

States of the Union

BLACKS AND BROWNS IN BLUE

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



"Life'd not be worth livin' if we didn't keep our inimies."

—MR. DOOLEY

ALTHOUGH THE American ladder to economic opportunity has always been somewhat rickety and unreliable, one of its lower rungs, that of employment in police and fire departments, has been a dependable step upward for many an immigrant group. Traditionally, these jobs have afforded aspiring but ill-educated citizens an exceptional chance to

This is the last of three articles based on a study for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights by Richard and Diane Margolis.

share in the nation's expanding wealth—either through grit or graft, both apparently deemed acceptable if practiced discreetly.

Fifty years ago, all things being equal, one might confidently have predicted that thousands of blacks, those Americans who stood in greatest need of a boost up the ladder, would be absorbed into our municipal protective services. Yet all things were not equal, and blacks were systematically excluded. Early in the 20th century, when municipal jobs were tied directly to political patronage systems, exclusion of blacks was simple and straightforward. By 1930 there were fewer than 1,000 black policemen in the entire nation, and most of these occupied lowly positions on segregated forces in the South.

As civil service spread, racial discrimination grew trickier; it was achieved, by and large, through a

complex applicant obstacle course of background investigations, written examinations and personal interviews—an ingenious screening process which to this day heavily favors whites. Many of these procedures sprang full-grown from the headquarters of police and fire departments during the Depression, when college-educated, status-oriented white "ethnics" donned municipal uniforms for lack of better job offers. Disappointed that life had deprived them of white collars, they set out to "professionalize" the police force. Henceforth only high school graduates with impeccable middle-class morals and a decent grasp of English grammar would be permitted to join the force. (Today's "professionalization" lobby is now talking about restricting job applicants to college graduates.)

The drive toward police professionalization was not entirely racist in intent, of course, but it succeeded in barring blacks and other minority members almost as thoroughly as did the old, discredited patronage system. In any case, it was not until the ghettos exploded in the mid-'60s

that Americans began to notice that nearly everyone wearing a badge was white. There ensued, in dozens of riot-stunned cities, a series of frantic promotional campaigns aimed at hiring more black policemen and firemen. (After the Irish Draft Riots during the Civil War, New York City began to hire more Irish policemen.) Detroit hired Bill Cosby to publicize its campaign; Los Angeles erected "brotherhood" billboards along its freeways; Denver enlisted a slick ad agency to write television copy.

With a few exceptions, these campaigns failed. Today fewer than 2 per cent of America's policemen are black, and for fire departments the figure is under 1 per cent. Moreover, much of the initial enthusiasm, among both whites and blacks, has already sputtered out. To borrow a jeremiad, "The harvest is in, the summer is ended, and we are not saved."

Those who have analyzed the failure generally point to the civil service test as the main barrier to black employment. While it is true that a much higher proportion of blacks than whites flunk it, recent experience suggests that the problem runs much deeper than testing.

In 1968, for example, the Michigan State Police Department decided temporarily to waive the written exam as an employment qualification. On the face of it, the experiment gave every promise of success. During the previous year 1,661 white and 73 black applicants had taken the written test, with only 13 blacks (18 per cent) passing as against 751 whites (45 per cent).

The news of the waiver was well publicized throughout the state, and the police department was flooded with applications. The first batch of 469 applicants included 80 blacks, a considerable improvement over the customary ratio. But once the complicated screening process had worked its will, only 11 blacks were admitted to the training school (compared to 130 whites) and only three were graduated! (The training

academy regularly flunks out 50 per cent of its students; during the no-test period the figure shot up to 70 per cent.)

The various steps in the screening process seem to have proven a disproportionate hardship for black applicants. Background and character investigations, for instance, eliminated 10 per cent of the blacks and merely 2 per cent of the whites. At the end of the no-test period, Michigan was able to add only five blacks to its state police force—its present minority total.

THIS DISAPPOINTING experience suggests that recruitment is not the only barrier in minority hiring practices. If police departments revised or eliminated their written examinations, would minority members be better off? The Michigan results tempt one to answer No. Nevertheless, the picture is not all that clear. Michigan's state police standards seem considerably sterner in some respects than those of many other police departments: Few academies flunk 50 per cent of their trainees, and though the special

program attracted more blacks than usual, it did not draw anywhere near the number of blacks who regularly apply to urban police departments.

One point, however, seems quite clear: The American system of segregation is far too deeply entrenched to yield to bureaucratic tinkering, no matter how radical it may seem to rank-and-file whites.

It is not the *mechanics* of recruitment that need reforming so much as the *assumptions*, which are extremely pessimistic and cynical on both sides. Many police officials feel that the black community is "not ready" for police work, by virtue of education or social ethics. As the police chief of Waterloo, Iowa, complained, "You can't make a good guy out of a punk by giving him a badge." A police chief who feels that blacks are a criminal class is unlikely to succeed at minority recruitment; he may go through the motions, but he will never make a real commitment.

Black assumptions are equally discouraging. Continual harassment in the ghetto has convinced many blacks that the policeman is Public Enemy Number One. To don a uniform is to become a traitor to one's brothers. ("My mama always warned me to stay away from the police station," recalls a black in Detroit. "She said they'd bust my head. Well, one day I wandered in there anyway. The sergeant lifted me up, put me on his lap and gave me a piece of candy. Wow!")

In general, then, white policemen (and firemen) and black ghetto residents tend to approach each other as adversaries, each convinced the other belongs to a criminal class. In Los Angeles County recently a white policeman watched job applicants—black and white—scrambling up ladders in a physical fitness test. He turned to his white companion and said, "I hope our side wins." It is part of America's current agony that men ostensibly dedicated to the protection of their fellow citizens' lives and property think it necessary to choose up sides.

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