

# Off Center

Sol Plafkin

1967

Probably one of the dirtiest jobs in the world is being a police commissioner in a large American city.

Even the most enlightened and liberal person in the world would have a bad time presiding as a civilian director over what is essentially a military operation designed to physically, socially, and psychologically suppress urban Blacks and poor whites.

The commissioner, no matter what his best intentions are, must inevitably end up justifying the actions of his men who derive great satisfaction from taking out their personal frustrations by brutalizing, tyrannizing, and humiliating thousands of a city's citizens on a day-to-day basis.

Detroit is a very good example of this pattern. Both commissioners appointed by Mayor Cavanagh were men who rated very high on an intellectual philosophy of equal and just "law enforcement."

Ray Girardin, now retiring after four years of near-anarchy in our town, testified ably before Senate committees in Washington on the necessity for promoting the latest humanitarian U. S. Supreme Court decisions in police work. Yet, even while he was speaking, his underlings—over whom he had so little control—laughed openly at his lofty pronouncements and continued on their merry party of illegal "stop and frisk" and "beat 'em up and ask questions later."

Ray's troops had a field day during the martial law period of the July insurrection and are still continuing in their efforts to destroy the Black community up to this very day.

"Police brutality" is the number one problem of our nation's cities. (And I found concurrence in this view in a recent conversation with Tennessee Republican Senator Howard Baker, Jr.—who incidentally is Sen. Dirksen's son-in-law.) It supersedes housing, education, employment—but none of our great enlightened "white liberals"—from Daniel Moynihan on down—want to discuss it.

Girardin's predecessor, George Edwards, left office in an even worse atmosphere of disgrace.

It seemed at first that the appointment of Edwards was a real stroke of brilliance for young Jerry Cavanagh in 1961 after the unknown 33-year-old attorney upset the establishment greatly through the support of a battered Black community reacting to a "police crackdown."

Actually, Edwards was happy to get off the Michigan Supreme Court where a lot of personal bickering and infighting among the eight justices made life very unpleasant.

So, in 1962, Edwards came to us with a background of the highest credentials in civil libertarianism -intent on, as he stated then, "bridging the river of hate that divided the community."

However, in the two years of Edwards' reign, the "river" became an "ocean," and he found himself placed in a position of justifying and covering up the "criminal" activities of his own officers who were hired to prevent crime.

Edwards' demise as commissioner was hastened by his immoral support for the "legal murder" of prostitute Cynthia Scott in 1963 by an officer who -according to many reliable reports—was actually Miss Scott's boy-friend.

An appointment to the U.S. Court of Appeals quickly lifted Edwards out of his morass and former police reporter Girardin was appointed to replace him.

The next commissioner, whether he be black or white, will face the same dilemma as his predecessors unless he cleans out the department all the way.

Mental tests (as suggested by Rep. Jackie Vaughn III) should be given to all officers, new and old. District commissioners should be chosen by the communities where they function and be responsible ultimately to the people they are supposed to protect. (This proposition is supported by the Henry brothers and radio-TV commentator Lou Gordon.)

And, above all, the role of the police officer should be seen as that of a member of the community working cooperatively with its citizens—not as an alien force dedicated to its extinction.

# fifth Estate

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<https://www.fiftheastate.org/archive/40-october-15-31-1967/off-center>  
Fifth Estate #40, October 15-31, 1967

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