

THE POLITICS OF CRISIS

An Insider's Prescription
to Prevent Public
Policy Disasters

POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS

POLICE

ERIC KOWALCZYK

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*To the women and men of the Baltimore Police
Department who serve today, and in days gone by,
with honor, integrity, and morality.*

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PREFACE

Perception.

Perception is everything. It defines the way we see the world. It shapes our experiences. It creates our memories, and everyone's perception is different. We hear so often how important perception is. Yet, when it comes down to it, we really don't spend a whole lot of time thinking about it. We go about our daily existence, content in our routines, worried about bills that need to be paid, hopeful for vacations we have yet to take. We love our jobs or hate them. Love our spouses or hate them. We plod through life and, while each one of us is unique, our existence is remarkably similar.

We make hundreds of decisions a day. What time to wake up, what toothpaste to use, what to have for breakfast. We don't think of these as life-defining moments. Yet any one of a hundred decisions we make has the potential to be that life-defining moment of change. And therein lies the rub. The mundane can become the extraordinary. That one seemingly minor decision affects the course of your life. Sometimes that decision can affect the lives of tens of thousands of people. And they will all look at the decision you made through their own perceptions.

Police officers make an incalculable number of decisions each day. I know; I spent more than a decade making those decisions. Whom to arrest, whom not to arrest. Which car to stop, which to let go. I never really thought about the impact of those decisions at the time I made them. The moment appeared and I decided. Simple as that. Only very rarely are the decisions police officers make simple. More often than not, we affect the lives of everyone we encounter for good or for bad.

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When one of those decisions we make affects a person negatively, it can spiral. That interaction can reach a family, a neighborhood, a community, a city, or an entire nation. On April 12, 2015, a few Baltimore City Police officers made what at the time seemed like an inconsequential decision. They arrested a man in West Baltimore—something that happens more times in a week than the average person can even comprehend. They never thought, at the moment the handcuffs were placed on Freddie Gray, a series of events would transpire that would shape the future of the City of Baltimore, the law enforcement profession, and the lives of untold thousands.

Each person has his or her own perception of what took place in Baltimore during the months of April and May of 2015. Shaped by unique life experiences, those perceptions are powerful. To live through a riot, media chaos, and political intrigue is a life-altering experience. Those experiences changed my life in ways that I could not have imagined. The events of that time helped me to see the critical need for law enforcement, as a profession, to change in fundamental ways. I heard the human cry borne of years of systemic oppression, racism, and violence. I saw a community and a police department ripped apart. My experience also galvanized demons I was wrestling with regarding the conduct of my own career and my department.

Not everyone will agree with me or my perceptions. I hope to change those minds. I hope my experiences can play a small role in helping the next generation of police officers do a better job of being partners and problem-solvers in their community.

This is my story.

Eric Kowalczyk
Baltimore, October 2018

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The Day That Changed My Life

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better.

The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena.

—TEDDY ROOSEVELT

The morning of April 12, 2015, was like any other Sunday. I was in bed at 9:24 a.m., curled up next to my boyfriend, Jeff, when the phone rang. It was Colonel Garnell Green, the head of our Office of Internal Oversight, calling to tell me that we had a prisoner with a broken neck, that it was as serious as it could get, and that I shouldn't worry—he had done it to himself. I was assured that we had a witness statement corroborating what I had just been told. I was groggy, tired, and warm. I was in bed; I didn't want to wake up. I did not fully comprehend what I was being told. I had no idea that phone call would lead to thirty days of chaos as the world turned its eyes to Baltimore and we learned that the life and death of Freddie Gray would change the course of history in the city forever.

I had become the chief spokesman of the Baltimore Police Department on June 26, 2013. At the time, I was a sergeant about to be promoted to lieutenant. I had no formal media training, no experience in public relations, no idea how to formulate media strategy or shape a message. I was brought down to then-Public Affairs because of my ability to work with community groups. I had a passion for it, I believed in it, and I was good at it. Public messaging and media messaging needed to be combined, and I was the lynchpin. The director at the time was talented and skilled, and I learned a tremendous amount under his leadership. He also deeply disagreed with the direction the department was moving in, and after an interview in which he made a comment that was construed by some as being dismissive of a wave of crippling violence, he was replaced. By me.

A brilliant communicator named Judy Pal trained me. A fiery redhead, she could hang with the boys and had no trouble telling it like it was; she could message the hell out of any situation. Her slight stature was betrayed by a booming personality that could keep the good ol' boys in check and bring salty police to silence. I didn't know it at the time, but working and learning by her side through scandal after scandal in 2013 would prepare me better than any course, any institution, or any university ever could have. I soaked up every lesson she had to teach, ready to represent 3,000 men and women who comprised the eighth-largest police department in the nation.

Judy came to the department with more than thirty years of experience. In her role as chief of staff for the department, she was helping the new commissioner institute necessary reforms. She had a reputation as a problem-solver. Departments in need of reform would bring her in and tap into her brilliant mind to effect needed change. She had worked her magic in Atlanta, Savannah, Halifax, and Milwaukee. Her core focus was on

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transparency, integrity, and pushing decision-making down through the organization in an effort to empower people at every level of responsibility to rise to the challenge. She would become a friend, a mentor, a confidant, and a sounding board in the most challenging moment of my life.

From June 2013 to March 2015, my team worked every day to push the boundaries of what it meant to be in media relations. We stopped playing favorites with one reporter, opened dialogue with all our media partners, and worked to repair decades of damage in the community. We tapped into the power of social media, pushing the boundaries of what was “acceptable” for a police department. From videos of officers dancing to cutting-edge recruiting videos, we built our Twitter following from 28,000 to nearly 80,000 by March 2015. The power of social media to shape mainstream media was clear, and we used every opportunity to drive stories. The effort was never about public relations stunts. Instead, we focused on catering content to the people of Baltimore. We tried to strike a balance between real crime information and inside looks at the department. Every week we would highlight a different unit in the agency. Videos and Twitter town halls were our way of opening the department up to the community. Social media interaction was a technique that would serve us well in the coming days.

My experience during the riots did not take place in a vacuum. I had a dedicated, selfless team that sacrificed all to give of themselves for the department. And during the days of the riots, people whose names will never be known cleaned tables and carpets so that officers would have a clean place to rest for a few moments. Commanders gave parts of their souls as they watched their officers hold the line, bleeding and battered, protecting the people who were spitting at them, hurting them, calling them murderers. During the Battle of Mondawmin and the defense

of Baltimore, many people played roles that were far more dangerous than mine. My task was to define for the world what we were doing. It was to add context to a tragedy that should never have happened. I defended a police commissioner who, for a love of the integrity of the badge, fought to hold a city together and forever change the face of law enforcement.



I had been in the Headquarters Annex Building elevator hundreds of times, from my office on the first floor to the police commissioner's office on the fifth and back. I knew every movement and sound of the elevator car. I could time the ride without even thinking about it. Today, it didn't have the same comforting feeling I was accustomed to. Today, the elevator felt like a cage, hurling me toward a future I didn't want to face. As the elevator doors opened, I couldn't help thinking, "This isn't supposed to be me." It was a mantra that thrummed its incessant beat.

How in the hell did I end up in this position? It was April 27, 2015, and I was about to hold what would arguably be the most important media briefing of my life. As the captain/director of media relations for the Baltimore Police Department (BPD), I was the one who had to explain to a global audience why Baltimore was on fire. Why were seemingly thousands of people across East and West Baltimore engaged in the first riot the city had witnessed in forty years?

I had watched, along with the rest of the nation, the media coverage of the riots in Ferguson, Missouri. I knew how national and global networks had picked apart every word that was uttered by government officials during that crisis. I knew that what I said in the next five minutes would set the tone for how the ensuing events would be covered. I knew that law enforcement analysts would examine every word I said as well as how I said them.

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I knew I would be translated into Russian, Japanese, German, and every other language spoken by the hordes of media from around the world that had descended on Baltimore.

More important to me was what the people of Baltimore would think. This was our city. It was in pain. It was in crisis. And now, it was on fire. As the sound of my footsteps echoed through an oddly and ominously quiet lobby, I again questioned how I was the person who was doing this. I had never sought to be the chief spokesperson for the BPD. This had never been envisioned as my career path, and I was worried that I wouldn't live up to the demands of the moment. That I would say the wrong thing and let down my agency, dishonor the police officers who at that very moment were being assaulted with rocks and bricks. That in my desire to differentiate between the peaceful protests of the previous few weeks and the horror we were witnessing now, I would say something that made the friends and family of Freddie Gray feel as if we didn't care about their grief. I worried I would say something that could be used to incite more rioters. That I would give credence to the provocateurs of destruction, bent on tearing down the fragile peace we had maintained for the last week.

And then it was time.

I walked out onto the bricks in front of headquarters. Standing in front of our memorial wall of those who had been killed in the line of duty, I looked at more cameras than I could count. A bank of microphones and what looked like a rat's nest of lavalier microphones were waiting for me in the center of the media scrum. I could hear the sirens of dozens of police cars screaming up I-83 toward Mondawmin Mall. I paused for two seconds, caught my breath, silenced the voice of doubt (at least for a moment) and began.

“Saturday, we saw the best of Baltimore. We saw protests that were peaceful,” I began. It was true. The preceding Saturday was April 25. A protest march of several thousand people had gathered at Gilmore Homes in West Baltimore and marched to City Hall to protest the death of Freddie Gray. It is hard to imagine; the march felt more like a celebration of life, a celebration of a voice that had long been waiting to be heard. It was an exhalation of frustration. I continued. “A small group of agitators turned that protest violent, and you saw remarkable restraint from our officers. Remarkable restraint.”

What came next were words that we had fought long and hard to avoid having to say. When Police Commissioner Anthony Batts had been appointed at the end of 2012, he came to the city with a mission to modernize and reform the BPD. His ideas were forward-thinking, community-oriented, and had run afoul with many of the rank and file, who liked things the way they were, thank you very much. After a group of outside experts conducted an exhaustive and thorough review of the organization, we had developed a nearly 200-page strategic plan to move the agency forward. It had been a difficult two-and-a-half years as we had worked to root out corruption, hold officers accountable, celebrate those officers who were doing the right thing, and reconnect with a community that was as distrustful of the department as any community could be.

“This afternoon, a group of outrageous criminals attacked our officers. Right now, we have seven officers that have serious injuries, including broken bones, and one officer who is unconscious. We will do whatever is appropriate to protect the safety of our police officers and the people who live and work in the Mondawmin area.” My voice was shaking with anger and disgust. I had spent the last forty minutes or so watching police officers wearing the same uniform I was wearing, the same

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badge I had pinned to my chest, assaulted with bricks, chunks of concrete, and rocks the size of a fist. I had listened in horror and helplessness as officer after officer got on the radio begging for help. The sounds and screams that I heard on the radio will forever be etched in my memory. The sense that I had not done enough in the preceding days to stop this from happening will forever weigh on my soul. The shame—that my department had as much to do with the creation of this situation as those who were throwing the rocks—was a dark, hidden truth buried in the depths of my being.

I was conflicted about the situation we were in.

I did not believe my department had credibility with the people of Baltimore. Decade after decade of scandal and corruption had seen to that. Literally dozens of officers arrested for everything from assault to robbery to drug dealing to murder had weakened our standing. Video after video of officers assaulting people, cursing at them, were a daily staple of tweets and Facebook posts sent to us. We were still recovering from the impact of 2005, when we had made more than 100,000 arrests in a city of 630,000 people. And because of policies and laws, our internal affairs process, as good as it was, was shrouded in secrecy. I also knew that hundreds of officers were hardworking, dedicated, committed, and believed in what they were doing. Nearly two hundred officers had died protecting the City of Baltimore. Every year officers were shot at, broke bones, and had horrific car accidents, all in an effort to protect people in one of the most violent cities in America. We were truly a paradox of corruption and honor, greed and selflessness, honor and deceit.

Standing in front of the microphones, I knew it would be foolish of us to ignore the systemic reasons that had brought us here in the first place. Watching police car after police car roar up

I-83, one half of my brain begged them to move faster to help my brothers and sisters in blue. The other half was resigned to the knowledge that this was in some ways our due; that years of neglect and half-hearted measures had led us to this point. And I thought of Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade":

"Half a league, half a league,

Half a league onward,

All in the valley of Death

Rode the six hundred."