

Roots of the Reactive Posture: A Manifesto for Police Trainers

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“Action is faster than reaction” is a fundamental axiom of tactics. Curiously, if you poll police officers about whether they conceive of themselves as actors or reactors, they answer “reactors” with little variation. If the axiom carries any value, the answer is alarming. Tactically, it means that police officers see themselves as (and therefore *are*) disadvantaged. The issue therefore merits substantive inquiry. *Why* do police officers tend toward a reactive posture when it is disadvantageous to do so? This piece will tackle the question. The inquiry is crucial, particularly at the extremes of the spectrum. Overreaction prompts officers to fire fifty rounds at unarmed suspects. Underreaction leaves officers brutalized or dead. Both are responses to the same fundamental pathology: panic—and panic rests, finally, in not knowing what to do. To a significant degree, then, training is the culprit. To a significant degree, training is also the solution. Our purpose here is to offer a comprehensive diagnosis of the problem.

I. Culture

In the movie “Tombstone,” the villain Johnny Ringo challenges protagonist Wyatt Earp to a gunfight. Earp is a fine marksman, but not so fast as Ringo. Knowing this, Doc Holliday, fastest gun in the west, unbeknownst to his friend Wyatt Earp, shows up in Earp’s stead to square off with the villain. As a shadowy figure approaches, assumed to be Wyatt Earp, Johnny Ringo says, “Well, I didn’t think you had it in you.” The shadowy figure reveals himself dramatically: it is Doc Holliday. “I’m your huckleberry,” Doc says in a famous line. Verbal jousting follows. They square off to fight. “Say when,” Doc says. By “say when” he means to challenge Johnny Ringo to draw first. The moment makes for riveting drama. After all, fattening drama is the point. Tactically, of course, it is madness. In a real world violent encounter, it is absurd to cede the first move to an adversary knowingly and as a matter of course. Nevertheless, countless movies and television shows, multiplied across decades by an industry whose lifeblood is entertainment, ground the tacit assumption that the good guy never strikes first; indeed, the good guy often *prompts* the bad guy to strike first. The trope shapes a mindset—all the more dangerous because it flits about the subconscious, unexamined and unchallenged. Good guys don’t act first. This unexamined premise frames a reactive posture.

Pre-conscious assumptions about “fairness” in violent encounters, inherited largely from athletic competitions such as boxing and Mixed Martial Arts, reinforce a reactive posture in real world encounters. “Ultimate Fighting” is often advertised as the closest thing to the “street” possible. In

Meditations on Violence, Rory Miller demolishes the preconception that martial arts and real world violence share a mutual connection and applicability.

Competitions are steeped in ritual and rule; the streets in chaos and lawlessness. Competitors warm up before a match. The street affords no such luxury. Competitive fights transpire through fixed limits of time and space (ring, octagon; three minutes, five minutes). The street abhors limits. Competitors rest between rounds as corner men urge advice and work cuts to stop bleeding. Adversaries can only wish for these things in the street as they navigate a mix of adrenalin, chaos and terror. Referees recite and enforce rules—and stop fights when serious injury seems imminent. The street has no referee. Competitions are flanked by prohibitions: no rabbit punches, no kidney punches, no sucker punches, no groin strikes, no biting, no eye gouges—that is, all the preferred tactics employed by street predators against their “prey;” the street brooks no prohibitions. Despite the violence, a sense of honor and fair play underwrites these competitions. Dishonor and desperation underwrite the street. Competitions are steeped in ritual and rule; the streets in chaos and lawlessness.

Competitions nevertheless shape a mindset about what the “fight” is supposed to look like: mano a mano; skill against skill; size is proportional; force employed is of a type. These unexamined assumptions about “fairness” serve to frame criticisms finding expression in questions such as “Why were there so many police officers there for just one person?” (The unstated presupposition is: “That’s not fair, many against one!”) “Why did the police officer use a baton? Even though he was struggling, the person didn’t have a weapon.” (The unstated presupposition is: “That’s not fair, one has a weapon, the other doesn’t!”) Fairness *assumes* a defined framework of rules jointly accepted. Real world violence carries no commonly accepted framework of rules; only the predatory drive to destroy. To talk of “fairness” in real world encounters by way of unexamined assumptions inherited from a radically different context is a category error—an error that, in practice, often swamps the capacity for meaningful tactical evaluation.

II. Procedural conditioning

Suppose you want to teach a child how to ride a bicycle. You tell the child “don’t put your left hand on the right handlebar; don’t put your right hand on the left handlebar; don’t put your left foot on the right pedal; don’t put your right foot on the left pedal; and do not, under any circumstances, pedal backward. Now, ride!” What you told the child was true, so far as it goes. It is also useless. You cheated the child, pretending to guide when you in fact merely confused. You provided the child no guidance on *how to ride a bicycle* by barking orders about how *not* to ride a bicycle. The injunctions are no help as the child gropes to sort out the subtleties of riding. Yet *this* is the form of “guidance” provided by all too many police agencies to officers as they navigate the complexities of the most extreme and perilous interpersonal encounters possible,

where loss of life and limb are real and daunting prospects. Enjoining police officers through a cognitively withering series of negatives “Police officers shall not use deadly physical force against another person unless...” “Police officers shall not discharge their weapons when...” “Police officers shall not fire...” “[Police officers] will not be subject to criticism or disciplinary action for choosing *not* to discharge their weapons...” (this last is a tacit injunction not to shoot) *without* any clear and countervailing guidance on when they *can* and *should* use force, deadly or otherwise, subliminally shapes a reactive mindset.

The dangerous and deadly consequences of couching policy in negative terms have been known since at least 1997, when the FBI published the second of its three seminal reports on Law Enforcement Officers killed and assaulted in the line of duty. Here is how the authors of *In the Line of Fire* put it:

“In general, the study results indicate that officers had clear memories of what ‘not to do’ and when ‘not to use force’ but that some had difficulty in recalling instances in which the use of force was an appropriate, timely, necessary, and positive decision...Some officers had to make a conscious effort to recall their departments’ use of deadly force policy prior to the initiation of necessary force. In some instances, that recall came too late (*In the Line of Fire*, p. 43).”

Their recommendations followed:

“Based on this information, it is recommended that each department review its use of deadly force policy to determine that all elements of the policy are clearly articulated and easily understood. Department members should be constantly tested for their recall of this policy, and positive aspects of the policy should be stressed, especially in reference to the proper time to use deadly force. Negative aspects, such as when not to shoot, should not be overemphasized. It is also recommended that training content and procedure be regularly reviewed and evaluated for the express purpose of keeping the officer alert to the constant potential for danger inherent in law enforcement service (*In the Line of Fire*, p. 43).”

The recommendations met with stunning indifference as municipal police agencies clung, idiot-like, to comfortable orthodoxies etched in stone ages past. As in so many contexts where it prevails, unquestioned orthodoxy, cultivating a dreamy stupor, conceals a brutal truth: procedure is drenched in blood.

III. Training

The following narratives represent actual training scenarios (past or present).

Recruit officers are dispatched to a domestic dispute. They should (and usually do) separate the parties involved and glean statements in an effort to ascertain facts all while the partners maintain some visual contact. If the recruit officers do these things, that is to say, manage the

scenario as they are trained, an instructor strides into the room and cuts the scenario, announcing dramatically “you’re all dead.” If a recruit asks (usually sheepishly) what happened or how they failed, the instructor says “I tossed a grenade into the room. It killed everyone.” When asked privately by a more seasoned officer what the purpose of the scenario is supposed to be, to the extent that the instructor can articulate one at all, he says something like “Hey, we’ve got to teach them that it’s a dangerous world out there. Anything can happen.” Instructors appeared satisfied. They made a dramatic point: they killed the cops. For the record, the instructors provided no information, no counsel and no strategy on how to handle invisible grenades during domestic disputes.

At a car stop workshop, recruit officers are conducting a felony stop, multiple passengers in the vehicle. As they pass the rear of the vehicle, a perpetrator emerges like a jack-in-the-box from the trunk and sprays the hapless recruits with simunitions fire. When asked privately about the purpose of the scenario, instructors, to the extent that they can articulate a purpose at all, say: “Hey, they should have checked the trunk. Anything can happen. They need to be taught that.” Instructors appeared satisfied. They made a dramatic point: they shot the cops. For the record, the sort of incident scripted in the scenario has never happened.

A seasoned patrol sergeant was compelled to take part in the “training” scenario that follows. The sergeant happens on a scene in which one person is holding another against a wall at gunpoint. The sergeant and his partner take cover, draw their weapons and issue firm commands to “drop the gun!” The role player with drawn gun shouts: “I’m on the job! I’m a cop! This guy is wanted for robbery!” The sergeant repeats his command to drop the gun. The role player complies. The sergeant and his partner systematically handcuff both, secure the gun and ask pointed questions. The role player tells the sergeant where to find his police shield and identification card as he offers a reasonably coherent narrative about witnessing a robbery. The sergeant scrutinizes his credentials and directs that the alleged robber be arrested. The role player then asks the sergeant to remove the handcuffs. Once uncuffed, he retrieves his gun from the sergeant and shoots him. The sergeant, having experienced many such remarkable plot twists in the course of his years of “training” said what many feel going into it: “I knew it. I knew something like that was going to happen. I was just waiting.” When asked privately what the purpose of the scenario was supposed to be, after stammering around a bit, the instructor answered, “Well, there are a lot of forged police ID’s out there. You just never know. You’ve got to know the good from the bad.” Instructors appeared satisfied. They made a dramatic point: they shot the cop. For the record, instructors never taught participants how to tell good from bad police credentials, neither before nor after the scenario. Evidently, the scenario was designed to test knowledge that was never taught to trainees.

Although details differ, virtually every police officer will read these narratives with a weary sense of familiarity, for they have slogged through programs teeming in the fantastic, the theatrical, the wild and the pointless: the dispute that explodes into 47 ronin emerging from concealed lairs with arsenals of extravagant weaponry and attacking without intelligible purpose.

In truth, the “bang, you suck, you’re dead” approach offends the reason and purpose of training. At its core, training should aim to provide principled, practical strategies for navigating the broad ranging and fluid dynamics inherent to street encounters. Scenarios designed to kill the cop; scenarios designed to embarrass and highlight deficiencies; scenarios designed to be unmanageable and unwinnable “teach” a dangerous lesson: how to die; how to focus on shortcomings; how to lose. The Kobayashi Maru does not test character. It shapes a reactive posture. More concretely, it encourages police officers to distrust their training. Consider the movement: instructors convey to trainees tactical principles purporting to assist them in managing encounters. The instructors then design scenarios or exercises to “defeat” the tactical principles. Why would trainees feel any confidence in employing strategies that bred defeat—personally experienced? There is NO training value in it. None. The unwinnable scenario is a theoretical abstraction emerging from the peace of the classroom, not from the realities of the street. Effective training should cultivate a winning mindset, expelling the concept of the “unwinnable” from the mental vocabulary of trainees. There are, as a matter of fact, no inherently “unwinnable” scenarios in the street. But for the sake of polemics, assume that there are. What is to be done about them? They are, by hypothesis, unwinnable. It is therefore in a strict sense vain to introduce the concept into training. How do you win against the “unwinnable?”

Most trainers are, of course, well intentioned. So what excites the will to design scenarios of the sort described? In many agencies, training is conceived as a luxury even if, in moments of political expediency, press releases profess devotion to it. In practice, time dedicated to training is limited, truncated, minimized. The content covered is commonly driven by cynicism and surveys fed through political algorithms. Frustrated trainers are made to navigate edicts imposed from the rarefied heights of executive management. This does not make for a healthy training program. Given the painfully limited time allotted and the dubious content grafted onto otherwise sensible topics, trainers desperately pack in everything that they can with little regard to sequence because, after all, it is time-consuming to sequence exercises in a meaningful way. Add this maddening, striking fact: most Instructor Development Programs are themselves impoverished and time constrained. Few agencies truly *train* trainers in any way that can be characterized as systematic and substantive. Given that framework, perhaps scenarios involving 47 ronin are predictable and unavoidable.

Many scenarios embedded in training programs are, moreover, steeped in a distorted understanding of “stress inoculation.” It wants reminding that law enforcement did not forge the concept of stress inoculation. It inherited the concept from Psychology. We do well to recall its roots. The concept was developed to remediate the mental seizure of those suffering a range of psychological traumas, especially phobias. Distilled to essentials, the idea was to introduce the person to the thing, condition or environment exciting the phobic reaction in controlled, measured, rationally sequenced doses in a systematic effort to build tolerance so as to manage the stress associated with the phobia or trauma with at least functional efficacy. Psychologists

focused on the “inoculation” part of stress inoculation. Law Enforcement focused on the “stress” part of stress inoculation. In practice, for law enforcement, the concept devolved into heaping undifferentiated gobs of stress onto trainees with little regard to how it was sequenced and without substantive understanding about the limits of cognition and performance under stress. Stress became an end in itself—and the more elaborate and wild the stress, the “cooler” the training. This approach badly misconstrues how human beings learn. Heaping stress on an unprepared mind does not magically, “somehow,” prepare it. On the contrary, it deepens the tendency to inaction and pathology. If your goal is to teach someone how to drive a car, you do not explore some of the biomechanics and a scanning technique or two and then dump your student onto the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, yelling “drive, drive, come on, come on!” The outcome of such “instruction” is that your student will never *want* to drive. Sensible training begins with talk about the mechanics of driving and the laws underwriting the practice; then applies the mechanics slowly in an abandoned lot; then, perhaps, a side street on which traffic moves only one way; then a major avenue on which significant traffic moves in both directions; and, at length, ends on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. Good teaching will get you to your desired goal, in this case, driving on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. But *how* you get there makes all the difference. Proper training can and should condition a sense of efficacy. To achieve this end, stress should be introduced in a series of manageable, tightly sequenced exercises, each building on the last and pushing toward the ultimate goal. Beginning where you want to end is poor pedagogy. Trainers should remind themselves regularly that stress is not an end in itself but rather a means to achieve efficacy in real world encounters.

Recommendations

Challenge the postulates that underwrite your training program with zeal. Attack them, siege them, scold and abuse them. Bring every technique, every strategy and assumption, every word and every illustration before the tribunal of reason and demand that it justify itself. If it cannot answer the demand, consign it to the dust heap of good (or bad) ideas that paved the way for better, however long its tenure may have been. Be wary equally of the “cool” and the “latest” on one hand and the old and enshrined on the other. Opt for the sensible, the operational, the usable.

Be mindful of the sacred bond between trainer and trainee, of the solemn obligation, pregnant with consequence, that a trainer seeks to open minds to possibilities not yet conceived; to help craft capacity and character; to invest charges with abiding skills that will sustain them safely through a career of taxing harshness that would otherwise consume them. As trainers, we do not owe trainees—our fellow officers—good. We owe them great. We owe them the best within us. This powerful mandate is never achieved by inertia. For a trainer, the one unforgivable sin is to say, “We do it this way because we always have.”

Avoid chirping negative procedural edicts to trainees. Repetition of this sort leaves a bitter taste, as the forced rations of propaganda always do. It may please executive management for reasons peculiar to that stratum but it hurts cops and is corrosive to trainers. Training is itself de facto policy. Make it positive. Tell trainees what *to do*—not what *not to do*. Having offered practical guidance about what to do, it is critical that trainers support trainees as they apply that guidance in real world encounters—and to signal the support loudly and explicitly. As a corollary point, when a trainee fails in some way once assigned to the field, a decent and honorable trainer assesses the incident under the provisional assumption that he in some way failed his trainee, knowing that the trainee wanted to perform better. Diagnose the issues and the extent to which training underwrites them and modify the program accordingly. Waving about a lesson plan and fussing defensively that you showed the trainee how “to get out of that,” thereby marginalizing the cop, avails you nothing, for you *learn* nothing by it. In practice, it canonizes a passive approach under which you endlessly await the next incident rather than actively minimizing occasions for a next incident.

Finally, we grant as an abstract possibility that there may be some tactically savvy executives sensitive to the nuances of building a potent curriculum tailored to the distinctly impolitic realities to which policing is liable, although we have not ourselves met any. By and large executives chatter about tactics without intelligible meaning, insisting on content that dilutes, truncates and eviscerates the sound and the solid in favor of the political and the banal. Here, most of all, you must remember the courage that drove you into the profession and the pride you take in your role as trainer; at times, you must tell the ivory tower executive that his suggestions are wrongheaded and dangerous. Though they may prevail by fiat, their rank has no prerogative over your expertise. For a trainer, the only reward that matters finally is the gratitude of a cop who remembered his trainer’s voice urging counsel in a moment where it was most needed. By comparison, the transient approval of executives is a flimsy thing.

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