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*'Marching to his own refreshingly off-step beat':*

## Ex-Seattle chief's 'kiss-and-tell' memoir

### Breaking Rank: A Top Cop's Exposé of the Dark Side of American Policing.

By Norm Stamper.

New York: Nation Books, 2005.

397 pp., \$26.00.

By Peter Moskos

Pity poor Norm Stamper. He would have liked nothing more than to write a book extolling the virtues of community policing and a greater police focus on domestic violence. A hard-working liberal police officer for 33 years, he rose from San Diego beat cop to chief of the Seattle Police Department.

Then came the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle. Massive protests and riots turned the city into chaos. Chief Stamper later resigned, admitting that he and his police were woefully unprepared for the scale of protests. Stamper's name is now cursed by both ends of the political spectrum, albeit for different and often diametrically opposed reasons.

"Breaking Rank" is largely autobiographical. The book's organization, poorly set around grandly themed chapters, conflicts at times with the otherwise chronological approach. And when Stamper's gaze turns toward the personal failings of himself and others, he relies too often on a disturbingly Californian blend of pop psychology and

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shiny idealism. Just what is so wrong with having a few beers after work?

Stamper is not the first police chief to tell his story. In 1933, August Vollmer wrote the wonderful and now too-rarely read "The Police and Modern Society." More recent contributions include Anthony Bouza's enlightening "The Police Mystique" (1990), Malcolm Young's excellent but little known "An Inside Job" (1991), and Bill Bratton's coauthored but self-indulgently good "Turnaround" (1998).

"Breaking Rank" is arguably more "anti-police" than any of these books (with the possible exception of Bouza's unwittingly Marxist take on the role of police in society). But Stamper can quite well fend off simplistic attacks that he is anti-police. Stamper is police. At the same time, those readers looking for a police chief turned "rat" will be equally disappointed.

As a kiss-and-tell, there is better kissing and telling: Poss and Schlesinger's ghetto cops in "Brooklyn Bounce," the slippery slope of McArary's "Buddy Boys," and the



day-to-day realities portrayed in the better half of Conlon's verbose "Blue Blood." In truth, Stamper doesn't really break rank. He just marches to his own refreshingly off-step beat.

As a polemicist, Stamper is far less radical than he claims to be. His personal beliefs and police philosophy can mostly be summarized as predictably liberal: opposition to the death penalty combined with support for gun control, gay rights, abortion rights, and better minority representation in policing. These are not bad ideas per se, just predictable. Other ideas — the demilitarization of policing, the decriminalization of drugs and prostitution, more women police, and improved community relations — are well articulated

and surprisingly convincing no matter the political label.

A significant part of "Breaking Rank" is devoted to reducing domestic violence. While perhaps beneficial to domestically abusive or poorly trained police officers, Stamper's focus on personal redemption and political awakening hold less interest for the general reader.

Stamper supports the "anti-police" court decisions of *Mapp v. Ohio*, *Gideon v. Wainwright*, *Escobedo v. Illinois*, and *Miranda v. Arizona*. Yet crude pro- and anti-police labels do justice neither to the diversity of ideology within policing nor the subtlety of Stamper's ideas. He convincingly argues that such "liberal" court decisions have resulted in both better policing and increased officer safety. And what side of the political spectrum is represented by his calling a cautious officer waiting for backup "a lousy, yellow-bellied, chickenshit excuse of a cop"?

Stamper's honesty provides a unique perspective of the role, power and limitations of a big-city police chief. During the Seattle protests, Stamper describes 1,200 overwhelmed and out-organized police officers. It becomes painfully clear how close he and his police came to simply losing. At one point in the night, an entire police station — prisoners, injured police officers and a vast armory — was under siege by more than 1,000 protesters.

Unfortunately, this Alamo-like story is dismissed in two woefully inadequate sentences. This and Stamper's ultimate moral — don't hold such large meetings in such a small city — fail to impress. These few days in Seattle deserve a book of their own. Yet here the Battle in Seattle is a virtual footnote, one too-brief chapter in 30.

Yet "Breaking Rank" often succeeds. As a police chief with the mandate and power to change policing, his liberalism is indeed noteworthy. Stamper's personal experience and knowledge of the upper echelon of police power is all too rare in police litera-

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*'Breaking Rank':*

## Courage shows through in Stamper memoir

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ture, his healthy intellect and analytical nature are all too rare in the upper echelon of police power.

The "war on drugs" weighs heavily in "Breaking Rank": "By any standard, the United States has lost its war on drugs. Criminalizing drug use... has been a colossal mistake, wasting vast sums of money, and adding to the misery of millions of Americans." Ironically, August Vollmer said much the same thing 70 years ago. And yet even today such common-sense arguments remain politically taboo.

Stamper continues to see a future in community policing rather than dismissing it as a fad of the past. Stamper supports college education for police officers, but not at the expense of increased diversity. He convincingly attacks the fallacy of "merit-based" civil service promotion. Police unions are generally viewed as "a pernicious embarrassment to law enforcement." Stamper accepts the necessity of police citizen review boards as an "occupational hazard." But he takes careful aim at New York City's plodding and

ineffective Citizen Complaint Review Board.

Refreshingly, Stamper lauds former New York and current Los Angeles Chief Bill Bratton. I don't imagine that Bill and Norm will ever be drinking buddies, but Stamper recognizes common ground: a desire to lower crime to work with the community, to support good police and weed out bad cops, to fight the good fight.

Stamper's chapters on the disciplinary process are the book's strength. Stamper is willing to address the issue of police corruption with far more forthrightness than most. These chapters are accessible to the lay reader, insightful to police, and useful to policy advocates and organizational theorists.

By encouraging ignorance of and silence toward the misdeeds of other police, Stamper sees the police organization as responsible for the failure of good police to do more. Denying both the "rotten barrel" and the "bad apple" theories of corruption, Stamper persuasively argues, in effect, that a bad barrel makes the apple rotten.

While Stamper has zero tolerance for bad police, he is brilliantly critical of a zero-

tolerance approach to police misconduct: "Inappropriate, overly harsh discipline creates a paranoid, angry, childish police force" that institutionalizes deceit and dishonesty. Stamper is much more interested in preventing police misconduct than punishing police officers for honest mistakes.

Stamper offers concrete suggestions as well. For instance, delegating responsibility to district or precinct commanders is more important than consistency in the discipline process. Such insights, gathered from a lifetime of police experience, are remarkably free of any political or ideological slant.

Regarding race, which no good book on policing can ignore, Stamper may be exercising personal demons: "Simply put, white cops are afraid of black men." While such generalizations make better copy than conclusion, Stamper's critique of police and fear is strong: "Good cops experience fear, to be sure. But they perform effectively by working through their fear... Fearless cops perceive their surroundings more accurately... Because these cops are alert, not alarmed or paranoid... they tend to produce routine

rather than tragic outcomes."

Stamper has moral insight into legal and financial liability as well. Why should it be financially advantageous for police to kill rather than wound suspects? How can community relations be improved when police chiefs are instructed by lawyers never to admit blame or even apologize for police mistakes? Such discussion should be of broader concern. All citizens pay the tab for "tragic outcomes": hundreds of thousands of dollars for arguably preventable car crashes; millions for the beating of Rodney King or the torture of Abner Louima.

"Breaking Rank" is hardly a flawless book. But then Norm Stamper is the first to admit he is hardly a flawless man. But he, like the reader, learns from his flaws. What stands out is the courage of "Breaking Rank." A character in Louis de Bernières's novel, "Birds Without Feathers," could just as well be describing Norm Stamper: "His courage was not the foolish kind of a young and silly man. It was the courage of a man who looks danger in the face, and forces himself not to flinch."