



Graphic evidence: Attorney Steven Lerman displays a photo of his battered client at a press conference

TINA GERSON—GAMMA LIAISON

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Police Brutality!

Four Los Angeles officers are arrested for a vicious beating, and the country plunges into a debate on the rise of complaints against cops

By ALEX PRUD'HOMME

The incident was over in a matter of minutes. But two weeks after the beating of a black motorist by Los Angeles policemen was videotaped by an eyewitness, it had led to arrests, probes by local, county and federal organizations and a Justice Department review of law-enforcement violence across the nation.

It began with wailing police cars chasing a motorist through the night, cornering his car in a Los Angeles suburb and surrounding the driver as he stepped into the street. A sergeant fired a 50,000-volt Taser stun gun at the unarmed black man, then three officers took turns kicking him and smashing him in the head, neck, kidneys and legs with their truncheons. A hovering helicop-

ter bathed the scene in a floodlight as 11 other policemen looked on. When the beating was over, Rodney King, 25, an unemployed construction worker, had suffered 11 fractures in his skull, a crushed cheekbone, a broken ankle, internal injuries, a burn on his chest and some brain damage.

The matter might have ended there had not a bystander captured two minutes of the March 3 incident with his video camera. Within hours, the horrific scene was being replayed on national television. Within days, outraged protesters were demanding the resignation of Los Angeles police chief Daryl Gates. By the end of last week, four officers had been arrested for assault and 11 others were under investigation by the FBI, the L.A.P.D.'s internal affairs division and the Los Angeles County

district attorney's office. Said D.A. Ira Reiner: "It is a terrible moment, and time for serious reflection, when officers who have sworn to uphold the law are indicted for the most serious felonies."

The scandal reverberated far beyond Los Angeles, stirring a nationwide debate over excessive police violence and finally prompting Washington to take action. Last week U.S. Attorney General Dick Thornburgh announced that the Justice Department would review all complaints of police brutality received by the Federal Government over the past six years—some 15,000 cases. Though it was unclear what steps Washington might take, Assistant Attorney General John Dunne said the immediate goal was "to determine whether there is a pattern of abuse to a high degree in any



Public anger: demanding the chief's resignation, protesters march outside L.A.P.D. headquarters

MICHAEL JUSTICE—PICTURE GROUP

particular region or police department.”

Critics of Los Angeles' Chief Gates charged that such a pattern does exist on his 8,300-member force. The day Thornburgh announced his investigation, 1,000 angry Angelenos at a police-commission hearing denounced Gates as the embodiment of a brutal, racist police department and demanded that he step down. Some in the crowd chanted, “Hey, hey, ho, ho, Daryl Gates has got to go!”

Gates, 64, a rawboned, crew-cut career officer with a reputation as a law-and-order hard-liner, sat stonily through the 3½-hour meeting. Though he had earlier declared himself sickened by the King beating, he said he was “very proud” of his 13-year tenure as L.A.P.D. chief and refused to resign. Said Gates: “I didn't invest 42 years of my life to go down the tubes over an incident that I had nothing to do with.”

Race was a persistent subtext of the controversy. “We don't know how much racism was involved,” says Jerome H. Skolnick, a law professor at the University of California, Berkeley, “but I believe that racist police are more likely to be brutal and brutal police are more likely to be racist.” When black people see a police car in Los Angeles, says state assemblyman Curtis Tucker, “they don't know whether justice will be meted out or whether judge, jury and executioner is pulling up.”

Though nonwhites account for 60% of Los Angeles' polyglot population, white officers make up 61% of the L.A.P.D. Simi-

lar imbalances exist in many heavily ethnic communities around the U.S. and, says sociologist James Marquart of Sam Houston State University, this pattern can encourage police violence. “White police officers don't understand a lot of things that go on in these areas,” says Marquart. “One way to deal with that is to use force. It goes across all cultural boundaries.”

Last week's federal action was prompted largely by the concerns of national civil

rights leaders. Attorney General Thornburgh's decision to review claims of police brutality came after a meeting with Democratic Congressmen John Conyers Jr. of Michigan and Edolphus Towns of New York, members of the Congressional Black Caucus. Said Benjamin Hooks, head of the N.A.A.C.P.: “Police brutality is one of the recurring, persistent questions that has never died down because it exists all over the nation.”

Statistics do indicate a rise in police-brutality cases in many urban areas. In the Metro Miami area, 111 excessive-force complaints were filed last year, up from 67 in 1985. During the same years, the number of Washington's complaints jumped from 299 to 415, while Chicago's went from 2,084 to 2,476. Yet experts seem divided over whether instances of police brutality are actually rising nationwide or whether the number of complaints has increased because of greater public awareness.

Neil Redlener, professor of psychiatry at Tufts University School of Medicine, argues that police are more prone to use force these days because they are facing a more lethal environment. “There is better firepower and increased violence in the streets,” he says. “A police uniform these days is as much a target as protection.”

But Robert Trojanowicz, director of Michigan State University's School of Criminal Justice, points out that departments increasingly emphasize better screening of candidates to lower the inci-

From what you have read or seen, do you think the Los Angeles police clubbing of a black man was racially motivated?

YES 43%

NO 20%

Should criminal charges be brought against these officers, or should this matter be left to the police for disciplinary procedures?

Criminal charges 67%

Police discipline 17%

How often do you think incidents occur in your community where police use violence against private citizens?

Very often

9%

Fairly often

13%

On occasion

48%

Never

23%

From a telephone poll of 500 American adults taken for TIME/CNN on March 13 by Yankelovich Clancy Shulman. Sampling error is plus or minus 4.5%. “Not sures” omitted.

dence of police violence. "Generally, police officers as a group use remarkable restraint in highly charged, emotional situations," says Trojanowicz, who believes most lawmen are deeply embarrassed by the Los Angeles beating.

There was ample cause for embarrassment in the March 3 incident. The police claim to have clocked King's 1988 Hyundai going 115 m.p.h. on the Foothill Freeway, although the audio transcript of their initial radio reports does not mention excessive speed. The manufacturer later stated that the car could not exceed 100 m.p.h. The police said they subdued King because he reached into his pocket as he emerged from the car, a movement they felt was menacing. Yet the videotape shows the man lying helpless on the ground as the officers repeatedly beat and kicked him. One eyewitness said that she heard King begging the policemen to stop and that they "were all laughing, like they just had a party." When King was released from jail three days later, he told reporters he was "lucky they didn't kill me." Though he was still on parole after serving a year for second-degree robbery, the D.A. declined to press any charges against him.

Instead his tormentors were facing charges. Last week a grand jury indicted Sergeant Stacey Koon, 40, and Officers Laurence M. Powell, 28, Timothy E. Wind,

Do you think L.A. police chief Daryl Gates should be held responsible for the conduct of his officers?

YES 50%

NO 34%

Do you think police chief Gates should resign over this incident?

YES 15%

NO 63%



LORI VALESKO—GAMMA LIAISON

Under fire: Gates intends to hold on

30, and Theodore J. Briseno, 38, on charges of assault with a deadly weapon and excessive use of force "under the color of authority." They face possible prison sentences of four to seven years. When the grand jury goes back into session this week, it will continue to investigate the 11 other officers present during the beating. King's attorneys say he is preparing to file suit against the city of Los Angeles, which paid out \$10 million in judgments against it in police-brutality cases last year.

Gates, who earlier singled out three of the officers for departmental discipline, said they had "brought shame and dishonor upon the police profession." Yet he dismissed the beating as an "aberration." In fact, the roots of the incident have much to do with both the history of the L.A.P.D. and the stewardship of Daryl Gates.

Over the years, television programs such as *Dragnet* and *Adam 12* have portrayed the Los Angeles force as a model of cool, dedicated efficiency. But with 8,300 officers serving an increasingly multiracial population of 3.4 million, the L.A.P.D. has the lowest officer-to-resident ratio of the nation's six largest police departments. To compensate, the L.A.P.D. pioneered the use of SWAT teams, helicopter pursuit and a motorized battering ram, tactics that differ markedly from the community-patrol approach many other cities have adopted.

Another factor is the L.A.P.D.'s unique autonomy. In 1937, responding to a police scandal, the city passed a charter that in effect gave the police chief life tenure. The chief cannot be dismissed by the mayor or the five-member police commission without "cause"—generally defined as misconduct or willful neglect of duty. This system, argues UCLA sociologist Jack Katz, has led to "a kind of organizational egocentrism." Mayor Tom Bradley, himself a former Los Angeles police officer, has had numerous run-ins with Gates and has requested on at least four occasions that the city charter be amended to allow a mayor to fire the police chief. Though Bradley stopped short of calling for Gates' resignation, he strongly denounced the attack on King. Said the mayor: "I have never seen this kind of intensity, anger and outrage that people have expressed, and I think rightly so."

Meanwhile, the man in the center of the hurricane seemed to be the coolest customer in town. A conservative Republican who exercises regularly and shuns alcohol, Gates lives in a downtown condominium with his second wife Sima. Supporters describe him as a disciplined and sensitive professional, fiercely protective of his men. His detractors call him an opportunistic cowboy who makes provocative statements to grab attention. He has, for example, called Hispanic officers "lazy," described a blond television newscaster as an "Aryan broad" and branded his own son—whom he disowned after the youth spent a year in jail for robbery—"a narcotics addict." In 1982 he was officially reprimanded when he suggested blacks are more susceptible to dying than "normal people" when subdued with a choke hold. That same year, he speculated that the Soviet Union was flooding Los Angeles with "spies" posing as Jewish émigrés.

The example of such leadership, say Gates' critics, ultimately trickles down to the cop on the beat and creates the conditions in which a beating like King's can take place. Sociologist Katz, who has studied the L.A.P.D., says its officers are taught "that there are two kinds of errors police can make on the street. One is not being aggressive when they should be, and the other is being aggressive when they shouldn't." The message the cops get, says Katz, is that they should err on the side of aggressiveness. And although Gates can't be held responsible for every officer's action, he does set the tone in the department. "If you look at the King videotape," says Katz, "there is a cultural sense that this [beating] is appropriate. It is not as though the police were personally, emotionally involved. It is really an ethos that makes this kind of behavior possible." —**Reported by Cathy Booth/Miami, Edwin M. Reingold/Los Angeles and Elaine Shannon/Washington**