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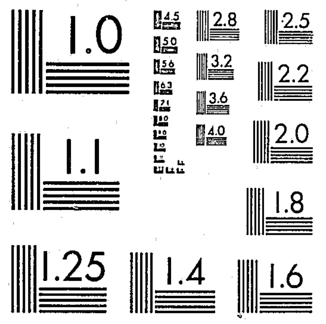

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Rhetoric
An Important Tool for Police Officers

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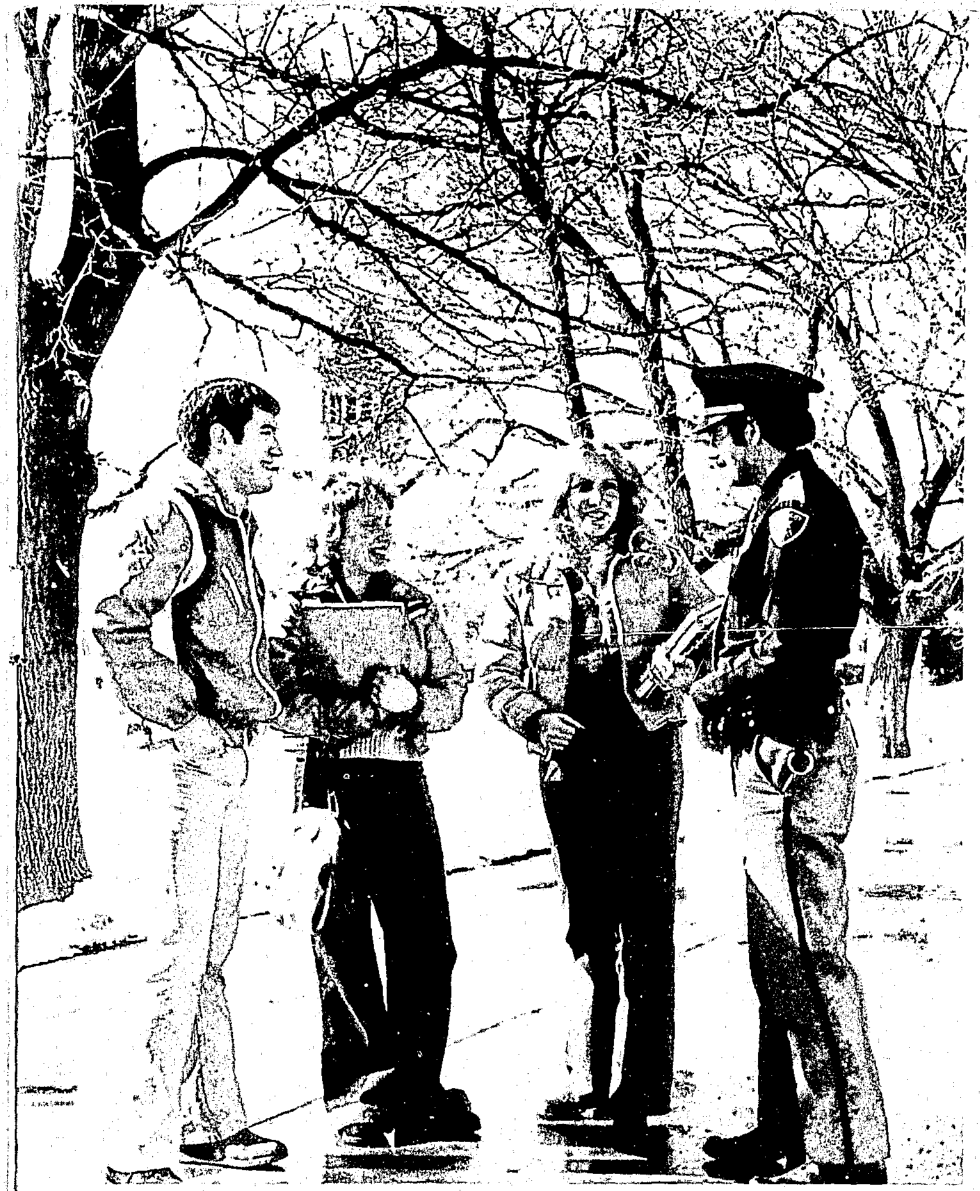
Communications



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Rhetoric
An Important Tool for Police Officers

Mr. Thompson

More powerful than mace, the night stick, or the gun, effective rhetoric is an officer's most useful tool in the field. Loosely defined as the art of effective communication, rhetoric is exercised numerous times each day by every officer on duty, whether in civil or criminal matters. Repeatedly, an officer's ability to select the appropriate means of communication, often under surprising or stressful circumstances, is a measure of good police work and good public relations.

Considering the daily pressures of police work—dealing with numerous people whose backgrounds, needs, points of view, and prejudices vary dramatically, moment to moment, as the officer encounters them—it is distressing that so little is presently being done to train officers to anticipate and to handle such complex social situations. Training academies and criminal justice curricula in colleges and universities generally offer little or no specific training in the functional skills of rhetoric. Apparently, criminal justice educators have assumed that such skills have either been learned in a general liberal arts program or that they can be picked up in some phase of the training or probationary period. But such an assumption is probably suspect and certainly should not be relied upon. The skills of practical rhetoric are so necessary to officers in the field that police supervisors should not leave their acquisition to chance or accident.

An often abused and misunderstood word, rhetoric, for our purposes, is most clearly defined as the art or skill of selecting the best available *verbal* means of persuasion at any given moment. I see it as consisting of five basic elements: Perspective, Audience, Voice, Purpose, and Organization (PAVPO).

Perspective may be defined as the viewer's point of view; in the case of an officer during a traffic stop or at a public disturbance, it is *his* view of the situation. *Audience* is the person or persons with whom the officer has made contact. *Voice* is the tone in which the officer conveys his information, his verbal personality. *Purpose* is the officer's goal or end, whether it be an explanation, a warning, or an arrest. *Organization* is the way in which the officer chooses to present or structure his communication; the officer must choose when to tell what and how much. The shaping of his communication or message often depends on his interpretation of the first four elements of rhetoric, and it often determines the eventual outcome of the rhetorical situation.

Perspective, the first P in the acronym PAVPO, is extremely important. The officer's own point of view is generally influenced by the written legal code. On most scenes, an officer represents not himself but society; he is society's spokesman and authority. Yet he is also a human being, with his own personal point of view and biases, and the many typical police calls—child abuse, beatings, and rapes, for example—wrench his personal feelings, making fair and impartial judgment difficult. As much as possible, the good officer must try to blend his own personal feelings with his sworn legal perspective, letting his humanity come

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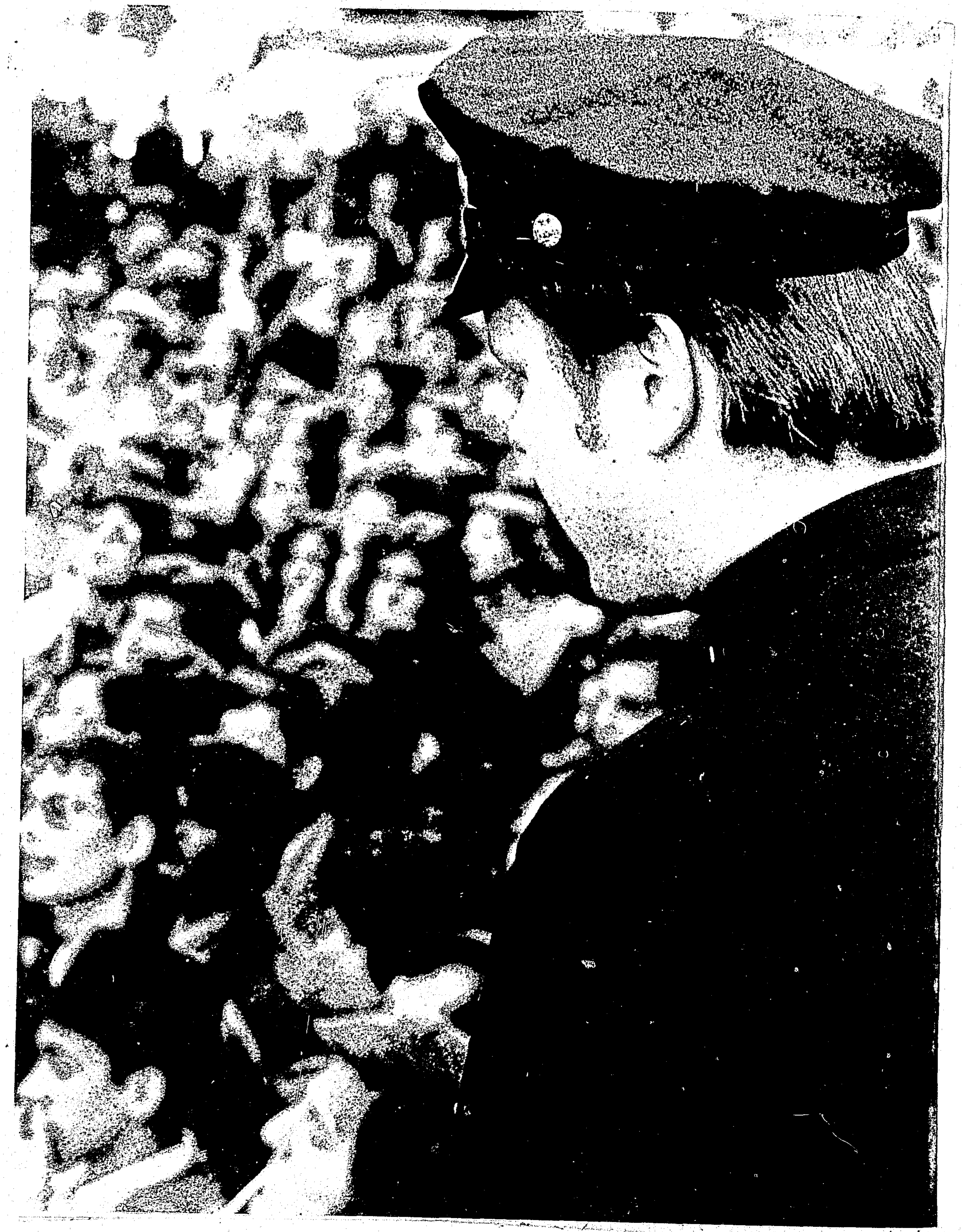

"The ability to analyze the precise nature of the audience and the ability to act spontaneously on that analysis is one mark of a professional officer."

through when it can help a situation and suppressing it when it threatens to make him an avenger of the law rather than an enforcer.

An officer's task is further complicated by the necessity to understand the perspective of those with whom he is dealing, citizens often quite unlike himself in every way. These citizens, an officer's *audience,* constitute the most difficult and challenging rhetorical problem for the police officer. Hour by hour during a daily shift, officers carry the pressure of having to see from another's perspective. It is not easy to acquire this habit of mind; it takes practice and training. The ability to achieve a sense of "otherness," a necessary requirement to see from another's point of view, demands a great deal of *disinterest* or nonbias. Sensitive attention to *audience,* the A in PAVPO, is hard to learn and easy to forget, especially under the day-by-day exigencies of police work.

Consider a typical audience problem, for example. Officers make numerous traffic stops during an 8-hour shift. After a while, stopping cars becomes just that—stopping *cars.* It is all too easy to forget that one is stopping *people.* Most people have experienced being stopped by an officer. It is rarely a pleasant experience. It is always anxiety producing. Even if no ticket is issued, the driver usually feels inconvenienced and embarrassed. Typically, police officers forget a traffic stop moments after it has happened, but the person stopped often remembers the event weeks, even months later, and most generally with negative feelings. If an officer has been careless or insensitive in the verbal exchange, it is this that the citizen will remember, nothing else. Too often an officer's reputation, and indeed a whole department's reputation, will be created by the sum of such incidents.

In short, any time a policeman encounters the public, the encounter is apt to have a more lasting effect on the citizens involved than an officer is likely to anticipate, and it will always have, at least, a different effect on the persons involved than it does on the officer. Thus, it is important for officers to see from the other person's perspective. Admittedly, some officers are born with this ability; others develop it out of a sensitive and compassionate view of their job. The officer who is known to possess "street sense" has this skill, this ability to see disinterestedly, but all officers can develop it by gaining a more thorough knowledge and understanding of the principles of rhetoric. The ability to analyze the precise nature of the audience and the ability to act spontaneously on that analysis is one mark of a professional officer. It is often the difference between good police work and bad.

A clear understanding of one's own perspective and that of one's audience aids in the intelligent and judicious selection of tone or *voice,* the V in PAVPO. Most officers know the importance of body language; most know that one's gestures, one's facial expressions, or one's physical stance have the power of one's words. People react to them *as if* they were words. The rhetorical equivalent to body language is voice, the verbal *persona* or character conveyed by one's tone. Every officer knows that if he wants a problem in a resisting arrest situation of some sort, it only takes a word or two to get it started. Words can ignite or defuse. The way something is said makes every difference, and tone and diction (word choice) are the determiners. The way in which an officer voices his questions, his commands, or his statements should be a matter of conscious choice. During a typical day, an officer will employ countless different voices, create and recreate his public personality again and again. He must be a chameleon, a master of the changeable *persona.* He becomes the person he must be to handle each situation.

Practically every situation calls for a different voice. A traffic stop, one moment, involving an elderly and confused driver, will be followed, perhaps, the next moment, by an angry and belligerent driver. An encounter with an erring but respectful teenager, one moment, may well be followed by a sneering and hateful one the next. Or, literate professionals, one moment, the ignorant and illiterate the next. In each case, the officer must respond in a verbal way, but rarely is this "way" the same. When to be polite, even deferential, when to be stern and commanding, when to use the language of the street, and when not—all these problems are rhetorical problems and all demand that the officer know his audience well enough *to make* or *create* the best verbal response he can. The voice carries the message; if the voice is wrong or inappropriate, the message, no matter how well-intentioned, will not be accepted without a problem.

Indeed, like the professional actor, the police officer must be capable of many voices and many roles for his audience is never the same. Because so much of his daily work—and its quality—is dependent on the habitual exercise of this skill, an officer should not leave the training of this skill to chance. The study of rhetoric can teach him not only how to understand his own perspective and how to analyze his immediate audience but also how to *choose* and *create* the most appropriate voice to convey his words.

Partly, of course, an officer's choice of voice will be governed by his *purpose,* the second P in the acronym PAVPO. Voice and purpose should be in harmony. Problems arise on the street when an officer's voice is illsuited to his immediate purpose. If an officer's purpose is to inform, clarify, or persuade, the voice he adopts should be consistent with that purpose. Confusion in any or all of the rhetorical areas of perspective, audience, or voice will lessen an officer's ability to achieve his purpose. In any situation, an officer must have a clear sense of purpose if he hopes to act with consistency and fairness. Unsureness of purpose leads to erratic and confusing behavior, an attribute the officer can ill afford. Matters which call for police attention need an officer to give clarity of direction and purpose, not the reverse. Officers make errors on the street when they confuse intentions, such as the intention to inform with the intention to persuade or vice versa.

The last element to consider in rhetoric is *organization,* the O in PAVPO. This refers to the problem of structuring a communication or verbal response. There are many ways to structure or shape a single message. An officer in a street scene plays a dual role—he is both actor and primary director. Every street incident is a mini-drama, with its own beginning, middle, and end, but this structure is amenable to countless variations and modifications, most of which are a result of the way in which an officer decides to direct the scene. Police procedure, of course, helps dictate the basic structure; it is the officer's given script. The attempt to determine, for example, whether a driver is under the influence (DWI) has prescribed steps, legal and departmental, which the officer must follow. Beyond this, how the officer will structure the rhetorical encounter with the subject is greatly a matter of improvisation. Like a detective conducting an interrogation, the street officer must decide when to ask what and when to make the actual arrest, if there is to be one. He must direct and shape the encounter. Too much delay may result in a fight; too quick a judgment may have the same end. The officer must not only be professional, he must also *appear* professional, both to the subject involved and to any bystanders in the area. The officer works the public theater of the streets, and much of his professional success depends on how he goes about his job. Should he "muddle" through a traffic stop or an arrest incident, he can expect problems. The skillful officer knows the procedural and legal script, but he also knows how to structure those steps to fit the particular rhetorical situation.

The acronym PAVPO, then, represents the five elements in every rhetorical situation, and officers have to use these elements each day, often unconsciously or spontaneously. The professional learns to manipulate these elements quickly and skillfully; the amateur never learns. Rhetorical expertise is so necessary to good police work that it is surprising that responsible leaders in law enforcement have been generally content to regard it as a preemployment matter, something a recruit probably has picked up elsewhere. Criminal justice personnel in colleges, universities, and training academies might well consider adding a sixth course to the present five-course curriculum first created by the 1970 Annual California Association of Justice educators. Such a course, perhaps entitled Practical or Functional Rhetoric, would best be taught by instructors who have police experience and academic credentials. Training academies, particularly, would do well to offer recruits a rigorous course in rhetoric, one that would be specifically designed to meet the realistic demands of the street. Intending to do for the officer what moot court presently does for lawyers, a rhetoric practicum or seminar could, by employing simulation techniques, train officers to make conscious and intelligent rhetorical choices. If approached as a problem-solving course rather than a purely theoretical "book" course, a rhetorical practicum which taught the five elements of rhetoric I have described would significantly improve an officer's street ability, and simultaneously, enhance his public image—a rare combination.

". . . because communication is a dynamic, fluid, and a constant-changing medium . . . the police officer . . . needs to be linguistically flexible and shrewd."

It is precisely because communication is a dynamic, fluid, and a constant-changing medium that the police officer, perhaps *more* than most professionals, needs to be linguistically flexible and shrewd. At all costs, he must not be deficient in the skills of judgment, tact, and command presence if he is to survive and to be regarded as a true professional. Much of one's judgment, one's tact, and one's command presence is a result of rhetorical skill. Dealing as he does with the public, the hottest possible arena, the police officer must be a master of rhetoric. He must know his own perspective, he must know how to couch his communication, he must be sure of purpose, and he must be clever in structuring his message. He must be able to speak in a variety of ways to a variety of people. He is actor and director in countless scenes daily. Ultimately, he should be linguistically rich and rhetorically smooth.

In short, though effective communication may appear spontaneous, it is usually the result of informed instinct and good training, a training which has taught the art of selecting the best verbal mode of response to a given situation. In the past, most officers have had to rely on street experience to give them this training, but such an approach takes time and can be costly and dangerous to everyone concerned when mistakes are made. I believe officers deserve a better break than this; they deserve as thorough a preparation for the streets as we can give them. The night stick, the mace, and the gun have their place in the street world of the officer, and he generally receives good training with each of them. But because police work is finally more rhetorical than violent, we should prepare each officer to function skillfully and imaginatively, with confidence, in this area. **FBI**

END