief, Worton's term was short. Thus, on August 9, 1950, William Parker, one of the architects of police professionalism, became chief and began the wholesale professionalization of the department.<sup>5</sup>

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4. For a thorough discussion of the LAPD's history, see Woods, "The Progressives and the Police."

5. *Ibid.*, 360–364, 397–416; see also Escobar, *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity*, 155–156.

While middle-class municipal elites had led the police reform movements of the Progressive Era, Parker and the other leaders of the police professionalism movement emerged from within the ranks of law enforcement agencies. Their main goal was to use professionalism to raise the status of policing, arguing that officers deserved the same respect, admiration, and control over their profession as doctors, lawyers, and teachers.<sup>6</sup> Two fundamental tenets of police professionalism—police autonomy and a war-on-crime orientation—had profound consequences for Bloody Christmas, the police's broader relationship with the city's minority communities, and ultimately for policing in the late twentieth century.

Police professionals stressed that law enforcement should be carried out impartially, free from the control of politicians who had traditionally used police departments for patronage and to protect their political friends, even when those friends engaged in illegal activities. Reformers instead argued for total police independence from political control. Like doctors and lawyers, only police should set standards for entrance into the profession, proper conduct, promotion, and what actions necessitated disciplinary action. Moreover, only with complete autonomy from political influence, especially in the areas of promotions and police discipline, could police administrators ensure that officers would enforce the law equally for all citizens. Thus, the police professionals conceded to elected officials only the power to pass laws. The police kept for themselves the power to determine how laws would be enforced, both for the public and for themselves.<sup>7</sup>

In Los Angeles, the statutory premise upon which police autonomy stood was Section 202 of the city charter. As amended in 1934 by a margin of just 175 votes out of 190,000, Section 202 stated that officers had a vested right to their jobs and could not be removed or seriously disciplined without due process. Due process in this case meant that sole authority regarding internal departmental discipline for serious infractions belonged to a board of review com-

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6. The discussion on police professionalism comes largely from Escobar, *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity*, 157–162; see also Robert M. Fogelson *Big City Police* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), 142–143, 145; for twentieth-century municipal reform in the West, see Amy Bridges, *Morning Glories: Municipal Reform in the Southwest* (Princeton, N.J., 1997).

7. Escobar, *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity*, 157–162; Fogelson, *Big City Police*, 59, 99–100, 104–105, 144–145, 158–160, 175–176, 184, 223–224, 225, 282–287.

posed of fellow officers. The board of review determined whether an infraction of department policy had occurred, whether a specific officer was guilty of such an infraction, and whether the infraction warranted serious punishment. The chief of police could review the trial board's decision and even lower the punishment, but he could not raise the board's disciplinary recommendation. No one outside the LAPD had any authority over department discipline.<sup>8</sup> Because various sectors of the community believed the police could not police themselves, Section 202 would become a focus of controversy once Bloody Christmas became public.

In addition to the principle of police autonomy, professionalism also brought a war-on-crime orientation that resulted in a degradation of the relationship between the police and the community. Spurred by the public relations success of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) war on criminals such as John Dillinger, a new direction arose among urban police departments in which police changed from being a responsive force that reacted primarily to citizens' complaints to a preventive force that aggressively confronted the "criminal elements" in society. Under the aegis of the war on crime, officers aggressively patrolled neighborhoods that arrest statistics identified as "high-crime areas" to demonstrate that violation of the law brought certain and severe punishment. Moreover, since many Americans violated some sort of law (liquor or traffic laws, for example), the emphasis on crime fighting created an "us against them" mentality and provided further evidence that the population at large disregarded the law. The police thus became alienated from the society they were supposed to serve.<sup>9</sup>

While the war-on-crime mentality may have made Los Angeles police officers feel like a class apart, it also put them in direct, often violent, conflict with the city's minority communities. That conflict resulted from the LAPD's belief that Mexican American youth were inclined toward criminality. In 1942 and 1943 a hysteria swept over Los Angeles emanating from the belief that a Mexican American crime wave was engulfing the city. Evidence suggests that no such crime wave existed, but a broad spectrum of observers nonetheless

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8. Woods, "The Progressives and the Police," 337–338; Escobar, *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity*, 163–164.

9. Fogelson, *Big City Police*, 220–221, 231–232; see also Steve Herbert, *Policing Space: Territoriality and the Los Angeles Police Department* (Minneapolis, 1997), 59–60.

concluded that the zoot suit fad among Mexican American juveniles signaled their inherent delinquency. While ultimately most analysts agreed that such delinquency resulted from poverty and discrimination, law enforcement officials at the time argued that Mexican American criminality sprang from biological factors and that people of Mexican descent were genetically inclined toward violent crime.<sup>10</sup>

In the years after World War II, the LAPD officially adopted sociological explanations for Mexican American crime but extended the linkage between race and criminality to African Americans and institutionalized it in the training and deployment of officers.<sup>11</sup> The adoption of the war-on-crime orientation and the labeling of racial groups as the criminal element in society resulted in chronic conflict between the LAPD and the minority communities. Officers who believed that Mexican Americans were criminally inclined were more likely to be on the lookout for crime among them, to find it, and to make arrests. Similarly, officers who believed that Mexican Americans were naturally violent were more likely to use force in what they regarded as dangerous situations. This last factor fused with Mexican Americans' growing vigilance regarding police practices to provoke a series of spectacular controversies between the Mexican American community and the LAPD in the late 1940s. At the same time, the conflict with the city's Mexican American and African American communities established the LAPD as the protector of the white middle and working classes against minority crime, a role that helped the department create a constituency among groups that it had alienated by its union-busting past.<sup>12</sup>

The war-on-crime metaphor also increased police officers' sensitivity to criticism and especially to perceived attacks on their authority. After all, in a theater of war, which was how the police saw the streets of urban America, there could be only two sides, and police came to believe that their critics favored lawlessness and disorder. Officers thus responded defensively to charges of brutality and

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10. Escobar, *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity*, 186–202, 207–227.

11. See William H. Parker, "Crime and Belief" and "Invasion from Within," in O. W. Wilson, ed., *Parker on Police* (Springfield, Ill., 1957), 11–17, 49–65.

12. Probably the most spectacular incident was the Salcido case, in which an LAPD officer stood trial for killing a Mexican American teenager. See *Times*, April 13, 1948, and other Los Angeles dailies for coverage of this case; for the LAPD's need to mend fences with nonelite whites, see Escobar, *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity*, 165–166, and Woods, "The Progressives and the Police," 436.



misconduct. This defensiveness, which historian Robert Fogelson has labeled “occupational paranoia,” merged with the professionalism principle of autonomy to make officers not only unsympathetic but practically invulnerable to citizens’ complaints. The professionalism model and its war-on-crime orientation thus strained the relationship between law enforcement and society in general. Because of the presumed linkage between race and criminality, however, they had their most deleterious impact on minority communities.<sup>13</sup>

William Parker, the new chief of police of the LAPD in the 1950s, was a product of this police professionalism tradition. Before becoming chief, he had developed and commanded the LAPD’s first Bureau of Internal Affairs, whose function was to investigate charges of officer misconduct. Under Parker and his successors, internal affairs largely succeeded in weeding out officers who took bribes or engaged in other forms of corruption that embarrassed the department. Parker’s success at running the internal affairs division was crucial to the future of police professionalism since that unit’s efficient functioning was vital to the concept of self-discipline and, ultimately, the philosophy of police independence. Moreover, Los Angeles had in Parker the quintessence of the professional police officer. He was intelligent, honest (“incorruptible” was the word often used to describe him), innovative, strong, and loyal to his department and to his men rather than to any politician. He was also a Catholic, a social conservative, a strident anticommunist, a Republican, and a believer in strict law-and-order policing. In short, he was the perfect Cold War police chief.<sup>14</sup>

Equally important, Parker had the political skills and muscle to make police professionalism a fact. He became chief in August 1950 with the reputation both as a strict moralist and disciplinarian and as one of the leading theoreticians in the police professionalism movement. Immediately upon taking office, he set about reenergizing and reorganizing the department. He informed the force that the old days of protecting vice and shaking down citizens for bribes were gone for good. Henceforth, internal affairs would seek out corrupt officers and remove them from the department. Parker also

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13. Escobar, *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity*, 162; Fogelson, *Big City Police*, 99–100, 104–105, 112–116, 158–160, 236–242.

14. Woods, “The Progressives and the Police,” 410–412, 417–425; see also Wilson, ed., *Parker on Police*, vii–xi.

streamlined the bureaucracy and gained additional appropriations for the department—including increased officer salaries—while at the same time diminishing the influence of the mayor, the city council, and even the civilian police commission in the running of the department. He successfully asserted the major tenet of police professionalism: that elected officials and the police commission had no authority over internal departmental discipline. Overall, he proved incredibly successful in these pursuits, turning the LAPD into the very model of a professional urban police force and making himself at once the country's most renowned big city police chief and the most powerful man in Los Angeles until his death in 1966.<sup>15</sup>

It is the supremacy of the police professionalism model in Los Angeles that brings special significance to the Christmas morning beatings and the subsequent investigations. For Bloody Christmas occurred not in spite of police professionalism, but because of it. Several aspects of police reform ideology contributed to Bloody Christmas and the ensuing cover-up. First, the war-on-crime mentality gave officers a no-holds-barred attitude toward those they considered lawbreakers. The linkage between race and criminality turned Mexican Americans into *the* criminal element and predisposed officers to engage in jailhouse justice against the victims. Furthermore, the public perception that Mexican American youth were criminally inclined gave officers a sense that their deeds would go unpunished.

The professional model also developed among officers an excessive sense of occupational identity and fraternalism. Thus, even normally honest officers placed vengeance for and loyalty to their fellow officers and to the department above the rights of people in their custody. The centralization of authority in the chief of police made him so powerful that he could successfully defeat any attempt, even by the police commission, to challenge established disciplinary procedures. Most importantly, the primacy of police autonomy meant that all other considerations could be ignored in its defense.

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15. Woods, "The Progressives and the Police," 417–436; *Daily News*, April 9, 1952. For the LAPD's prestigious reputation, see the series of articles in the *Chicago Sun Times* extolling the department as one of the best police departments in the nation. *Chicago Sun Times*, March 11, 13–14, 1952; Wilson, ed., *Parker on Police*, vii–xi; Herbert, *Policing Space*, 59–60. In time, the Los Angeles Fire and Police Protective League would become a crucial component supporting the professional agenda, but in the early 1950s it had not yet attained its current political influence; see Fogelson, *Big City Police*, 192–218.

The department's independence, especially in the area of discipline, meant that outside agencies were virtually powerless to pursue thorough investigations. In the end, even the power of the courts was mitigated by the intransigence of individual police officers who perjured themselves rather than incriminate fellow officers. Consequently, despite the involvement of at least 100 police officers in Bloody Christmas, not one was disciplined until after the grand jury investigation was completed. Furthermore, the grand jury investigation resulted in only eight indictments; in the eight trials that followed, there were but five convictions.

One of the few forces to question the basic direction of the LAPD was the emerging Mexican American civil rights movement. From the mid-1940s through the 1950s Mexican Americans dominated the civil rights agenda in Los Angeles. As recently as the early 1940s Mexican Americans had had practically no impact on local government. The crisis of the World War II-era zoot suit hysteria and the political aggressiveness of returning Mexican American veterans, however, brought about a new political consciousness that resulted in Mexican Americans gaining first influence and later a voice in city government. During the 1940s crisis, groups such as the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee brought national attention to anti-Mexican discrimination in Southern California. City officials, looking for ways to restore Los Angeles's stained reputation, turned to Mexican American-led groups, such as the Coordinating Council for Latin American Youth, to gain a better understanding of the Mexican American community and to deal with the zoot suit phenomenon. Having asked for Mexican Americans' help, civic leaders had to grant them at least a modicum of influence. Mexican American leaders took full advantage of the situation to gain social service programs for their community and reforms within the LAPD.<sup>16</sup>

After the war, returning Mexican American GIs asserted their newly found political muscle. First, they formed political groups, such as the Community Service Organization (CSO) that embarked on voter registration campaigns and addressed issues of community concern, including police misconduct. In 1949 the CSO helped elect Edward R. Roybal as the first Mexican American city council-

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16. Escobar, *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity*, 264–284; for earlier instances of Mexican American protest against police misconduct, see *ibid.*, 34–36, 66–68, 132–154.

man since the 1880s. Roybal had witnessed the zoot suit hysteria firsthand and made ending police abuse of Mexican Americans a major theme of his campaign. During his years on the city council, he paid special attention to issues related to the LAPD, especially to the department's relations with the Mexican American community. Roybal, for example, supported the appointment of Parker as chief of police in 1950 because he believed that Parker would bring needed reform to the LAPD. Roybal also backed increased appropriations for many of the professionalization initiatives that Parker proposed. At the same time, Roybal focused on projects that improved relations between the department and the community and was quick to criticize the department over issues of police misconduct.<sup>17</sup>

The emergence of Mexican American political power thus altered relations between that community and the LAPD. One reason for the changed environment was that some mainstream white groups took up a protective stance toward the recently discovered exploited status of the Mexican American population. Beginning in the mid-1940s, the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations, created in response to the Zoot Suit riots and the Sleepy Lagoon case, kept a watchful eye on police treatment of Mexican Americans to forestall any recurrence of the zoot suit hysteria. Leftist groups, such as the Civil Rights Congress, were quick to decry instances of police brutality. Newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Daily News* publicized obvious cases of police misconduct. Most important, however, were the efforts of Mexican Americans themselves. Individuals, such as attorney Richard Ibañez, helped raise awareness in police shooting cases. Mexican American-led organizations, such as the CSO and the more radical *Asociación Nacional Mexicana Americana*, called for investigations of the LAPD's treatment of the Mexican American community. Overall, Mexican Americans declared that they would no longer allow police abuse of their community to go unchallenged.<sup>18</sup>

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17. *Ibid.*, 285–290; Congressman Edward R. Roybal, interviewed by author, Jan. 5, 1988, in author's possession. See also Katherine Underwood, "Pioneering Minority Representation: Edward Roybal and the Los Angeles City Council, 1949–1962," *Pacific Historical Review*, 66 (1997), 399–425.

18. Escobar, *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity*, 259–260; *Daily News*, April 14, 1948; California State Assembly, "Resolution," March 20, 1950, box 35300, Chief of Police (hereafter COP), General Files, Los Angeles City Records Center (hereafter CRC), Los Angeles. See also Underwood, "Pioneering Minority Representation."

Not only did the Mexican American community express its wishes, the LAPD listened. In the immediate aftermath of the Zoot Suit riots, the department embarked upon a program to improve relations with the Mexican American community. For the first time in the department's history, the chief of police proclaimed that officers should not engage in discriminatory treatment of racial groups. The LAPD initiated community relations programs and even Spanish-language training in the police academy. The department also established the Deputy Auxiliary Police, a program in which police officers did youth work in the Mexican American community.<sup>19</sup>

Despite these efforts, relations actually worsened in the immediate post-World War II years as instances of police misconduct continued and the community became ever quicker and sharper in its response. During his brief tenure, however, Police Chief Worton made real efforts to improve interactions between police and Mexican Americans. He opened dialogues with community leaders. He made special efforts to quell public fears created by sensationalized newspaper accounts of Mexican American crime. He helped establish the Committee of 21, a joint police-community group in the Mexican American barrio of East Los Angeles that sought to discuss and resolve differences between the two groups. Community leaders, and in particular Councilman Roybal, hoped that the new "professional" chief of police, William Parker, would improve relations even more. They ended up being sorely disappointed by his response to Bloody Christmas.<sup>20</sup>

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The catalyst for the Christmas morning beatings was a brawl outside the Showboat Bar on Riverside Drive just northeast of downtown. Two officers, Julius Trojanowski and Nelson Brownson, responded to a call that minors were illegally drinking at the bar. When the officers arrived, they found Danny and Elias Rodela, Jack and William Wilson, Raymond Marquez, Manuel Hernandez, and

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19. Escobar, *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity*, 260–264.

20. For worsening relations, see the letter of the Mexican American candidate for the state assembly reprinted in the *California Eagle*, July 22, 1948; on William Worton's efforts and the Committee of 21, see Roybal to Worton, Jan. 17, 1950, Worton to Roybal, Feb. 16, 1950, and especially Worton to David C. Wigglesworth, March 23, 1950, box 35300, COP, General Files, CRC; Armando Morales, *Ando Sangrando [I Am Bleeding]: A Study of Mexican American Police Conflict* (La Puente, Calif., 1972), 21–22.

Eddie Nora sitting at the bar, drinking beer. Although the young men provided identification proving they were over the legal drinking age, the officers demanded that the seven leave the bar. When they refused, the officers physically removed them, which precipitated the fight between the officers and the seven youths. No arrests occurred at the bar; however, several hours later police officers went to the homes of the seven, arrested them, and took them to the central city jail.<sup>21</sup>

When the youths arrived at the jail, they found themselves in the midst of the department's Christmas Eve party. In violation of department policy, about 100 officers were drinking liquor donated by local merchants. A false rumor had spread that Officer Trojanowski had lost an eye in the fight on Riverside Drive.<sup>22</sup> The effects of the liquor, the desire to avenge a brother officer, and the knowledge that the prisoners were relatively powerless Mexican Americans produced an atmosphere conducive to brutality.

The Bloody Christmas beatings were indeed brutal. Danny Rodela suffered a punctured kidney and a broken cheekbone. A physician testified that Rodela had been "near death" and would have died had he not received repeated blood transfusions. Eddie Nora sustained a punctured bladder from repeatedly being kneed in the groin, and he still suffered from the effects of the beatings months later. All the rest suffered similar injuries. Despite the obvious brutality, the fact that as many as fifty officers had participated in the beatings, and that over 100 officers witnessed or had direct knowledge of them, department officials managed to keep the case from the public eye for over two months.<sup>23</sup>

By late February 1952, however, Mexican Americans' increased aggressiveness brought the issue of police brutality to public attention. The incident that raised conflict between Mexican Americans and police to a new height was a violent confrontation between An-

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21. For early reports of the incident, see *Daily News*, Dec. 25, 1951; *Times*, Dec. 26, 1951; *Mirror*, Dec. 25, 1951; *Los Angeles Examiner* (hereafter *Examiner*), Dec. 26, 1951; *National Voice*, Jan. 3, 1952.

22. The Los Angeles metropolitan newspapers gave almost daily coverage to Bloody Christmas, beginning with the trial of the victims on March 6, 1952, until the grand jury issued its indictments on April 23, 1952. See, in particular, the *Daily News*, March 20, 1952; *Herald Express*, March 20, 1952; *Times*, March 21, 1952; *Christian Science Monitor*, April 24, 1952; and the *Mirror*, July 2, 1952.

23. *Daily News*, March 20, Sept. 16, 1952; *Times*, March 21, 1952; *Citizen-News*, May 12, 1952; *Mirror*, May 13, 1952; *Herald Express*, July 16, 1952.

thony Ríos, chairman of the Community Service Organization, and two LAPD officers. According to court testimony, Ríos and a friend, Alfred Ulloa, saw two apparently drunken men beating a third man in the parking lot of a café on First and Soto Streets in East Los Angeles. Ríos and Ulloa protested, not knowing that the two assailants were plainclothes vice officers. When the two officers, F. J. Nájera and G. W. Kellenberger, identified themselves, Ríos and Ulloa demanded to know their badge numbers, whereupon the officers drew their guns, threatened to kill Ríos and Ulloa, and arrested the two for interfering with an officer. According to both men, at the jail Nájera and Kellenberger stripped them of their clothes and beat them. "I guess this will teach you to keep your nose out of other people's business," Ríos quoted Nájera as saying. Ríos and Ulloa filed an official complaint, and fellow CSO member Councilman Roybal asked for a meeting with Parker. Nothing came of the complaints until Ríos and Ulloa went on trial.<sup>24</sup>

The trial of Ríos and Ulloa, which began on February 27, 1952, sparked public interest in the issue of police misconduct. Here, after all, was a case where the head of the city's most important civil rights organization was going on trial for allegedly trying to stop an instance of wanton police brutality. Moreover, events immediately preceding the trial date brought the issue even wider public attention. On February 25 newspapers reported that Officer Nájera had stabbed a young Mexican American in an altercation at an East Los Angeles movie theater. The next day a Mexican American physician, Dr. Arthur Serra, claimed that a Los Angeles motorcycle officer shot at him while he was rushing to see a patient. Finally, on the day the trial began, Councilman Roybal charged before the city council that he had fifty "provable" complaints of brutality by police against Mexican Americans and called for an immediate investigation of the department. Parker responded that Roybal's charges were "unwarranted" and that such accusations were "wrecking" the police department—a rhetorical device that Parker would use repeatedly in the months to come.<sup>25</sup>

The charges of police brutality thus became newsworthy, and the Ríos trial received daily coverage in the local press. Newspapers

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24. *Daily News*, Feb. 25, 27–March 11, 1952. After February 27, the other metropolitan newspapers also began to carry the case.

25. *Daily News*, Feb. 25–March 11, 1952; *Times*, Feb. 26–March 11, 1952; *Herald Express*, Feb. 25–March 11, 1952; *Examiner*, Feb. 26–March 11, 1952.

made much of the defense attorney's charges that Officer Nájera was a "brutal sadist" and that he bragged that he was "the toughest cop on the East Side."<sup>26</sup> One witness corroborated Ríos's and Ulloa's story that the two officers threatened to kill them when they asked for identification.<sup>27</sup> The owner of the café where the altercation took place testified that Nájera had been drunk and had tried to intimidate her.<sup>28</sup> With little deliberation, the jury found Ríos and Ulloa innocent of charges against them, a verdict that one newspaper called a vindication.<sup>29</sup>

The Ríos verdict legitimized the charges of police brutality against minority groups and provoked a broader discussion regarding the extent of police brutality. The African American-owned *California Eagle*, for example, published an informational piece entitled "Police Brutality; What To Do" that told readers how to make complaints to the police department.<sup>30</sup> More provocatively, the *Los Angeles Daily News* published an editorial that called for amending Section 202 of the city charter to put LAPD discipline in the hands of the civilian police commission and the mayor. "When any function of government, national or local, gets out of civilian control," the *Daily News* concluded, "it becomes totalitarian." Anything other than civilian control of police "makes them a Gestapo."<sup>31</sup>

Thus, for Parker and other proponents of police autonomy, the stakes were high when Bloody Christmas came to public attention in the midst of the Ríos trial. As in the Ríos case, the LAPD had not disclosed allegations about the beatings until the beginning of the trial of six of the seven youths who had been charged with battery and disturbing the peace. As might be expected, prosecution and defense witnesses gave differing accounts of the altercation at the Showboat Bar. The two police officers claimed that they were attacked when they "peaceably" asked Jack Wilson to leave the bar.

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26. *Herald Express*, March 1, 3, 1952. F. J. Nájera's reputation seemed to be well deserved. For an example of another confrontation with a Mexican American, see John García, affidavit, Feb. 15, 1952, Los Angeles Board of Police Commissioners, supplementary files (henceforth P.C. supplementary files), CRC.

27. *Mirror*, March 6, 1952.

28. *Daily News*, March 6, 1952.

29. *Ibid.*, March 11, 1952. In the same story, the *Daily News* noted that the jury foreman stated that the jury was unanimously in favor of acquittal almost from the beginning of deliberations.

30. *California Eagle*, March 6, 1952.

31. *Daily News*, March 4, 1952.



The defendants, in turn, claimed that the fight began when Officer Trojanowski began hitting Wilson on the head with a blackjack.<sup>32</sup>

But the presiding judge, Joseph L. Call, did not restrict testimony to the fight at the Showboat; he also allowed argument and testimony about how officers beat the defendants after police had them under arrest. In his opening remarks, defense attorney James Warner told the jury that police beat five of the defendants on three separate occasions after the initial arrests. The defendants themselves gave vivid testimony of the beatings. Danny Rodela recounted how officers broke down the door of his house and repeatedly beat him over the head with a blackjack as they dragged him out to the waiting police car.<sup>33</sup> Jack Wilson testified about how two officers held him by the arms while Officer Trojanowski hit him in the stomach and on the face.<sup>34</sup> In his summation, defense attorney Warner argued that LAPD officers had acted as “dictators” and that the defendants had a right to defend themselves. The jury did not agree and on March 12 found the defendants guilty of two counts of battery and one of disturbing the peace.<sup>35</sup>

Judge Call, however, was deeply angered by the apparent brutal and bloody beating that LAPD officers had inflicted on the defendants. After the jury delivered its verdict, he issued a stinging rebuke of police practices and called for an independent investigation into the Christmas morning beatings. “The record in this case,” Call stated, “is permeated with testimony of vicious beatings and brutality perpetrated without cause or provocation long after these defendants were taken into custody.” He called the brutality by law enforcement officers “intolerable and reprehensible” and stated unequivocally that the police officers involved were “guilty of assault, battery and assault with a deadly weapon—a felony.” Call concluded by requesting a grand jury investigation of the Christmas morning beatings and for indictments for those involved. Police Chief Parker and District Attorney Ernest Roll could only acquiesce.<sup>36</sup>

Bloody Christmas created a firestorm of criticism against the

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32. *Ibid.*, March 7, 1952; *Examiner*, March 8, 1952.

33. *Daily News*, March 6, 1952; see also *Examiner*, March 7, 1952, and *Mirror*, March 7, 1952.

34. *Times*, March 8, 1952.

35. *Daily News*, March 13, 1952; *Times*, March 13, 1952; *Mirror*, March 13, 1952; *Examiner*, March 13, 1952; *Herald Express*, March 13, 1952; *Citizen-News*, March 13, 25, 1952.

36. *Times*, March 13, 1952; *Mirror*, March 13, 1952; *Examiner*, March 13, 1952.

LAPD. Individuals and groups of various political persuasions condemned the beatings and called for reform of the department. The tenor of the different groups' statements ranged from those that simply denounced the LAPD to those that made specific policy recommendations. The city council, for example, observed "that the people are rightfully disturbed over evidence . . . [of] Police brutality."<sup>37</sup> More pointedly, a group of 300 residents of East Los Angeles signed a petition protesting the LAPD's belief that just because people "are Negro or Mexican[,] they are criminals." The petition also "demand[ed] a halt to the random arrest and the beating of members of our community." For its part, the primarily Mexican American Boyle Heights Post of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, noting that the LAPD had taken "no clear cut disciplinary action" regarding the many complaints of police brutality, called for an immediate investigation and demanded that the brutality "cease at once."<sup>38</sup>

Concerns over the department's inaction and calls for an investigation were among the most prominent aspects of the criticism of the LAPD. Even before Judge Call's denunciation, the Los Angeles County Democratic Central Committee sent a resolution to the state attorney general denouncing "the indifference of city officials . . . toward brutal police methods against citizens and minority groups." Such indifference, the Democrats stated, protected, sanctioned, and encouraged police brutality. They called on the attorney general to launch an investigation into "the person and the office of the Chief of Police William H. Parker, the Police commission and other responsible officials" and demanded that "officials responsible for allowing police brutality to continue be brought to justice, be punished and dismissed or forever barred from public office."<sup>39</sup> While some may have seen this as a partisan attack, the announcement that the FBI was "probing L.A. police brutality" fed speculation that Los Angeles Mayor Fletcher Bowron, a fellow Republican, was displeased with Parker and would seek his resignation.<sup>40</sup>

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37. Walter C. Peterson to Police Commission, March 14, 1952, P.C. supplementary files, CRC.

38. Amelia Aguayo to Los Angeles Police Commission, March 13, 1952; Pauline Epstein, *et al.*, to Fletcher Bowron, *et al.*, petition, March 13, 1952, P.C. supplementary files, CRC; Boyle Heights Post No. 1556, resolution, March 13, 1952, in *ibid.*

39. *Daily News*, March 12, 1952.

40. *Herald Express*, March 14, 1952; *Times*, March 14, 1952; *Citizen-News*, April 30, 1952; *Daily News*, March 13, May 26, 1952; *Examiner*, May 27, 1952; *Mirror*, May 27, 1952.

As offended as Parker may have been by these personal attacks, he was undoubtedly equally concerned over calls to amend Section 202 of the city charter, which guaranteed the LAPD's independence on personnel issues. The Independent Progressive Party characterized Section 202 as a "most vicious and undemocratic law that tends to create the attitude among police officers that they are 'Law unto themselves.'" It called for the creation of an independent and elected civilian review commission to investigate and adjudicate any complaints of police brutality and misconduct.<sup>41</sup> A major metropolitan newspaper, the *Los Angeles Daily News*, called for amending Section 202 to give the chief of police ultimate authority over discipline within the department.<sup>42</sup> Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Los Angeles County Conference on Community Relations (LACCCR) charged that the LAPD's Internal Affairs Division (IAD) failed "effectively to check and discipline abuses of police power." The LACCCR specifically asserted that investigating officers could arbitrarily dismiss any complaint, that complainants were not allowed the presence of attorney, and that "too frequently" the IAD's "interrogations are conducted in an antagonistic manner or are based on the assumption that the complainant is a malcontent or troublemaker and the officer is above suspicion." The LACCCR thus called for the police commission to investigate the IAD and make recommendations that would "insure greater respect for the law and the law enforcement agency among the public."<sup>43</sup>

The calls for Parker's ouster and reform of the IAD threatened LAPD autonomy and the larger professionalization movement. In response, LAPD supporters and Parker in particular went on the offensive by impugning the integrity of their accusers and claiming that such criticism seriously damaged law enforcement efforts in Los Angeles. Mayor Bowron began the counterattack on March 17 at a

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41. Leroy Parra to Board of Police Commissioners, March 17, 1952, P.C. supplementary files, CRC.

42. The *Daily News* was the only major Los Angeles newspaper to call for amending Section 202. See, in particular, *Daily News*, March 24, April 29, May 11, 14, 1952.

43. Public Relations Committee of the Los Angeles County Conference on Community Relations (LACCCR), "Report to the Los Angeles Police Commission," March 17, 1952, P.C. supplementary files, CRC. The LACCCR's other recommendations included having the department 1) issue a "statement of policy [regarding] the treatment of persons in custody" and make "periodic checks to insure conformance"; 2) establish a human relations detail; 3) establish Police-Citizen Committees in minority divisions; 4) provide in-service training on minority relations; and 5) administer "social attitude tests" for current personnel and recruits.

special meeting of the police commission called to investigate complaints of police brutality in minority communities. While stating that he would not tolerate police brutality, the mayor nevertheless claimed that most allegations of police brutality came from communists who were seeking to destroy all agencies of lawful authority in America.<sup>44</sup> Conservative neighborhood newspapers often repeated this allegation.<sup>45</sup>

Two weeks later Parker picked up the same theme but added a new twist. In a speech before a West Los Angeles civic group, the chief declared that “fast money boys” were behind the accusations of police brutality in order to get him fired. The chief declared that if he were removed, underworld influences would reenter Los Angeles and reestablish their illegal activities. He defended his officers’ use of force, saying that, in a violent society, “sometimes the police have to use violence to protect the public.” Articulating what later became a recurrent theme, he charged that “all that stood between the public and anarchy were the police.”<sup>46</sup>

In addition to impugning the motives of their critics, police officials sought to hinder the various investigations into Bloody Christmas. Parker, for example, prevented the civilian police commission, which had statutory authority over the LAPD, from investigating allegations of police brutality. Although it had no authority to impose punishment, at its special March 17 meeting the commission voted to have its hearing examiners investigate Bloody Christmas and all other complaints of police brutality. Parker, on the advice of City Attorney Ray Cheeseboro, however, informed the commission that, under the city charter, hearing examiners could not investigate matters of police conduct. With no other investigative staff, the commission was unable to investigate the department over which it theoretically had authority.<sup>47</sup>

LAPD officials and their allies also managed to limit the grand jury’s investigation. The district attorney provided the grand jury only with evidence related to the Christmas morning beatings themselves and the poor supervision that allowed them to occur. The jury thus did not address the crucial question of the efficacy of the

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44. *San Fernando Valley Times*, March 17, 1952.

45. *Ibid.*; *Citizen-News*, March 27, 1952; *Rancho Park Star*, March 27, 1952; *The Companion*, April 1952; *Greater West Hollywood Tribune*, May 1, 1952.

46. *Westwood Hill Press*, March 27, 1952.

47. *Daily News*, April 9, 5, May 22, 1952; *Herald Express*, April 22, 1952.

LAPD's disciplinary system or the broader issue of police brutality. In addition, the department managed to confuse and undermine even this limited investigation. Parker, for example, provided the grand jury a 204-page internal report on Bloody Christmas that revealed that several officers actually witnessed the Christmas morning beatings. The report nevertheless concluded that "none of the prisoners was physically abused in the manner alleged."<sup>48</sup> Moreover, several officers seemingly perjured themselves in their grand jury testimony. For the first two weeks of hearings, the grand jury listened to vivid and detailed testimony from the victims about the exact nature of the beatings. In contrast, officers who were accustomed to giving precise testimony in criminal trials were vague, evasive, and often even contradictory before the grand jury. Officers, for example, admitted seeing the victims being beaten but could not recognize any of the officers taking part. Furthermore, some officers who had previously given detailed information, including names, to the internal affairs investigators could remember little or nothing of the night's events when under oath. Los Angeles newspapers reported that the grand jury considered issuing perjury indictments against police officers.<sup>49</sup>

The stonewalling of the investigations succeeded in limiting the damage to the LAPD. Despite early speculation that as many as fifty officers might face indictment, the grand jury ultimately indicted only eight—all for assault.<sup>50</sup> In addition, Parker initiated disciplinary proceedings against more than forty officers for their activities on the night of the Christmas Eve beatings. The punishments, however, were minor, consisting of temporary suspensions without pay.<sup>51</sup> On April 29, a week after issuing the indictments, the grand jury released its final report on Bloody Christmas. While the local media made much of the criticism leveled at Parker, the report itself focused primarily on management issues related to the night of the beatings. The report faulted the department for "a general lack of proper supervision and control" on the part of lieutenants and sergeants, the fact that there were "no clear cut or well defined zones of responsibility" in the jails, and that training had been in-

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48. *Examiner*, March 21, 1952.

49. *Times*, April 11, 1952; *Mirror*, April 11, 1952; *Citizen-News*, April 11, 1952.

50. *Herald Express*, March 18, 1952; *Times*, April 23, 1952.

51. William H. Parker to Grand Jury, June 16, 1952, box 35306, COP, General Files, CRC.

adequate, “particularly [in] the matter of handling prisoners and the general public.” The report made no mention of the larger issues of LAPD brutality against Mexican Americans or how the department handled internal discipline. Nevertheless, the grand jury did feel compelled to remind the LAPD that it functioned “for the benefit of the public and not as a fraternal organization for the benefit of fellow officers.” It also suggested that officers seek to understand “the meaning of an oath taken before the Grand Jury, as some of them who testified before this body are quite evidently unaware of the same.”<sup>52</sup>

The trials of the eight indicted officers, which took place between July and November 1952, provided few new revelations. Ultimately, five of the eight were convicted; only one received a sentence of more than a year in prison. Nevertheless, the extent to which high-ranking officials, from judges to Chief Parker, ignored the apparent perjury and subornation of perjury by police officers reveals the lengths to which government officials would go to protect the LAPD. Throughout the criminal trials, police officers either lost their memory or changed their testimony from what they had said earlier to either the grand jury or internal affairs. The first officer to come to trial was Charles Heinzelman. During the trial, Heinzelman admitted telling one version of the events on Christmas morning to the internal affairs investigators and then changing his story during his trial. After his conviction, he stated at his probation hearing that he had been “influenced” by a fellow officer not to tell the truth before the grand jury. Although this became public knowledge and was a clear indication of subornation of perjury, neither Police Chief Parker nor District Attorney Roll was willing to damage the department’s prestige by pursuing the matter.<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, policemen who themselves were not accused of any criminal activity were nevertheless loath to give damaging testimony against brother officers. Repeatedly they described the blows that resulted in punctured kidneys and other serious injuries with euphemisms such as “jostled,” “touched,” “pushed,” and “shoved.” Some even repudiated their earlier testimony before the grand jury.

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52. Los Angeles County Grand Jury, “Interim Report Re: Police Brutality,” April 29, 1952, box 29, Edward R. Roybal Papers, Department of Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles; for newspaper coverage of the report, see *Herald Express*, April 29, 1952; *Daily News*, April 29, 1952; *Times*, April 30, 1952.

53. *Daily News*, July 31, Aug. 1, 1952.

The changing testimony of Officer John P. Epperson offers an illustration. Before the grand jury, Epperson stated that he saw Lt. Harry Fremont, the highest-ranking officer indicted, "handling the boy [Eddie Nora] roughly . . . There were possibly one or possibly two . . . blows," Epperson testified, "struck in the mid-section of Eddie Nora by Lieutenant Fremont." (Nora suffered a ruptured bladder because of the beating.) During Fremont's trial, however, Epperson stated that he no longer believed that he had seen Lieutenant Fremont strike Nora. Epperson explained that before the grand jury he "testified more freely than [he] normally would have done" because police officials assured him that they would handle the matter internally and that Lieutenant Fremont would not face criminal charges. "Now," he concluded, "I believe I was mistaken about it being Fremont who struck a prisoner in my presence."<sup>54</sup>

That police and elected officials were covering up the facts of Bloody Christmas did not escape the notice of the Los Angeles newspapers. The *Daily News* repeatedly stated that the apparent perjury proved the injudiciousness of police self-discipline and called for the repeal of Section 202. The *Mirror* editorialized that a cover-up had existed since the beginning of the departmental investigation and had continued through the criminal trials. Columnist Florabel Muir wondered mischievously if officers' bad memories would one day result in criminals going free. Even the conservative *Los Angeles Times* commented wryly that, while "some policemen can remember everything they see or hear; others can't remember much." Reporting on the trial of Officer Roy Lantz, the *Times* noted, "Only one of the obviously reluctant [police] witnesses was able to recall with any clarity what he had previously reported witnessing in the jail."<sup>55</sup> Despite such damning commentary, it would seem that the courts, like the district attorney and the internal affairs division, were more interested in preserving the LAPD's autonomy than in taking action against this apparent obstruction of justice.

One reason that the courts failed to take action against the apparent instances of perjury, and that the press referred to it only obliquely, was the LAPD's campaign to gain public support. Part of the campaign included Parker's meeting, sometimes privately, with

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54. *Daily News*, July 8, 1952; *Citizen-News*, July 8, 1952; *Times*, Aug. 7, 1952; *Mirror*, Aug. 7, 8, 1952; *Examiner*, Aug. 7, 1952.

55. *Daily News*, March 24, April 29, May 11, 14, 1952; *Mirror*, Sept. 18, March 20, July 2, 1952; *Times*, Oct. 9, 1952.

influential community leaders to plead the department's case. In late March, for example, Parker met with a select group of newspaper editors and other members of the white political establishment to try to temper coverage of Bloody Christmas.<sup>56</sup> The overall theme of the campaign was that Los Angeles needed the LAPD to protect the city from criminal elements and maintain the city's reputation. In public pronouncements, Parker argued that criticism of the police hindered officers' ability to fight crime, thus leaving law-abiding citizens defenseless against the depredations of gangsters and criminals who sought to overrun the city. On the day before the grand jury was to hand down its indictments, for example, Parker told a television audience that "antisocial elements are having a heyday" as a result of all the publicity regarding police brutality. He complained that the department was "harassed by the press," placing it in a "defensive position from which the whole community is suffering."<sup>57</sup>

Other high-ranking police officials agreed, alleging that crime was rising and arrests were falling because police officers' morale was "shot" from all the negative publicity. The *Los Angeles Mirror* disclosed that a consensus of LAPD division commanders reported "a general letdown in activity because of public criticism of police." The commanders argued that officers hesitated to make arrests because they feared accusations of police brutality. These high-ranking police officials seemed to take aim at the groups they blamed for raising the issue in the first place. The Valley Division commander, for example, complained that "those groups who provoke incidents now take an insolent attitude. They do all that they can to try an officer's patience." Parker spoke to the consequences of the current state of affairs when, according to the *Mirror*, "he termed the drop in police morale a dangerous situation for the community." "It tends," he added, "to incite hoodlum elements to a

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56. *Daily News*, March 28, 1952; see also the *Community News*, April 4, 1952. At the time of Bloody Christmas, the LAPD had only the most rudimentary public relations operation. Parker, however, understood that his professionalism program needed strong public support and spent much of his time in subsequent years making public appearances. Today, of course, the LAPD has a highly sophisticated public relations apparatus. For the department's public relations program in the early 1950s, see Worton to Bowron, Jan. 6, 1950, and Worton to Police Commission, March 1, 1950, box 35306, COP, General Files, CRC. For Parker's public relations initiatives, see Gates and Shah, *Chief*, 27–38; for Parker's ideas on public relations, see William H. Parker, "The Police Administrator and Public Relations" in Wilson, ed., *Parker on Police*, 135–144.

57. *Mirror*, April 2, 1952.



sense of power.”<sup>58</sup> By implication, critics of the LAPD became allies of hoodlums and enemies to law-abiding citizens.

In a further attempt to influence public opinion, Parker inaugurated a new metaphor for explaining the mission of the LAPD. In early April Parker informed the police commission that he was starting a weekly television program that would “disseminat[e] accurate information to the public concerning police affairs.” Parker named his program *The Thin Blue Line* and stated that “current attempts to undermine public confidence in the Police Department demand some counteraction if the interest of the community is to be served.” The specific purpose of the program was “to instill greater confidence in the police service.”<sup>59</sup> The idea of “the thin blue line” would become the LAPD’s central organizing metaphor for decades to come. Its essence was Parker’s statement in the early days of the Bloody Christmas controversy that only the police protected civilized society from anarchy. Parker saw society as two competing forces. On one side stood law-abiding, white, middle-class Americans who longed for security and supported, and even appreciated, the need for strong law enforcement institutions. In opposition were the forces of chaos and iniquity. Here Parker saw not only organized crime but also racial minority groups, dissidents, especially communists, and anyone who supported these groups, which for Parker meant anyone who criticized the police. The role of the police, in short, was to protect civilization from these forces of barbarism and anarchy.<sup>60</sup>

In the long run, the concept of the thin blue line helped create a vast constituency for the LAPD among people who feared that the rapidly changing nature of American society threatened their personal safety. It was a particularly salient idea within a Cold War mentality that already divided the world into two opposing camps. For white Angelinos (about 80 percent of the population) already inured to the linkage between race and criminality, the idea that they must support the LAPD, which after all was the only entity that

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58. *Ibid.*, April 30, 1952.

59. Parker to Police Commission, April 1, 1952, box 35306, COP, General Files, CRC.

60. William H. Parker, “Invasion from Within,” 49–65; for the long-term effect of the concept, see Gates and Shah, *Chief*. The newspaper published by the Los Angeles Police Protective League (which had evolved from the earlier Los Angeles Fire and Police Protective League) is called *The Thin Blue Line*.

protected them from the growing brown and black populations, must have been particularly persuasive. In the specific scandal surrounding Bloody Christmas, it helped the department gather support to fight off efforts to overhaul its disciplinary policy. Parker's program stayed on the air only through September 1952.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, friendly editorials from conservative newspapers and statements of support from individuals and organizations echoed LAPD rhetoric.<sup>62</sup> The Hollywood Post of the American Legion, for example, passed a resolution supporting the department in part because "there are those whose background, training, habits and inclinations are such they constantly flaunt [*sic*] . . . laws and, on occasion, attack law enforcement officers."<sup>63</sup>

The strategy seemed to work. The obstructionist legal tactics and the public relations campaign joined with the convictions of five of the eight indicted officers to dissipate widespread demands for reform of the LAPD. As early as May 1952, both the mayor and the police commission reaffirmed their confidence in Chief Parker, laying to rest any rumors that he would be removed.<sup>64</sup> As the trials proceeded, public officials, the general public, and even critics of the police seemed to lose interest in the issue of police brutality. Nothing shows this better than the reaction to the September 13, 1952, killing of Servando Canales by LAPD vice officer Donald MacGregor at the same bar where the Bloody Christmas incident had begun the previous December.<sup>65</sup> While the department's version of events changed several times, the official story was that MacGregor drew his gun when a group of men physically threatened him while he questioned a patron about his age. When the men "jostled" him, the gun went off, fatally striking Canales in the chest.<sup>66</sup> Parker, who personally took charge of the investigation, called the killing "a tragic, regrettable accident."<sup>67</sup> Local newspapers, however, referred to "trigger-happy" police and accused Parker and Mayor Bowron of

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61. Parker to Donald Norman, Sept. 26, 1952, box 35306, COP, General Files, CRC.

62. See, for example, *Citizen-News*, March 15, 18, 27, 1952.

63. American Legion Hollywood Post No. 43, Resolution, April 16, 1952, box 35306, COP, General Files, CRC.

64. *Herald Express*, May 27, 1952; *Times*, May 28, 29, 1952; *Citizen-News*, May 29, 1952; *Examiner*, May 29, 1952.

65. Los Angeles newspapers covered the Servando Canales killing on a daily basis between September 14 and September 25.

66. See, in particular, *Examiner*, Sept. 19, 1952, and *Times*, Sept. 19, 1952.

67. *Mirror*, Sept. 15, 1952.

a cover-up.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, other eyewitnesses stated that no one was near MacGregor when he fired, and two told investigators that he referred to Bloody Christmas just before he shot Canales. Nevertheless, a specially picked coroner's jury found that Canales's death was an "excusable homicide—performed in the line of duty." The next day the county grand jury dropped its investigation into the killing and thereafter the press ended its coverage of the matter as well.<sup>69</sup> The whole process took less than two weeks. Everyone seemed to agree that the Canales killing would not become another Bloody Christmas.

With the Canales investigation out of the way and the final Bloody Christmas trial concluded, Parker began reinterpreting the whole episode for his men and the city. For Parker and the LAPD, Bloody Christmas was not about the rights of people in custody, police misconduct, or the department's disciplinary procedures; it was about the forces of anarchy trying to destroy lawful authority. On December 5, two days after the last officer was convicted and sentenced, Parker proclaimed that, while "criminals have been made into heroes in the eyes of the hoodlum element, . . . innocent [police officers] had their names dragged through the mire." He reminded his men to be especially careful during the coming holidays, as subversive elements in Los Angeles "will work actively to incite holiday incidents calculated to discredit the department and rekindle old fires of public criticism."<sup>70</sup> He thus simultaneously reminded the public that criticism of the police was anti-American.

In the final analysis, Bloody Christmas helped establish the organizational culture that would dominate the LAPD for the next half-century. By beating back the department's critics, Parker ensured the dominance of police professionalism: For decades to come, no one would seriously threaten the department's prized independence. For that reason, from the 1950s through the 1980s, the LAPD had the reputation as the least corrupt, best paid, best trained, best equipped, and best run police department in the nation. Such a reputation helped make the LAPD the most powerful

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68. On trigger-happy police, see the editorial in the *Examiner*, Sept. 16, 1952, and *Daily News*, Sept. 19, 1952; on allegations of cover-up, see the editorial in *Mirror*, Sept. 18, 1952.

69. *Times*, Sept. 17, 24, 1952; *Mirror*, Sept. 17, 25, 1952; *Herald Express*, Sept. 17, 1952; *Times*, Sept. 18, 1952; *Examiner*, Sept. 18, 1952.

70. *Herald Express*, Dec. 5, 1952.

institution in the city as well as the envy of other big city police departments. The way the LAPD beat back its critics in Bloody Christmas also established a precedent for how it would deal with future criticism. Henceforth, police officials would work hand in hand with other government officials to limit the scope of investigations, demonize critics, and, if all else failed, engage the “blue code of silence” to make it all but impossible for a citizen to prosecute a complaint against an officer successfully for excessive use of force or other forms of anti-citizen police misconduct.<sup>71</sup> What made all this possible was the department’s adoption of the thin blue line as its controlling metaphor. As the self-proclaimed guardians of civilization, the LAPD had the right, indeed the responsibility, to attack its critics, who, of course, could only be the forces of barbarism.

The irony of all this is that the department’s prized independence became an end in itself, eclipsing other more fundamental and even professional values, such as compliance with the rule of law, telling the truth while under oath, and enforcing the law equally for all citizens. Thus, while the internal affairs division continued to rid the department of officers who stole or took bribes, it ignored apparent cases of excessive use of force and perjury, especially when the victims were Mexican Americans or African Americans who, after all, were the criminal element. What resulted was a culture within the LAPD that prized highly aggressive, even illegal, tactics in minority communities; that protected officers who stepped over the legal limit; and that lashed back at anyone who criticized or otherwise tried to constrain the department. The logical outcomes of such a culture were the Rodney King beating and the Rampart scandal in which LAPD officers committed perjury, planted evidence, and even shot people, all in the name of ridding the community of Latino youth gangs.

It is not surprising, therefore, that frustrations over LAPD misconduct grew and became solidified in minority communities. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the increasingly self-conscious Mexican American and African American communities grew ever more frustrated with police misconduct. Many came to see the department as a hostile occupying force and began organizing politically around the issue of police misconduct. Grow-

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71. For an example of how officials protected law enforcement in the 1960s, see Escobar, “Dialectics of Repression,” 1501–1504.

ing resentment and anger directed at law enforcement led to the spontaneous eruptions of violence in Watts in 1965, East Los Angeles in 1970–1971, and Los Angeles in 1992. In the 1990s the twin controversies of the King beating and the Rampart scandal have kept the LAPD in an almost constant state of upheaval. Police professionalism may have triumphed in Bloody Christmas, but the irony is that it simultaneously legitimized new forms of corruption that violated the rule of law—the fundamental principle of policing in a democratic society—and led to the department’s estrangement from large segments of the community it served. The LAPD is still paying the price.