

A Former Baltimore Cop: We Have to Solve the Problems of America That Nobody Wants to Deal With

By Geoffrey Gagnon GQ April 30, 2015

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Though the cops in Baltimore have been the focus of intense national scrutiny all week, few people have paid closer attention to them than Peter Moskos. A professor of criminal justice and sociology who now teaches at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Moskos used to be a cop in Baltimore (an experience he wrote about in the acclaimed book, *Cop in the Hood: My Year Policing Baltimore's Eastern District*). Monday night, as cars burned and glass shattered, he followed a live-stream of the radio calls from officers on duty--and felt a strange urge to join them. We spoke about his time on the force and about the perspectives of urban cops in a city like Baltimore.



A condensed and edited transcript of the conversation is below.

As a former cop, what were you thinking as you followed the riot? What's easy to misunderstand if you're not a cop?

You know, cops are put in this horrible position where they have to solve the problems of America that nobody wants to deal with. The same idiots who burned shit down Monday, they're gonna be there today and tomorrow. The cops are always dealing with them, whether they're burning things down or not. They're always there.

I was speaking to a cop, a black guy from East Baltimore, and he's like look, "Cops reflect where they work. Yeah they can be dicks, but that's the neighborhood they're working in. Whether they're from there or not, they end up speaking the language of the ghetto."

You've policed the areas where violence broke out. What stays with you from your time on those particular streets?

One thing that sticks out from my time is how much all cops hate the ghetto. And that's not a race thing. I think black cops are better at picking up the class nuances of the ghetto and defining it more about that than about geographic area. Some people want to make this a racial thing, I really think it's a class issue. You have this underclass that has no education, no jobs, no experience outside of a four block radius. And we ignore it.

The lack of adult structure for kids here is huge. The kids who are out there night after night, they have no parents. The thing that shocked me--and I'm not religious--but it was that none of

the juveniles we'd arrest ever went to church. You don't go to church if you don't have a parent to take you to church. There wasn't one churchgoer among the juveniles I arrested. The other thing was the isolation. I'd ask the juveniles if they ever left Baltimore. Maybe they went to the Inner Harbor once, maybe they visited their auntie on the west side. Their entire lives are in a five block radius. They're raised on the streets by their friends.

For cops not from that area, it's so unbelievable. The lifestyle, the poverty, the crime that goes on there. And they feel that outsiders, particularly liberals and the media don't really understand what cops have to deal with. They know things are fucked up, but we put cops in an impossible situation. We tell them to do the best they can, and then when an individual cop messes up, everybody blames the police. And cops feel strangely victimized by this system--they're put in the middle and used as political tools.

In your experience, do many cops live in the area? Isn't that part of the problem?

Very few. Many are from there, but then move out because there are good reasons you don't want to live there. Cops from the area understand that there are good and bad people. Of course, another thing is that most people who can leave have left. And so, in these pockets, how can you have good community relations when a substantial number of people are actively or passively involved in crime?

I think there are a lot of cops that just say, "Fuck 'em, they want burn their neighborhood, let 'em." But on the other hand, the cops are out there putting their lives on the line to save their city. I know a retired cop who went back to work Monday, because he cares. He was on the streets because he wanted to make sure other officers were safe.

What does a cop feel when the police begin assembling as they did on Monday to confront unrest?

Whatever they're doing, keep in mind, they've never done it before. They've never really trained for this. We had like a half day of riot training in the academy. There's fear, but mostly of the unknown. You're going to work and kissing your loved ones and you don't know what the hell you're going into. You don't know if and when you're coming home. You don't know. I try not be a cop cheerleader, but they could, at some point, say, "Fuck it, I quit. I don't like this job anyway."

We expect that our cops are gonna show up. And the fact that we had retired cops going in there, well, they deserve real credit for that. That's not easy. And these are people who hate the ghetto--and still they're in there. I felt an urge to put on my uniform. You feel a strange sense of calling.

Knowing what you know about Baltimore, what is going to happen now?

In an ideal world we'd invest money and make things better, but I think in the real world, Baltimore is going to take a step backward. These businesses won't reopen. They're still swaths of vacant lots in the Eastern District that haven't recovered from the '68 riot. Those scars are still there. If I were a betting man, I'd say things will simmer down, there will be much pontificating, and then it'll be business as usual.