

## Police Attack

### FORUM COLUMN

By Chris Ford

Last week, the Los Angeles Police Department blew the public's trust in a way that will take years to restore. Amped-up officers in full riot regalia launched what only could be described as a military-style assault on the family-filled May Day rally in MacArthur Park. It was a chilling reminder to the Latin America-native participants of the bad old days of military repression in their homelands.

The pro-immigrant May Day march started out auspiciously and peacefully. As the ranks of demonstrators swelled, the city sensibly opened up Alvarado Street to marchers even though they lacked a permit.

As a National Lawyers Guild legal observer, I saw what happened next with my own eyes, and I can attest that the media have reported certain key facts inaccurately. First, while a Native American drum group held an impromptu jam on Alvarado in front of the park, the LAPD spontaneously decided to kick people off the street.

With no warning, officers roared into the crowd with motorcycles, wielding batons and rushing marchers to the sidewalk. If the officers' initial intent had been to clear Alvarado Street to accommodate rush-hour traffic, they failed. The street would be unavailable to cars for at least two more hours.

I interviewed several people who had been needlessly hurt by LAPD batons in this first offensive. Officers bludgeoned one petite young woman three or four times. A male marcher said he was trying to back off the street when "they just started whacking away."

The LAPD set up a skirmish line along the west side of Alvarado Street facing the park. Though some crowd members gave the officers a piece of their mind, generally all was peaceful - except for the endless clatter of low-flying police helicopters, which, according to one observer, created "a tense and unpleasant environment."

After about an hour, the crowd and police began to lose interest in each other, and the police began disbanding. Then, a youth stepped off the curb, and the police reacted

with force.

The crowd pulled the youth back onto the sidewalk, and more people showed up to challenge the officers' overreaction. A few not-so-bright souls began hurling empty plastic bottles, sticks and empty Styrofoam cups into the skirmish line.

Speaking to TV cameras, LAPD Chief William Bratton referred to the hurled objects as "missiles," and the media echo chamber of the past week insists that they were "rocks and bottles." But to my eyes, their speed and trajectory showed that the objects were light in weight and no real threat.

Aided by the media, Bratton also has pushed the story that a coordinated group of "agitators" engendered the attack. I saw nothing of the sort. Those who lofted the lightweight objects at police were upset at officers' earlier violent treatment of crowd members.

In any case, why did the police become so agitated by a few flying plastic objects? They are supposed to be tough, and on May Day they were bedecked in riot gear, bristling with weaponry. Officers who can't handle a few plastic bottles without losing their cool should definitely find another line of work.

After crowd members hurled the objects, the sound of wailing sirens heralded the siege. Scores of officers flooded Alvarado, some armed with the LAPD's infamous "less-lethal" weapons. Notwithstanding their kinder-and-gentler name, these huge guns fire hard projectiles weighing up to three ounces at speeds of 200 mph.

Carloads of officers lined the south side of MacArthur Park. These officers - with no audible warning in any language, contrary to Bratton's claims - stormed the park at a dead run, firing their "less-lethal" guns at the crowd full of families and the elderly, creating chaos and confusion.

Again and again, I heard the loud pop of the "less-lethals," punctuating the dispiriting sight of terrified children, tears streaming down their faces.

The LAPD thus took a public forum - the park and its surrounding sidewalks - away from peaceful demonstrators who only wanted to shed light on this nation's inhumane and hypocritical policies toward working-class immigrants.

Even the broadcast media, usually eager to show police clashes with protesters, were indignant, because officers beat up TV reporters and camera operators. A reporter for a Spanish-language station referred to the LAPD's May Day attack as a "pesadilla" (nightmare) and said it "will never be

forgotten."

I am not alone in considering the LAPD's action an attack.

In an open letter, a Mexican government official expressed deep regret over the "furious attack that hundreds of peaceful demonstrators suffered" at the hands of the LAPD.

In addition, Joe Domanick of USC's Annenberg Institute, who has written a book on the Los Angeles police, described the May Day action as "a very methodical, well-planned and coordinated attack on people."

La Opinion, a Los Angeles Spanish-language newspaper, uses Spanish equivalents of "attack" frequently in its coverage.

Huberto Caspa, adjunct professor at California State University, Long Beach, observed in the pages of La Opinion that the LAPD "adopted the same repressive system" as 1970s-era Latin American military dictators.

Because of the LAPD's excesses with "less-lethal" guns during the 2000 Democratic National Convention, the city paid about \$4 million in damages in several lawsuits. Chastened, the LAPD became admirably restrained at protests in recent years.

But that all fell apart on May Day, and the city will pay a big price.

First are the lawsuits - one with TV reporters as plaintiffs and another planned class action on behalf of demonstrators - which likely will be successful. Second, the cost of all those officers, many no doubt on overtime, plus the fuel for their gas-guzzling cars and trucks, will be significant.

But worse than the draining of city coffers is the loss of community trust and respect. The LAPD does not exactly engender confidence in many quarters of this city, but after May Day's disaster, it can expect open hostility.

The LAPD likely will need years to recover the public confidence it took less than an hour to lose. To do that, the LAPD will have to drop its siege mentality and show respect to those who take to the streets to exercise their First Amendment rights.

**Chris Ford**, a former reporter and editor for the Daily Journal, is a Los Angeles sole practitioner who focuses on civil rights and appellate law.

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