

How Cops Really Feel About the Occupy Wall Street Protests

By Peter Moskos | Posted Monday, Nov. 14, 2011, at 11:23 AM

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Slate.com

Which Side Are They On?

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Update, Nov. 15, 2:55 p.m.: *The NYPD moved in this morning and cleared out Zuccotti Park. Mayor Bloomberg, as he should, took responsibility for the decision. From a tactical police perspective, the operation appears to have gone well in that the park was secured and nobody was seriously injured. Of course the situation is still rapidly evolving. Among other things, an important court decision is expected in half an hour.*

Whether one agrees or disagrees with the mayor's decision, such is the way things are supposed to work in our representative democracy. (I, for instance, find the arrest of reporters particularly distasteful.)

As to the protesters, I have sympathy. I can only hope they will direct their anger not toward the men and women following orders (lawful orders, mind you), but to those with the power and means to actually affect change.

As to the police, I also have sympathy. You are stuck in the middle, as usual. But you must exercise professionalism and restraint. The whole world really is watching. And the good job of many can easily be undone by the out-of-control action of few.

But to those who may be intent on provoking and hurting police, I can offer no better warning than one told to my friend years ago by his father: "Don't get into fights with police; they're not in the habit of losing."

There's a dirty old joke about two men watching three other men go at it, in bed. One observer, a bit naïve, asks the other about the man on the left. The second observer, more knowledgeable, describes his role. The naïve one then asks about the man on the right and, after receiving a detailed answer, finally asks about the third man, the man in the middle. The cognoscente says, somewhat longingly, "The man in the middle? Why that's Lucky Pierre!"

I think of Pierre when Occupy protesters ask police, as they do, "Who the fuck are you protecting?" It's certainly a valid question. Police are supposed to protect everything and everybody—shop windows, people who need to get to work, even the protesters. It's an impossible task. On one side a very small minority of protesters wish to create something between mob rule and a literal revolution. On the other side, perhaps a few totalitarians wish to eliminate all dissent and relive battles of bygone decades. Placed between conflicting demands, police end up like Pierre, but unlucky: stuck in the middle and screwed from both sides.

Protesters—the vast majority peaceful—exercise their [1st Amendment](#) rights to speech, assembly, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances. Meanwhile residents and businesses whose livelihoods depend on normalcy oppose the protests, if not on ideological grounds, than simply because of their disruptive presence. Our democratically elected leaders make the laws and order police to enforce them with legal force. City officials, their eye on overtime and the bottom line, order police to clear an area—which requires force—and to make sure nobody gets hurt. It can't happen.

Police become the messenger stuck between two irreconcilable forces. The results can be tragic. In Oakland, a young veteran was [critically injured](#) when police tried, unsuccessfully in the end, to keep a public plaza free from protesters. Tear gas, rubber bullets, and Tasers are called *less-lethal* for a reason. They can and occasionally do kill.

Occupy protests complicate matters by bringing a segment of society—a white middle-class segment—into, what is for many, first contact with police authority. If you think of police as coming whenever you call for help, you may be surprised to learn that police do not work for you. Officers work first for the police department and then for the city that pays them. A force designed to maintain order and the status quo will never sing Kumbaya with protesters who combine a desire for change with a privileged sense of agency and entitlement.

Police were invented in 1829, very explicitly in part, to protect society from mob rule. [H.L. Mencken](#) described police of the early 1900s as poorly paid, “but they carried on their dismal work with unflagging diligence, and loved a long, hard chase almost as they loved a quick, brisk clubbing.” Police today are undoubtedly changed for the better, and reliance on force is much less common than it was in Mencken’s age (or even a few decades ago). Better training and changing attitudes (combined with video cameras and lawsuits) have dragged police culture reluctantly into something very close to the present day.

Even though police culture remains solidly working-class and socially conservative, there is a surprisingly strong populist and even libertarian streak in policing. Granted, this is more Tea Party conservative than balaclava-wearing anarchist, but in an era when even those who wear blue see pink-slips, one does not have to dig too deep in the rank-and-file to find conditional sympathy for Occupy. But to ask if police have sympathy for Occupy protesters is to ask the wrong question (akin to asking waiters if they’re hungry on behalf of their customers). Police work is not about sympathy but getting the job done, pleasing the boss, and going home in one piece.

When times are routine, police drive around, respond to calls for service, help when they can, arrest when they must, and pick up the pieces of very troubled lives. The angry, the criminals, the victims, the idiotic—they can all be part of the fun. In a chaotic world, routine comes to substitute for order. Your average cop asks for little more than a working car, a decent cup of coffee, a clean bathroom, time to eat, and the chance to get off work on time.

Police will always gripe when something disturbs their routine. (But honestly, police can sometimes be a complaining lot.) If cops could wave a magic wand, the protesters would simply go away. But if cops could wave a magic wand, the whole damned city would probably disappear. Police relate to the demoralized employees in the film [Clerks](#): “This job would be great if it wasn’t for the fucking customers.” Occupy protests are certainly seen as a nuisance, but this is more work-related than deep-rooted ideology.

If we accept that Occupy protests, like all large public gatherings, need to be policed, there are guidelines of protest behavior that can mitigate police unpleasantness: 1) don’t hurt yourself or others, 2) don’t shut down the city, 3) don’t antagonize the police, and 4) no surprises. If these simple rules are followed, police will gladly stand around and collect overtime while others chant and rally.

The job for police at large protests is mostly to protect and contain. In general, police avoid arrests at major events because they are time-consuming, disruptive, and remove officers from the scene. But when break-out groups of protesters disrupt the city, police have to react, and they won’t be in a good mood. As long as protesters—not all protesters, but some—wish to provoke officers, police will play the role of an angry Pierre.

If we wish protests to be allowed and peacefully contained, we could do far worse than follow the lead of the NYPD. So far, with a few [notable bumps](#), things have actually gone pretty well in Manhattan. But New York City has huge resources not available to smaller locales. Ultimately the decision to accommodate, tolerate, or battle protesters rests, as it should, with a multitude of locally elected officials. Perhaps they should be more tolerant of groups of people who wish to control public space. Perhaps blocking roads isn’t the be-all and end-all (after all, cars do it all the time). Perhaps we can better balance local livelihoods and open access to public space.

These issues need to be decided by cool-headed civil discussion and not the moment a chunk of concrete whizzes past an officer’s head. Police work literally and figuratively in uniform, but it is counterproductive and somewhat absurd to antagonize an officer in New York for an order given in California (and vice versa).

Occupy is supposed to be about economic injustice, not the police. The majority of protesters are peaceful and mean well; the majority of the public respect, if not the substance of the protesters, the right to protest; and the majority of police officers—who, unlike the protesters, would certainly prefer to be elsewhere—do not want to become the focal point of protesters’ fury. And yet there the police are, center stage, day in and day out. Wherever the protests go, police have to come reluctantly along for the ride, stuck in the middle, like poor Unlucky Pierre.