

Bill Granger

A proposal for fewer police stations brings to mind an even better idea



Mayor Washington has received a report in which it is suggested that he reduce the number of police stations in Chicago as part of a continuing effort to fight crime.

Harold does not want to talk about it right now because to reduce the number of police stations might make him look soft on crime. It is exactly the thing that Edward and Thomas want to talk about.

No, it is not suggested that fewer police mean fewer criminals, though that sometimes is the case, depending on the policeman.

It is suggested that resources can be better used to make police beats more consistent and to put more manpower in heavy crime areas.

The removal of police from an intimate relationship with the general public has been going on a long time; this is merely another step along a long road.

In the 1950s, while there were still a few flatfoots who actually pounded beats, most sensible policemen tried to find interesting ways to do as little as possible. They would careen from one end of the city to another to answer interesting calls, such as one about a woman in underclothes dancing in an alley, and studiously ignore more mundane, even dangerous duties, even when they were thrust at them.

I recall fondly an afternoon in 1956 when the berserk and very large grown son of the janitor of our building on 59th Street decided to beat down his father's door with an ax and then, presumably, do the same thing to Dad.

The janitor, a gentle soul, had the foresight to put up a steel door to his digs in the courtyard behind our apartment. So Sonny gave the door 40 or 400 whacks, and all he got out of it was blisters.

The scene electrified the sleepy summer neighborhood, and everyone called the cops. The cops were lolling away in the Englewood district station, four blocks from the scene of this bit of domestic violence, but their response time would make calling 911 today seem light years better. In short, after two hours, the cops did not come and the berserk man was still pounding away at that steel door with an ax. Finally, the guy who owned the store downstairs walked over to the district station, collared an otherwise unemployed cop and physically brought him back to the scene of the potential crime. He arrested the worn-out madman, and all was well.

I bring this up to show how things have changed in this electronic world. In 1960 O.W. Wilson, a respected criminologist, was called upon to head a panel of blue-ribbon people to find a new police chief for Chicago. The search was occasioned by the Summerdale police scandal, in which a number of cops were found guilty of being part of a burglary ring using a real burglar—the hapless Richard Morrison—to do the heavy lifting.

The city responded by renaming the Summerdale police district—it is called Foster Avenue today—and firing the chief, Timothy J. O'Connor, a man noted for once expressing disbelief that a crime syndicate existed in Chicago.

Wilson searched for the best—and found himself. As the new chief—now called superintendent because

he loved British cop jargon—Wilson mapped Chicago into a series of police beats patrolled by the newest weapon in the war on crime—the police car. The walking patrols ceased in the neighborhoods, and so did the wide-open old days of cops from the North Side abandoning their beats and running down to the South Side to look into an interesting case.

The cops didn't like it much. Suddenly, beat cops were electronically responsible for their beats, summoned to calls by a central dispatcher who knew exactly where every cop car should be. The number of police districts was cut down, too, by Wilson, and a lot of people thought it was a bad thing, just like ending walking patrols was a bad thing.

Was it? Not really. If you couldn't get a cop from a stationhouse four blocks away while mayhem was in the air, you probably could get a cop in 90 seconds from a numbered patrol dispatched by a central dispatcher whose communications were recorded on tape and who didn't give a damn who the cops were at that moment on Beat 2387.

The police will argue—like the politicians—that fewer cop houses mean fewer cops and more crime.

Policemen are the most conservative people in the world. They always yearn for the good old days, even if they are in their 20s and the good old days was the week before last.

But few of them would like to be back on walking patrol. The foot patrol, once so widespread in the city, was made possible by cheap labor and the relative immobility of the criminal elements of an earlier day. Getting a job "on the department" was always a good deal. Not only was there the regular salary and job security, but the opportunity for what once was called "honest graft" was unlimited.

[Honest graft, it seems, is that which falls your way by the nature of the job, as opposed to dishonest graft, which is that which you go out of your way to get. The tavern payoff was honest; shaking down pimps was not.]

Graft remains, though it is not as pervasive as in the old days of the walking patrol and stealing an apple from Tony the Pushcart. Foot patrol, except in certain commercial districts, is a thing of the past.

So when the great debate about closing down some cop houses comes up in the City Council after the election, don't automatically jump to one side or the other. But you might ask another question as you survey the grinning ranks of indolent aldermen, talking about the cop-house cutback:

Do we really need 50 aldermen in this day and age?

The answer is simple. You can get the same degree of nonresponse and nonservice today from an alderman that you could have received years ago, but the cost would be less if the number of shiny suits was reduced to 20 or so. The arguments and history cited above to explain the unimportance of the cop house in the neighborhood could be used to rationalize a reduction in the ranks of aldermen and their assistants, their salaries and their expense accounts.

But I doubt somehow that Harold, Thomas or Edward would be interested in talking about that. ■