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LAW AND ORDER

# Cops Aren't Your Enemy

They know the system's broken, too.

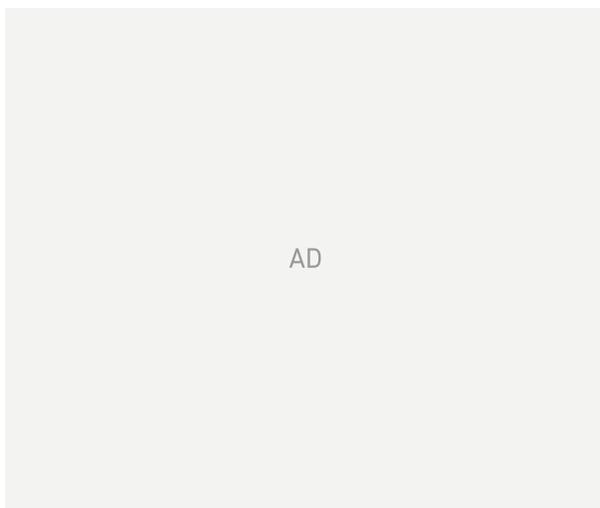
By THOMAS C. KNOWLES | December 23, 2014



*Thomas C. Knowles has worked in law enforcement for nearly 40 years, including as a military policeman, a Fresno, California, police officer, and as a FBI special agent and supervisor.*

**L**et's get one thing straight up front: No good cop ever wants to pull his gun. No good cop wakes up in the morning hoping to shoot someone. Firing your service weapon in the line of duty means something has gone terribly wrong.

We know, though, that a moment's hesitation or a second's distraction for a police officer can equal death—for the cop or for other citizens that we have sworn to protect. From the start of any police academy, we are taught as cops to be ever vigilant—to apply laser-like attention to our surroundings at all times. Then once out of the academy, our time on the street too often teaches them to expect the worst of too many. This weekend's terrible tragedy in Brooklyn should remind us all, that even the most mundane moments of a street cop can turn deadly in a heart beat.



In the wake of the recent protest in cities across the country, in the wake of the police-involved deaths, and in the wake of the assassination of the two NYPD officers, I fear that we've lost sight of just how complicated the challenges are for cops on the streets of such a diversified country.

Amid this fall's unrest—in duels between police and protestors on the streets of Ferguson and on the Brooklyn Bridge, and in duels online between Twitter hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter—we've lost sight of an important rule; Cops aren't the enemy.

I know that cops aren't perfect. I've spent the last 39 years working as a Military Investigator, a police officer and then 23 years as an FBI Agent and supervisor. I've worked with law enforcement in more than 50 countries around the world and know that the overwhelming majority of them are willing to give their life, to protect someone they have never known. I've also investigated some bad ones—and working with good cops, we've done our best to rid our system of their corruption and jail them. Yes, bad cops do exist—and they must be held accountable. They deserve the full weight of our criminal justice system brought down upon them.

But I don't think that's what this fall's protests are really about. We're not talking about bad cops. We're debating bad policies and broken systems. And too many people are trying to indict the system itself by pretending that the cops are the enemy.

In almost every instance, by the time a cop pulls his or her service weapon and fires, the system has failed. A police officer's use of lethal force, in almost every instance, isn't the disease. It's a symptom of broader challenges and bigger problems. Deadly force, most often, is the end result of a failure—and often many cascading failures—elsewhere in our society leading up to that fatal encounter.

I'm not going to comment specifically on the three incidents that launched the debate this year; I have my personal and professional opinions on each of those and I'll be the first to agree mistakes were made by all.

But addressing the challenges these instances have raised isn't just a matter of giving cops some different training, tweaking a couple of departmental policies, or giving a few cops some new body cameras or Tasers. Sure, each of those reforms might be needed—and, in many cases, would be welcomed by most cops I know.

But the challenges don't begin and end there. And these aren't simple problems to fix.

There's an education component to these problems. There's a mental health component to these problems. There's a criminal justice component. There are broad public policy and societal challenges to address. There's even a family component—a role

for mothers and fathers because it all starts at home. While I understand that sometimes bad is born, this is not the case with all of the juveniles that are out on the street into the wee hours of the night.

The solutions we're seeking as a society this fall lie as often in better after-school programs, better vocational training, smarter social policies, greater parental oversight and more comprehensive (and better funded) mental health programs.

Frequently, by the time the cops have contact with certain troubled individuals, the entire "system" (parents, family, friends, and government) have failed these people both as kids and later as adults.

Cops don't make our laws, and they are expected to enforce them whether they agree with them or not.

America's cops respond to thousands and thousands of calls for service each day. Perhaps as many as 350 people are killed by law enforcement each year. Each of these deaths is, in its own way, a tragedy. But, again, there is another side to this. In 2013, nearly 50,000 cops were assaulted on the job. Already this year, more than 120 cops have been killed in the line of duty. Being a cop is dangerous—and nearly all of those who wear the badge are hard-working, dedicated, patriotic Americans who want nothing more than to protect their fellow citizens and go home at the end of the shift to their families.

They are not your enemy.

If changes need to be made to our society and to our system, let's make them. But in the meantime, let's not blame the police protecting our streets for the failures of society and for our system.

Police are only one cog in a very large wheel.



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