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# Spokane Police Violence: A Follow-Up

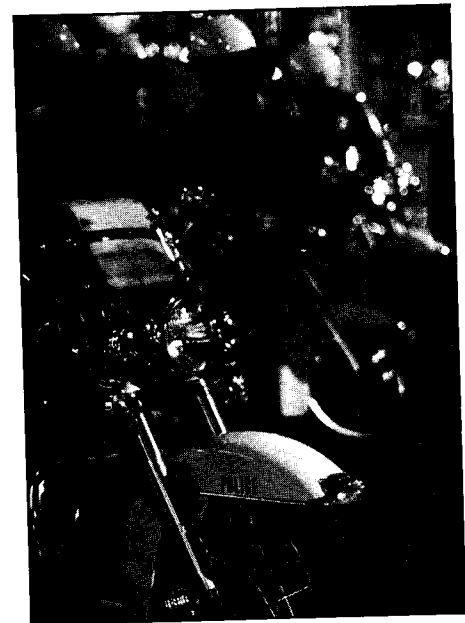
■ In his letter to the editor on page 6, Police Chief Robert Panther says SPOKANE MAGAZINE'S June article on police violence "demands a response." Have we gotten one? The article cited six specific instances, naming names, places and dates, in which policemen allegedly used their uniforms as license to deliver unnecessary beatings to citizens. In each case cited the accusation of the victim was backed by a witness who, so far as we could tell, had no reason to lie. Their stories are on the table for everyone's scrutiny. The only real way we know of to carry the inquiry any further is to have the police officers who were involved tell us what they saw. From the beginning, however, the police have refused to say anything (we quoted extensively from official police reports to give their side of the story). Now the police chief says that in every case his officers are innocent; he just is not at liberty to tell us how he knows. But a policeman, of all people, will understand that specific allegations are not perfectly answered by general assurances that there is nothing to worry about.

Chief Panther says that it is legal counsel which prohibits him from responding in more detail. This is not quite the case. Shortly after the article was published, city manager Terry Novak requested a meeting with the magazine's editors so that the city could present the police side of the story (the police had turned down several requests to add its versions to the reported incidents prior to publication of the article).

At the meeting in Novak's office, the city manager said that he had asked Chief Panther to respond to the article in a memorandum. Novak said that he was willing for the magazine to use this memo as the basis for a follow-up article. Assistant corporation counsel Larry Winner, also at the meeting, went through the memo during the meeting to delete certain names and other details which could not be part of the public record. The magazine editors agreed to consult with the city on what information might be published (Winner felt some of the memo's statements could expose the city to

libel suits). But the editors added that naturally the information would be put in context and checked against other records and sources. Having received the assurances he needed, Novak pushed the memo across the table toward SPOKANE MAGAZINE editor Larry Shook. Chief Panther, however, stood, reached across the table and intercepted it, saying he wanted to think about it longer. Not the city legal representative, not the city manager, but Panther himself prevented the police response from becoming part of the record. Panther decided to keep the memo to himself and instead sent the letter (on page 6).

The chief also scuttled a tentative agreement reached at the meeting whereby it was understood the police department would allow a reporter from the magazine to interview two officers. Six days after the article was published Spokane police arrested 22-year-old Douglas Breikreutz at a North Side apartment house. Breikreutz, a convicted felon, was also charged with committing simple assault on the two officers who arrested him. However, five witnesses to the



Max Gano

arrest who talked to SPOKANE MAGAZINE (at least one of whom was cited in police department reports as a potential witness for the prosecution) say they saw no signs that Breitreutz was resisting arrest; that he was lying on a couch when at least one of the officers punched him repeatedly in the face. The magazine learned of Breitreutz' arrest and his injuries from a former prisoner in the Spokane City-County Jail. The tentative deal to allow the arresting officers to be interviewed was off, Panther said, because the department believed Breitreutz had intentions to sue the city because of the arrest. It was, in essence the same stance taken by the city prior to the article's publication: if there was just the question the city was going to face a suit as a result of alleged violent conduct on the part of its officers, the department would provide no information.

Whatever his reasons, we believe the police chief is overlooking the utility of putting the police department's response on record. The alleged use of excess force by certain police officers has been a matter of public charges and gatherings for over two years now. If the police chief can be certain that his officers are in no way and to no degree culpable, revealing some of the information that so assures him could help lay the matter to rest.

Take the case of David Tripp. Ever since he was arrested two years ago, his mother has made a crusade out of her son's claim that he was gratuitously beat up by the officer who arrested him. Tripp's claim is supported by a woman who happened to be watching from her bedroom window. She does not know Tripp, characterizes herself as a strong supporter of the police and was very reluctant to make any statements on the matter. Here is what she said:

"One of the officers slapped the kid repeatedly on the head. The boy was crying and yelling, 'I didn't do anything!' At first he was lying on his hands. Then he put his hands behind him and was handcuffed. One officer hit him again and ordered him to get up. I don't know if the boy didn't want to get up or if he couldn't get up, but then the policeman jerked him up by the hair."

The police chief apparently has gotten an explanation of this incident which satisfied him that his officers acted properly. If the chief would reveal what convinced him that the police action was proper, the community could look at the whole story and be assured itself.

The community, after all, deserves such assurance. A blue uniform does not sanctify. A police officer has the same temptations to give way to base instincts as the rest of us—but there is more at stake if he does. A policeman is the only person in society at liberty to hit, shoot or imprison others by his own judgment, generally with no questions asked. Beyond his physical powers, his actions are symbolically important, for whatever he does, he does it in the name of society. If a teenager misbehaves, we give the policeman the difficult job of representing society in asserting its rules. But what is the

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effect on a teenager, or his friends standing around, if an officer of the law ties the teenager's hands behind his back with handcuffs and then proceeds to "teach him a lesson" by beating him? Finally, a policeman must be held to strict standards because of the public trust in his office. In court and elsewhere, his word is implicitly accepted; any looseness in his behavior is, consequently, that much more dangerous.

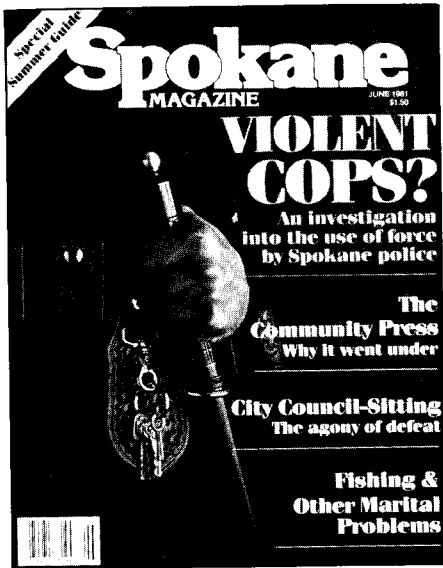
A police chief is the community's guarantor of the behavior of its police force—not an easy job, since he is nearly as removed from the scenes of arrest as the rest of us, and since other policemen who are on the scene understandably do not like telling on their fellows. The only apparent way for a police chief to guarantee the proper behavior is through the careful watch of, and assiduous follow-up on, citizen complaints. If a policeman knows that the administration impartially pursues every complaint, this knowledge is constantly with the policeman as a warning to act as he is commissioned to act, whatever the pressures or temptations. Conversely, if complaints are ignored or perfunctorily dismissed, the message to a frustrated policeman who is tempted to lift his fist for one personally satisfying punch is: you may do so without fear of us.

One of the most serious problems discovered in the article about police, the magazine felt, was that it is quite difficult to register a complaint against an officer. SPOKANE MAGAZINE writer Tim Connor accompanied a complainant to the police station three times, to see him turned away each time with advice to come back another time (once he was urged to come in at 11 p.m.) After the third try, the man gave up.

Chief Panther concedes that there was a problem with the complaint process, but he seems to feel it was basically a bureaucratic inconvenience. Is it possible one of his important management tools has been on the blink, and therefore has not been sending forward important signals? The chief says of the officers, "The restraint they exhibit is commendable." Is he certain he would know if it were otherwise?

The chief may in fact know that his officers are showing proper restraint and he may feel that restraint is commendable. If that is the case, the most useful response to the SPOKANE MAGAZINE article would have been to place before the public the rest of the story, the evidence that has convinced him the named police officers were in the right. To say such convincing evidence exists, and then to literally pull it away from public scrutiny, only raises more questions than have been answered since the article's publication.

In summarizing the sequence of events to date, it is hard to avoid this question: is the city sincerely committed to the control of Spokane's police department, or is it merely putting up a front? We feel from his actions Chief Panther has given the impression that he may be more concerned about the "morale" of his troops than their actual behavior. #



## THE CHIEF RESPONDS

Tim Connor's article in the June, 1981 issue of SPOKANE MAGAZINE raising questions about police violence demands a response. Legal counsel, however, advises against detailing specific responses to the reported complaints against police officers.

Each of the incidents referred to in SPOKANE MAGAZINE has been investigated by the police department. Our work was made more difficult because of a lack of cooperation on the part of some of the complainants and due to the fact that not all the information provided to Mr. Connor for the article is accurate.

Based on the totality of information that I have reviewed regarding the subject of excessive police force, I believe that Spokane police officers are conscious of the need to exercise careful judgment in the use of an appropriate amount of force in overcoming resistance. Any force beyond that level will not be tolerated.

The expressed concerns of Mr. Connor as to the certainty that a complaint would be taken from a citizen whenever he or she wished to make a complaint did have some merit. In a continuing effort to be responsible to the legitimate needs of Spokane's citizens, our procedures have been further clarified to insure that citizens will be heard promptly.

The work of a police officer today is difficult. Respect for any kind of authority is discouragingly low. In light of the assaultive behavior displayed against officers (42 officers assaulted in 1980; 35 officers assaulted in the first six months of 1981) the restraint they exhibit is commendable.

Spokane has a good police force. I am proud to be a member of our department.

ROBERT D. PANTHER  
Chief of Police

*Editor's note: Spokane Magazine replies on page 20.*

The subject of police brutality is long overdue, and many media sources are afraid to touch it; but you came through. As citizens and taxpayers alike, we have the right to know what is happening here in our community.

It's about time the residents and other officials quit burying their heads and refusing to believe this could happen in such a perfect community as Spokane.

Damn it Spokane—*wake up!* Everyone seems concerned about our "All American City" image, so let's all be concerned, and expose this once and for all and quit the coverup.

MRS. M. NELSON  
Nine Mile Falls

## MORE "NUCLEAR" FALLOUT

Lawrence Shook's "A Koan For Our Time" [August 1981] is without a doubt one of the finest pieces of writing ever to appear in SPOKANE MAGAZINE.

One of the great calls to courage during a war some thirty years ago was sounded thus: We have nothing to fear but fear itself. Now, perhaps, fear may become a friend. If the insane logic of nuclear proliferation is not enough to scare us into doing away with the tools of nuclear warfare, what is?

MITCH FINLEY

I'd like to applaud your nuclear point of view. Your "Publisher's Notes" discussed an elusive subject in such a sophisticated, relaxed manner that I'm certain you changed some minds and, too, encouraged others to continue to take responsibility for world peace and the preservation of man.

LARRY BROWN

Your article "A Koan for Our Time" was most appropriate for all of us. The everyday busy-ness of our lives tends to cloud over concern for the bigger picture. When our own SPOKANE MAGAZINE helps us all to think globally, I applaud you.

Nuclear disarmament is perhaps the biggest issue that faces the world, and it is only through responsible media that we can be sensitized to what is going on in that arena. In 1945, one ten-kiloton bomb killed 130,000 people. Today, the United States and the Soviet Union possess 50,000 nuclear weapons—most of them thousands of times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb. In half an hour all the cities in the northern hemisphere can be destroyed, and the Spokane area would be one of the first.

On May 2, at a Waging-Peace Conference at Harvard Divinity School, economist Kenneth Galbraith said, "After a nuclear exchange, not even the most ardent ideologue is going to be able to tell the ashes of Communism from the ashes of free enterprise."

EDWARD B. LINDAMAN

You have performed what must be the highest role of journalism: to crystallize thought and catalyze action on a human issue of enormous scale in our time. A compelling phrase like "mutant logic" can only be the result of the journey of a lucid mind through a complex and threatening labyrinth.

As distressing as developments like the neutron bomb are, efforts like your's affirm for me what I must believe: that peace is possible. I'm sure that others will, after reading the August issue, feel as challenged as I do to help make it happen.

ALLEGRA ASKMAN

William Young's vivid depiction of what has already happened twice too often in our world, Paul Quinnett's "Parable" and William Stimson's "Nuclear War as a Local Issue" were articles worthy of this nation's finest publications. Their words brought home the grim reality that, indeed, this "issue" is like no other and that all people of good conscience and love for this world had better soon begin speaking. So many passages [in "A Koan For Our Time"] were so penetrating and moving that I could not help but read them aloud to friends who were near. I commend you on your courage in speaking thoughts which disturb.

I am a Catholic priest and I hope to soon preach to the people of my parish community on these questions. Your words have helped me in choosing to do so. I am proud that we have such people as your contributors and such a periodical as SPOKANE MAGAZINE in our community. Thank you.

KEVIN CODD  
St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church

With so many people in Spokane in favor of all the new nuclear weaponry so that we can "keep up or get ahead" of the Russians, I think you were very brave to print three convincing articles questioning the correctness of such a theory.

CAROL L. JONES

"A Koan for Our Time" states eloquently and precisely how I have been feeling for a long time. In essence, that we are in a downward, destructive cycle caused by a military logic that states we must "arm for peace" and which creates an incredible tension amongst humanity. This cycle not only creates more destructive nuclear weapons and a greater chance of nuclear holocaust, but it also creates a deeper sense of helplessness among the sane and the practical.

Those of us who look at the insanity of the Catch 22 of deterrence stand in horror as we see the nuclear temperature rise—but what of these men who are world leaders, can they not see this horror also. Are the ones in power as helpless as those of us who are followers? Possibly another koan would be, "Who is more powerful than a powerless leader?"

Could it be that no one knows where to stop this insanity? That we are all part of a logic that will go on no matter how much