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Editorial Observer

In Los Angeles, Where the Police Were Unable to Contain Themselves

By CAROLYN CURIEL

Los Angeles

Reinvention is the mother of this city, which owes its very existence to rerouting fresh water to an arid landscape. Downtown, long just a handful of tall buildings and squat discount shops, is becoming a destination for the urban wealthy. In the last two decades, an influx of immigrants, largely Hispanic and Asian, has changed the face of the entire city.

Everything changes in Los Angeles, it seems, except the police. On May 1, members of a Police Department riot control unit violently and unnecessarily dispersed participants in a pro-immigrant march. It was the biggest fiasco since the last time the L.A.P.D. clashed with a minority group.

Helped along by its own words and actions, and a way of dealing with the public that can feel more remote than professional, the force has a poor reputation with minorities that predates the Watts riots of 1965, set off by white officers arresting a black man for drunken driving. In 1982, Daryl Gates, then police chief, set a tone the city has yet to live down when he explained — after a black motorist was rendered unconscious by a police chokehold — that blacks might be more likely to die by chokehold than “normal people.” The mayor, Tom Bradley, was African-American, as were the next two police chiefs. That hardly mattered. The South Central unrest in 1992 that followed the acquittal of officers who beat Rodney King, a black man, was the worst in the nation’s history.

In these days of heated national debate over immigration, the police’s edginess seems heightened when immigrants congregate, and in California, that is frequently. Some 600 officers were assigned to the demonstration in MacArthur Park on May 1. They included dozens of officers equipped with face shields and enough body armor to resemble a small army of Robocops.

Immigrant advocates said the riot unit cast a pall over the crowd, which posed no threat and included undocumented workers who prefer to avoid law enforcement altogether. Before long a group of about 30 people at the fringe of some 25,000 demonstrators threw plastic bottles and cans at the police. The police

failed to isolate the troublemakers, instead managing to push them into the larger crowd.

Officers seemed clueless or unconcerned about procedures for crowd control and even about allowing journalists to do their jobs. They ineptly ordered the crowd to disperse, in English, from a helicopter that may have been too far away for anyone on the ground to hear.

Several people were wounded by so-called rubber bullets, batons or general manhandling, including working journalists, some of whom are themselves immigrants. An officer caused a hairline fracture to the wrist of a local news camerawoman. Her camera was flung to the ground, but images from other cameras, including from cellphones, showed the police out of control. One video showed an officer using his baton more than once to strike a boy who appeared no older than 12.

The Spanish-language news media, which draws the biggest audiences in the region and had the most people covering the event, filled the airwaves with firsthand accounts, analyses and editorial indignation. Antonio Villaraigosa, the first mayor from the large, established Mexican-American population, hurried back from a trade mission in Latin America, and the chief of police, William Bratton, tried to stem the damage.

Within days, a Latino police veteran, Sergio Diaz, was named a deputy chief, replacing the officer who was in charge at MacArthur Park. Some 60 Metro police officers were taken off the streets. It was not enough. The police commission, which has been expected to recommend Mr. Bratton for a deserved second five-year term, heard calls for his head during a public hearing.

Whites overwhelmingly support Chief Bratton, but only about half of surveyed blacks and Hispanics want to see him return. As head of the New York Police Department from 1994-96, he innovated computer tracking of crime hot spots to help reduce crime, which has also gone down during his Los Angeles tenure. Los Angeles, however, is not New York.

The nation's largest city has a concentrated population, making foot patrols a useful tool for a rank-and-file force of 37,000. But the 9,500 officers in the Los Angeles force generally travel in squad cars, interacting mostly with one another unless there is a problem to confront. They are spread thin, each having to cover as much as 40 square miles, more than 10 times the ground of a typical New York beat cop.

Chief Bratton wants nearly twice as many officers as he now has, which would allow them to work a smaller territory and get to know the people they serve. So far, with the support of Mr. Villaraigosa, the chief has won authority to hire just an additional 1,000 officers.

Since 2001, the force has operated under a federal consent decree designed to protect civil rights. The MacArthur Park incident is another reminder that the goal remains elusive, and that the L.A.P.D. needs still more sunshine, including a larger inquiry by the Justice Department.