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A hopeful police experiment, based on service rather than force, points a way toward easing tensions in our cities beset by racial conflict

Riots - April 1968

## How Baltimore Fends Off Riots

Condensed from BALTIMORE SUNDAY SUN FLOYD MILLER

**L**AST summer, many of America's large cities exploded with race riots—but not Baltimore. This was surprising, because CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality), aware of the oppressing problems of the city's large Negro population, had chosen to concentrate on Baltimore as its first target city. How is it that nothing happened?

No man knows all the answers to that question. But a large share of the credit must go to the Baltimore Police Department and its new commissioner, Donald Pomerleau—and to a novel concept of a police department as a social-service organization. I went to Baltimore recently to find out what *service* meant.

Commissioner Pomerleau is a large, well-tailored man of 52. He speaks with authority, yet there is a surprising amount of flexibility in

the man—a willingness to experiment, to risk failure.

"We have not solved all our problems," he said at the beginning of the interview. "Far from it. But we're working at them as hard as we can, and I think the people know that. This gives them hope and patience."

One of Pomerleau's first acts upon taking office in 1966 was to set up a course in Negro history which every Baltimore police officer will eventually take. Simultaneously, he expanded the Community Relations Department to 18 (7 white, 11 Negro) and told them to penetrate the Negro community, not with gun and nightstick but with service.

"We opened a chain of storefront service centers in the Negro community," Pomerleau told me. "Each is manned by a uniformed police officer from noon to eight in the eve-

ning, seven days a week. I wish you'd look at them in operation."

"That's My Man." In an unmarked police car we headed for the ghetto. At the wheel was plainclothes detective Flan Couch. Beside him sat the articulate, gold-braided commanding officer of the Department of Community Relations, Maj. William Harris. Both men are Negro; both are graduates of Morgan State College.

"Let me tell you something that shocked me," Harris said as we threaded traffic. "We prepared a lecture series on citizenship for the schoolchildren, and when my lecturer first appeared before a class of second-graders, two little girls took one look at his uniform and broke into tears. That reaction convinced me that my men should be in uniform when they operate the service centers. I want the children to become familiar with the uniform, to learn that we are not monsters but men—black men, just like their daddies."

As we moved into the Negro neighborhood, Harris continued talking, but his eyes were on the sidewalks that teemed with black faces. Suddenly he thrust an arm out the window. "Booter!" he called. "Hey, there, Booter boy."

A half-dozen impassive faces turned toward us; one lighted up with recognition. Its owner waved back, calling, "That's my man!"

This sort of exchange took place in almost every block. It was as if Harris were running for public office. In a sense, he was.

The 1200 block on Pennsylvania Avenue was lined with shabby clothing shops, hardware stores and saloons. In the midst of them was a store with a window sign that read, BALTIMORE CITY POLICE COMMUNITY RELATIONS CENTER. Below that, in smaller letters, was the department's slogan: "Come in and talk it over."

Harris gestured proudly. "Our place looks just like the rest of the block," he said. "The landlord wanted to give us paint and an air conditioner, but I said no. We don't want to stand out from the neighborhood."

**Islands of Safety.** When we entered the center, we were greeted by the officer in charge, Patrolman Godwin DeLillye. He opened the logbook to some typical entries:

Mrs. Rachel Brown—Junkies on her apartment-house steps.

Mrs. Hanna Riber—No garbage collection this week. Garbage all over sidewalk.

Church—Sunday morning trouble. Gin mills.

"Any action taken on these cases?" I asked.

"We take action on every case in the book," DeLillye said crisply. "Now, Mrs. Brown's case. She said that none of the junkies lived in her building, and they were giving the place a bad name. I went and talked to them and found she was right. So I told them to go and sit in front of their own buildings and give the bad reputation where it belonged. Now, Mrs. Riber. We checked an



discovered that her street had sure enough been skipped by the Sanitation Department, and there was garbage all over the walk. We notified Sanitation at once."

"Did they come?" I asked.

DeLillye smiled. "Everybody knows that the police commissioner and the mayor are behind us. Sanitation came, all right. Sent a special truck."

"And the trouble at church?"

"Sunday mornings, when the women walked to church, the winos would come out of the saloons to make fun of them, call out things that no decent woman should have to hear. So we organized a husband-and-father march. When the winos came out of the bars, the men walked up to them, polite, and said, 'Don't do this to our wives and daughters.' It worked fine. The women don't get hoorayed anymore, and we got the old man to church."

At the next service center, on East Baltimore Street, I met an attractive young policewoman named Mercedes Rawlings. She had in tow a six-year-old girl with a tear-streaked face. Mrs. Rawlings explained to me that the centers encourage children to come to them if they are frightened or troubled and, just as with the adults' problems, immediate action is taken.

"What happened to the little girl?" I asked.

"Some bullies tormented her and broke her doll," Mrs. Rawlings said. She looked down at the child. "But

they won't do it again. And when Mommy comes, we're all going to the store to get a new doll." Mrs. Rawlings smiled at me and said softly, "We have funds for such emergencies."

"A Sort of Armed Truce." Next we visited the Cherry Hill center. It, like the others, was full of activity and optimism. I wondered how much optimism was really warranted. "You've made contact with the people, the churches and PTA's," I said to Major Harris. "But what of the radicals, the Black Power boys? Are you able to talk to them?"

"That's the big problem, of course," Major Harris said. "We're going to have to deal with them, one way or another—either over the barricades with fire bombs falling about us, or over a glass of beer in some gin mill. My department is trying the latter."

To Detective Couch he said, "Cruise around and look for Jackson K. This is the time of day he generally shows up."

Jackson K, I learned, is a neighborhood agitator. His program: "Hate Whitey."

"We try to keep him talking to us," Harris explained. "We need to know what he's thinking and what action he plans. That way we can keep a step ahead of him. For example, a few months ago he organized a march to forcibly desegregate the bars and clubs on Greenmount Avenue. He had a point. Segregation in public places *is* against the law. On the other hand, we could hardly let

him support one law by breaking others.

"When I learned of his plans, I went immediately to the proprietors on the street, then to Commissioner Pomerleau. The commissioner, in turn, went to the mayor. I was able to return there and announce that steps were being taken to desegregate the street. The tension soon subsided."

"There he is," Couch suddenly announced.

"Do you want to talk to him?" Harris asked me.

I did.

We braked to the curb alongside three Negro men dressed alike in white T-shirts and tight dungarees. There was no mistaking the leader. Jackson K wore a headband of imitation leopard skin, and walked with lazy arrogance. As we got out of the car, he turned to face us. Harris performed the introductions, and Jackson shook my hand with total indifference. I asked him if we could have a discussion in some privacy. He agreed to the suggestion.

"What do you think of Major Harris?" I asked.

"I hate all cops."

"But he's a Negro. Doesn't that make a difference?"

"Oh, he's a soul brother, but he's still a cop."

"But do you trust him? I mean, if you tell him of something that needs doing, and he agrees it needs doing, does he get it done?"

"Sometimes," Jackson admitted.

"He knows that if he don't do what I say, there's big trouble in Baltimore!" He lifted the thumb of his right hand. "That's where I got that cat—right under there."

Later, when I recounted this dialogue to Major Harris, he laughed. "Every time the city is able to desegregate a pool or a restaurant, Jackson K struts up and down the street. That's all right with us. We don't care who claims the credit. But Jackson K also knows that Baltimore is ready to crack down hard if he violates the law. It's a sort of armed truce, I suppose, but it's better than war. It gives the city time to do its work."

**Leader in Embryo.** The last service center we visited was on Greenmount Avenue. As we approached, Harris said, "The Neighborhood Youth Corps has sent us nine teenage boys to act as aides at the centers. I think we'll find one on duty about now."

We did. He was 15 years old, and his name was Harry Sampson. With great natural dignity he explained his duties.

"Well, I take messages, and run errands, and then I see that the children behave. We take them on trips to the zoo and the parks and the museums, and I go along to see that they act proper."

"Do your friends ever tease you about your job, Harry?"

"No, sir." He looked perplexed. "I'm helpin' the police to make things better. There's no cause to tease me for that."



While we were talking, a half-dozen teen-age boys had gathered on the sidewalk. Patrolman James Greene, in charge of the center, said, "Harry, invite those boys in for a Coke."

After a brief sidewalk parley, the boys came in and soberly drank their Cokes. Harry conferred with a couple of them in a low voice, then turned back to Greene.

"They got a problem. The man in charge of the playground at the school won't let them play basketball there."

"Why?" Greene asked.

"The man calls them jailbirds."

"Are they?"

"They been in reform school, yes, sir. But that shouldn't make no difference to play basketball."

Harry had suddenly found himself a new role. I was watching the development of a young community leader.

"They should be let to play basketball," he said stubbornly. "Especially them."

"Why especially them?" Major Harris asked.

"So they got something to do. So they don't get in no more trouble."

Harris gave a nod to Greene, who stood up and said, "Okay, Harry, let's go to the playground with the boys and see if we can't settle this thing."

A half-hour later, Officer Greene

and Aide Sampson returned to the center, satisfaction on their faces. The thing had been settled.

**Somebody Cares.** As I was being driven to the airport that evening, I tried to sort out the impressions of the day. "One thing still puzzles me," I said to Major Harris. "In most big city ghettos, the Negro policeman is a special target of abuse. He is called an 'Uncle Tom,' and worse. But here in Baltimore he seems to be held in respect, sometimes even affection. Why is that?"

"Well, to begin with, every political district in Baltimore has Negro residents. They have a stake in what happens here. Also, we have many responsible community organizations, and a responsible Negro press."

He paused. "And the fact is that my men deserve a lot of credit. They're all volunteers in the Negro community; they *want* to work here, they want to help. The people know that somebody cares."

Surely, that is one of the requisites for peace: the knowledge that somebody cares, somebody *in authority* cares. When the man wearing a police uniform is not automatically hated, then there is progress, there is hope.

In Baltimore there is hope.



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*Wisdom is the ability to discover alternatives.*

—Paul Eldridge, *Maxims for a Modern Man* (Yoseloff)