

#53 (ART ACEVEDO)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Reducing crime features conversations with influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers.

Art Acevedo is the interim police chief in Aurora, Colorado, and has been a chief with the California Highway Patrol, in Austin, Texas, Houston, Texas, and for a short tumultuous tenure, Miami, Florida. We talk about his career, his viral public address after the murder of George Floyd, and what needs to change in police leadership.

Clip from movie "Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan":

Don't grieve Admiral. It's logical. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few or the one.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Welcome to Reducing Crime, I'm Jerry Ratcliffe.

Trekkies will recognize first gen Spock there, passing on some last-minute wisdom to Jim Kirk before making the ultimate sacrifice. Or it would be if they didn't then reboot him in the very next movie. And again, with a different actor in 2009. Star Trek canon is complicated if you don't know your way around it.

One person who definitely knows his way around it, and the reason that clip will be relevant in this episode, is my guest Art Acevedo. Cuban-born Acevedo came to the United States at the age of four and was raised in El Monte, California. In 1986, he joined the California Highway Patrol, rising to make Chief in 2005. He moved to municipal policing and was hired as police chief in Austin, Texas in 2007, spending nearly a decade leading that department. He followed that with a stint as police chief in Houston, Texas from late 2016 to early 2021. During his time in Houston, Art rose to international prominence from a viral video showing him speaking to community members in Houston after the murder of George Floyd. We talk about that pivotal moment in this episode, but for now, take a listen to a snippet from that video.

Art Acevedo [at Houston public protest]:

And what I love about this man and this man, what I love about this city is that they want people of color to be talked about as being thugs and we're bums and my people, as an immigrant. You know what? We built this country. We've got news for them. We ain't going nowhere! We ain't going nowhere! The ship has sailed. So if you've got hate in your

heart for people of color, get over it. Because, this city is a minority majority city. And this city is a city where blacks and whites and browns and legal and illegal all get together, because we judge each other by the content of our hearts. So I am angry. I'm angry.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In April 2021, Art Acevedo was sworn in as police chief in Miami, Florida starting a tumultuous, somewhat fractious and ultimately short-lived tenure that lasted barely six months before he was fired by the city manager. He was recently hired as the interim police chief of the Aurora, Colorado police department.

I chatted to Art at the American Society of Evidence-Based Policing conference in May earlier this year. I strongly recommend this annual meeting of thinking cops and practical academics and hey, next year it's in Las Vegas. And as we all know, what happens in Vegas... generally clears up with penicillin. Bear with me during the recording. I have a bit of a cold, but at least it wasn't COVID. And as you join us, we were just chatting about COVID.

Art Acevedo:

I'll talk about COVID because COVID's been very frustrating for me as a police executive, that we've lost hundreds of cops that didn't need to die, because we're just like society. We get people from society so we are a reflection of society, and 50% of cops, they decided to follow politics.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Didn't get the vaccine.

Art Acevedo:

And so over 300 died that didn't need to die. And it just saddens me. But I think it speaks as to the challenges of this country right now, for public servants and just for Americans in general, there's so much division and everything's political.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How did that happen? Because here we are at a conference for evidence-based policing and you've got this evidence-based policy about vaccines and all these cops are going, "Nah, I looked at something on the internet on Facebook, so I'm not doing it."

Art Acevedo:

Well, like I told my cops, I would tell them we're supposed to follow the clues, and my clue is that when every living president and their families got vaccinated, that's your clue that maybe you should be getting vaccinated. And these are the same guys that would scream and yell, "It's just a flu, it's no big deal." It's a flu vaccine. The science was not new. I give the Trump administration a lot of credit, they put an emphasis on it and they got it done. Unfortunately, he politicized the vaccine but he still took it, didn't he? So it is what it is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. So you've come a hell of a long way from being born in Havana.

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Art Acevedo:

12/24/68, we landed in Miami. We were part of the freedom flight. We spent a week processing at the House of Liberty, which was Old World War II Barracks on the international airport grounds then we moved to Los Angeles.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You were like four years old at this time?

Art Acevedo:

Four and a half. Yeah, four and a half. And my father said to us, "We're not going to stay in Miami, because if we stay in Miami you're not going to learn about other cultures. You're not going to learn about being an American. You're not going to learn about-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was insightful of him.

Art Acevedo:

I thought very much so. I'm convinced had my father not done that I'd never end up having the wonderful career that I've had in law enforcement. And it is that experience as a refugee. My dad and mom would say, "Hey kid, just remember that the United States had given you the greatest gift of all, which is freedom. So make sure you take advantage of it and pay it back."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There we go. We should run a flag up around that.

Art Acevedo:

Amen. Amen.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Your father was in the job? I read that your father was a police officer.

Art Acevedo:

In Cuba, way before the communists. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Wow.

Art Acevedo:

Way before the communists. And I loved my old man and my mom and dad. I'm a mommy and daddy's boy. I lived to make them proud like a little Cuban, but he'd tell stories. It's Cuba, right? So I kept getting reports of a ghost stealing chickens in Havana.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Where's the CAD code for that?

Art Acevedo:

So he spots the so-called ghost stealing chickens. So I spotted that ghost one night and I started shooting some rounds in the air. It's Cuba, right? Different use of force policy.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I don't know. There's some parts of the US where that still flies.

Art Acevedo:

Unfortunately. But his joke was, "I've never seen a ghost jump fences as quickly as this ghost did." And the ghost went away after that and never came back. So it was a guy in a white sheet probably or a lady. And he'd tell me, "Yeah. And then when we'd get in pursuit son and they were running from us, we'd get the Thompson machine gun and we'd put it out the window and just start shooting him." I'm like, "Okay dad." That's like DPS in Texas. We don't do that in the United States.

DPS used to do that until not too recently. Oh lord, they'd be shooting from helicopters down at vehicles, a sniper from a helicopter. And I remember that that happened in a pursuit about eight, nine years ago. And they knew that there was people underneath the tarp, you can see it with their infrared, they still shot. And the thing rolled, killed people. And I remember being at a dinner with the number two guy from the Texas DPS. He Says, "Hey, I want to give you a little word of advice. Do not do that in Austin, Texas because you're going to get indicted."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That strikes me that you've always had this sense of, you're very passionate about good policing, but you don't mind calling out bad policing.

Art Acevedo:

No, you got to call balls and strikes, right? I say as leaders, our jobs is to call balls and strikes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, some people just feel like the only way is to be a hundred percent back the blue and anything less than that is-

Art Acevedo:

No, when you have that mindset, you do more to hurt the good men and women in American policing. Look, nothing happens in a vacuum anymore, right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No, that's true.

Art Acevedo:

Look, I was a cop for 35 years and part of the challenge for this generation of police officers is they truly are so much better than they were 35 years ago. But we didn't have 350 million or 400 and 500 million cell phones. We didn't have ring cameras, we didn't have public safety cameras, we didn't have everything captured. If we can move the clock back 35 years when I started and had been able to capture everything then, we'd be able to prove that we've made a lot of strides. We've made a lot of progress. But it is a work in progress. It never ends.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I remember back to when I was a young police officer in the east end of London, if I'd had cameras on me then all the time, I wouldn't have got fired. I didn't do anything wrong, but I just made an ass of myself on frequent occasions. You're just learning, takes a while to learn the job.

Art Acevedo:

And you're young and you're immature. We come on at 21, we're pretty immature when we're young.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is that when you joined the job?

Art Acevedo:

As soon as I could. I quit law school to be a cop and I never looked back.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because your father was a police officer? Was that an influence on it?

Art Acevedo:

I think the biggest influence for me was growing up I wanted to be one of three things. West Point graduate, prosecutor or a police officer and all three of those, the way I was raised is because I wanted to give back to this country, to pay back for the greatest gift of all, freedom.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Your father made it a point. Right.

Art Acevedo:

Yeah. My brother served in the Army for 30 years, went to both Gulf Wars voluntarily, volunteered for both. I got a nephew who just graduated West Point. My other nephew, great nephew actually, because I'm old, he was in the Marine Corps. He just got out. He was actually in the Marine Corp barracks in DC and was in the presidential detail so you know he is a sharp kid. There's this big immigration debate in this country. Immigrants are a four letter word.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I hadn't noticed.

Art Acevedo:

Right. So you're lucky you have that East Texas accent, far East Texas accent.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, that's right. South Philly, born and raised.

Art Acevedo:

But it's a tough time for policing. It's a tough time for the country and the poor cops are stuck in the middle.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The cops are stuck in the middle of it aren't they?

Art Acevedo:

They are. We're also seeing that we are part of the problem you're talking about. We're not as good as those that say we're perfect and we're not as bad as those that say we're broken. We are like every other condition of humanity, we're imperfect. When my cops say, "Hey chief, we're number one." Have you heard that? I look around and I go, "Hey man, if we're number one, I hate to see second best." Because, if you end up with that mindset that you've arrived, you got nothing to learn, you only have one way to go in your performance and it ain't up, it's down. So I always tell our officers that we should seek every day as an opportunity to do a little better.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you grew up in California and then joined California Highway Patrol?

Art Acevedo:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How long were you there?

Art Acevedo:

21 years. I was there for 21 years and I applied for LAPD, LA sheriffs and the CHP.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

With one of those you dodged a bullet a wee bit.

Art Acevedo:

Which one of them?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I don't want to say.

Art Acevedo:

Look, I love the CHP, but sometimes we get too big for our britches and they have a great national reputation, or a great organization. But let me tell you something. If you put all the misconduct of the CHP that spread out through this big state into one city, one county, one community, they'd be under a consent decree. They're great, but they're not saints. So I worked internal affairs, I worked special investigations and I can tell you that I learned early on, never say never when there's an allegation. We had a female cop, could have been a supermodel, selling methamphetamines out of the police car in uniform.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The way I look at it is there's 800,000 cops across the United States. So you show me a city with 800,000 people that doesn't have some degree of criminality in it.

Art Acevedo:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The great strength of policing is that people are drawn from the community. The great downside of policing is that-

Art Acevedo:

They're drawn from the community. They're not growing on petri dishes, right? Which means that leadership, accountability, your systems, your risk management systems, your investigation systems, all those things really matter. And as a chief, it would kill me and just irk the bejesus out of me when I had had to fire somebody. I remember when I went to Austin, I started as the chief there in July of 2007. And I had to fire a guy early on after an officer involved shooting where he killed Kevin Brown, African American individual that was running away from him. He was armed with a pistol. But the only thing this guy demonstrated throughout this entire thing is a desire too...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Get away.

Art Acevedo:

When people have guns and dope, nine times out of 10 what they're trying to do and they start running is get away. Well, he dumps the firearm. Here comes this other guy named Mike Olson, Sergeant Olson, and basically triangulated him. They went around different parts of this complex and he basically double-taps him, takes him down, while he's on the ground. We didn't have body-worn cameras, we had car cameras. But you can still hear the audio.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Art Acevedo:

Kevin Brown saying, "Please don't let me die." He shoots two more times. He missed, but he still shoots two more. The guy's just laying there.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, I know.

Art Acevedo:

So I ended up firing this guy. I'm brand new and I come out of the DRH, disciplinary review hearing in Texas, you have to have him with the chief and somebody says, "Well, we saw that one coming." He was getting fired because of this guy's history and who he was. And my response is, I'm dealing with something that, A, could have been prevented-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm sure you're very restrained, because you know.

Art Acevedo:

I'm very quiet.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, yeah. You're almost a monk.

Art Acevedo:

Yeah, almost. And I said, "If you saw it coming, what did you do about it?" Because, I think that when I worked internal affairs with the CHP, almost without exception, people ended up getting fired, there was a path to that moment. There was a series of actions that led to that moment. And then what really irritates me is that we let all this stuff go, we don't hold them accountable. But then when they really off management, now you want to throw everything and the kitchen sink, and if it ain't documented, it didn't happen. So a lot of careers in this country and a lot of lives have been lost and a lot of harm has been done because too many leaders don't want to do the heavy lifting.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But in some cases in the case that it's really difficult for the police leaders due to contracts and arbitration, and all those kind of things to actually get rid of bad people.

Art Acevedo:

I think that's true in a lot of places. But I think part of it also is...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They don't want to do the battle.

Art Acevedo:

You don't want to have to fight. So I get to Texas and the union was, "Hey man, is this true?" When you fire somebody, it's 50/50, they're going to get their job back. Well I'm proud of the fact that, I batted 9.75. Right? Because, A, very clear on what the expectations were. If you lie, you die. If you abuse people, you're done. Two, you have to be consistent. If you start looking at personalities instead of based on this fact and this work history, because not every case is the same, they're all distinguishable. But if you're consistent, you're clear on your expectations and you testify to stand up for your decision. I batted 9.75. It was not fun. It was really interesting is when I first got to Texas, I don't like drunk drivers. A lot of cops die from drunk driving and get injured a lot. A lot of my friends have been hurt and killed. And a lot of Americans, a lot of community members probably. Well, in the state of Texas, if you are convicted of DWI, you're prohibited from becoming a police officer for 10 years.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm okay with that rule.

Art Acevedo:

But listen to this though. You're a 19 year old kid, you go to college, you get a conviction DWI, you can't even apply until you're 29. But if you're a cop who's taken an oath of office, who knows the consequences, who sees firsthand the scourge that this stuff is, they were getting 10 day suspensions.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, that's not right.

Art Acevedo:

I'm sorry. I had a problem with that and I was getting all these DWIs. When I got there, I said, "You know what? We're done." I did a video, I put it out and said, "Effective from this moment forward, if you get arrests for DWI..." Do you know how DAs can plea bargain the hell out of everything. "... If I can prove it administratively, you're fired." And it worked. We always won those cases.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you move to Austin. Yeah. Is that your real first exposure to just the politics around being a chief? Did you have a sense of it with CHP? But I'm feeling that you've got state politics, because it's Texas and then you've got city politics, because it's Austin. What was that like?

Art Acevedo:

Well, first with the CHP, you got to remember the CHP is more of the political pressures. When a buddy of mine that was testifying against a bill and all of a sudden the governor's office calls the Commission of the Highway Patrol and says, and by the way, it was the right position against the bill, but some rich benefactor-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You eventually got to the word benefactor, but I could see what was going through your mind.

Art Acevedo:

You know what I'm talking about. So some rich guy, and I know who it was and everything, that owned one of the largest trucking companies in the state of California wanted, for his business purpose, let people drive a lot more hours. So we took a position, it was evidence based and it was based on data and was based on safety. And it's based on the best interest of the public.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Perish the thought.

Art Acevedo:

Yeah. So there's my poor buddy. We're against this, and all of a sudden they pass him a note. As I was saying, we and the member of legislature said, "Y'all got the call, didn't you?" "Yes sir." We make fun of Mexico and other places. We're just a little bit more sophisticated here. We don't shoot each other, just it's all about money.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

America never comes top of the integrity rankings in terms of transparency international. We're a long way from the top there.

Art Acevedo:

But we think we are.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How is it with city politics?

Art Acevedo:

What happens, I think, once I transition to Austin and municipal policing is now you're answerable to a specific community.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Was that a change for you?

Art Acevedo:

No, because I was a very strange highway patrolman. When I was a young guy in East LA, we didn't call ourselves east LA CHP, said we east LAPD. Right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Art Acevedo:

And I was in the mindset that without the community, without engaging the community, you're never going to be effective. I went to East LA as a trainee, I promoted as a sergeant there then I came back as the captain. I love East la. I love that community. It's this big Hispanic immigrant community.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Austin must have been quite a change then.

Art Acevedo:

It was a change in that now you're in a community where you're really the fish bowl, the intensity of the scrutiny, of the leadership, of the department. And then Austin has a lot of activists there. I always talk about extremism, especially in this country right now, the two extremes. I have a problem with both, even though one's more anti-democracy right now. You figured that out.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It doesn't take a rocket scientist or a PhD. I think we're there here. But that doesn't let the other side off the hook being a little bit crazy at times either.

Art Acevedo:

No, absolutely not. No. Come on. Abolish the police, defund the police. Come on. It's hogwash. But the problem is how many chiefs actually speak up against that. We keep quiet. And like I said about the community of 10 in Austin, that was the rude awakening for me. Because, we had the same 10 actors that would show up at city hall every week and they'd scream about something and you'd see the policy makers make a decision based on the input of 10 people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That doesn't feel very democratic.

Art Acevedo:

You know what? You want to see things better in this country? When it comes to gerrymandering for these, any partisan race that those districts, whatever the configuration of the districts are, depending on the level of government, that they all have to be 50/50.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Then we'll see some moderates.

Art Acevedo:

Now everybody's going to focus on good policy and on good governance and not on good political theater based on primary politics. When you live in a city or in a community where your primary election determines who's going to win the general, that is not good for that community. Because, you have to be an extremist and that can be the problem.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How long did you spend in Austin?

Art Acevedo:

Almost 10 years. I got there July of '07 and left in November of '16.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What would you consider to be your flagship thing, that sense of success that you got from being in Austin?

Art Acevedo:

I'm very proud of the fact that we really transitioned the department to being more intelligence led, data driven in a place that was very difficult to get stuff done. Because, from the extreme right, anything you try to do was big brother. And to the extreme left, everything you wanted to accomplish was civil liberties. Right? And right now these extremes have fallen off the earth and they've met in the middle.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They've come all the way around and now they're on the same page, which is the most bizarre thing.

Art Acevedo:

I was able to navigate that very successfully for 10 years. I'm really proud. The chief before me couldn't get public safety cameras. And it was the activist that ran the local ACLU would help kill it, because your position was, "You have an expectation of privacy walking down the street, right?" I called and we had in car cameras and I said, "Hey." Her name was Debbie. I said, "Hey Debbie, I want you to know you. You've convinced me. You have convinced me that the people of Austin have an expectational privacy walking down the street." And I said, "So next month I'm taking out all the cameras in the police cars." "What are you talking about?" "When we stop somebody, that camera's capturing the passenger, the person driving by, the guy walking across the street with his girlfriend, when his wife's at home."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They're getting stopped by the police. How stressful is that?

Art Acevedo:

She says, "You can't do that." I said, "Well, wait a minute. Are you trying to tell me your position is we can't have public safety cameras in a public space to keep an eye on the crooks, but we can have them to keep an eye on the cops. So you can't have it both ways." That was the end of that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

10 years, give or take, is a much longer tenure than most police chiefs have. The average of these days is something like three years.

Art Acevedo:

That's extremely long now.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, it's really low. What was the impetus to move? Because, in most cases, once you've made it 10 years, so it's like that's a tenure for life. Was it to move to a bigger city? Or did you just get the feeling you've done everything that you wanted to do?

Art Acevedo:

I think that if you don't accomplish what you've set to accomplish in 10 years, you're never going to get it done. One. Two, there's a lot of other departments that need to evolve. Three, by leaving, I want to create an opportunity for someone. They had not had an inside chief for 35 years until Brian Manley got it when I left. And now Joe Chacon is the second chief in a row and I'm really proud of that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you moved to Houston in 2016. That was a hell of a ride.

Art Acevedo:

I loved Houston. First of all, my cops there would tease me about, "Hey, come into the bigger city." I go, "No, no, no, no, hold on. I'm from Los Angeles. That's where I grew up as a cop. That's how I grew up as a person." Well, Houston's not as big as LA but it's big enough. So I know how I was pushed back on that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Being the first Hispanic chief there...

Art Acevedo:

And Austin. In both. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Was that a big deal or do you just like, "Pfft, it is what it is."

Art Acevedo:

Two things. One, as a Hispanic or as a female or whoever you are, if you're a first, then you have a responsibility to conduct yourself in a manner and perform in a manner where there'll be a second. Right? And diversity's never been our strong suit. It's like right now we're trying to go back, turn the clock back in our country. And think about who was president at that time, it was President Trump. His rhetoric about immigrants and others, it was very divisive and it was very mean spirited. And I think that to this day, I go back to the Houston, the community, whether it's the African American community or the Hispanic community, documented, undocumented, legal or illegal, they appreciate the fact that I would stand up for the community.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Which leads me into one of the most high profile things that I think, from my outside perspective that you've been involved in, is the viral video post-George Floyd, you in with protestors, just engaging with people with some really irate

protestors, black and brown protestors, right in the heart of Houston. That really put you on the map for a bunch of people. What was that day like?

Art Acevedo:

Well, it was more than a day. One night I disappeared for four hours. We had a protest of about 60,000 people. And I disappeared at night by myself and these crowds for four hours.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Did you spend a lot of time thinking about what your position was going to be? Or was this just instinctive?

Art Acevedo:

That was just a spontaneous thing, but that was speaking from the heart. That video made me a racist according to my conservative cops, because they only hear what they want to hear. They forgot that I said in this city, I brought in that we all get along and we're not going to let people tear down our city. And it was powerful, man.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It was very authentic and-

Art Acevedo:

You can't make that up, right? You can't just make it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Some people try to, but it doesn't ring true. But I was surprised, obviously, because knowing you as I do, you're such a shy, retiring kind of guy.

Art Acevedo:

Well look, remember I'm an immigrant, right? So I hate hypocrisy in life. Even Cubans now, it's like, "Okay, we've arrived. To hell with everybody else." Look, I'm not in for open borders at all. But we haven't changed immigration numbers here in how long. The only way we're going to sustain this country is through immigration and we're going to have to compete, because people have other options besides the United States.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're very clear about... You're not backward in coming forwards about your political views on things. Is that the reality of being a chief nowadays? Or is that something that you go, "Yeah, I'm taking a risk. Put my views out there as a chief." Because, a lot of people try to make police chief an apolitical job, but you don't mind just embracing it and owning it.

Art Acevedo:

What they don't understand is that people need to know your heart. People can't trust you who don't know your heart. And what I have always found interesting is that as a police chief, you got to police everybody. And you have to try to build trust with everybody. I'm the idiot that would go on Alex Jones before he got Uber crazy. Why? Because, Alex

Jones had a large following. Those people are living in my community, living all over the world. And I believe that you have to create trust with everybody and they have to feel that you care about them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But, what even if your politics differ from them significantly?

Art Acevedo:

Most Americans and most human beings are reasonable people. Whether they agree with you or not, what's more important to them is what's in your heart, if they think you're being genuine.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'd have probably agreed with that two or three years ago.

Art Acevedo:

But you know what? But you know what, Doc...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Don't call me Doc, makes me sound like a proctologist.

Art Acevedo:

Jerry... Dr. J... Dr. J, listen. The truth of the matter is people think they know you. And it's so interesting to me, they think I'm this liberal chief. Right? Or in the extreme left, they think I'm this George Floyd protest in Houston. I always say, "Do not confuse kindness for weakness. When that sun went down and people started breaking stuff, we made over 700 arrests." So the real left, "Acevedo, you're a hypocrite. You marched with everybody during the day and the cameras around that night." No, during the day, there were families, there were people exercising their First Amendment rights. We were there to facilitate those rights. And at night the freaks came out and started breaking stuff and they went to jail. Period.

But let me just finish real quick. So President Trump's running for office. I'm still in Austin. And these are two anecdotes that, I'm telling you, people think that you care. That's half the battle as a leader, whether they agree with you or not. Trump's comment, we were having little riots everywhere he went, San Jose, and I lead from the front. So I knew I'd get criticized by some folks, because when that plane landed, the police chief was at the bottom of those stairs. I'm the police chief. My job is to let that man do what he needs to do in terms of exercising his rights to run-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because, that's that American freedom.

Art Acevedo:

That's right. I shook his hand. "Mr. Trump, welcomed to Austin. My name is Art, also I'm the police chief. I will be with you this entire day and I promise you, I guarantee you'll be able to conduct your campaign business without any incident

here." Thousands of hits from people. What? Whether it was him or Hillary, doesn't matter. We're going to be there. We go to ACL... Have you been to Austin lately?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Not for a couple of years. COVID here.

Art Acevedo:

It's a Sean Hannity town hall forum. If you're going to Sean Hannity Town Hall, you're a true believer in the message he's putting out. So it sold out. I'm this left wing nut to people on the right thing. And I walk in, people notice me and all of a sudden I hear, "Hey, it's our police chief. It's Art Acevedo." And the whole place started clapping. Okay, so this thing goes on. Then we're over. The thing's over. Now we got to go outside. Who do you think is waiting outside? All the crazy people to the left, right? And they're wearing costumes and these crazy masks. And I walk out to just scope it out right before it ended. "Hey, it's our police chief. It's Art Acevedo." All they all start clapping.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And at that point the batteries died. You know, would think that after doing this for more than 50 episodes, I would have this shit down. But nope. Time for another rookie mistake. On the plus side, I had spares and we were back up and running in seconds. Not that Art was going to let me get away with that. Oh no.

Look, the batteries just died on me. It didn't give me any flipping warning. It was showing three little things. What did you do to it? Oh my god.

Art Acevedo:

Duracell works. What is this crap here?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This is what you're doing now that you're no longer a police chief. You're just shilling for Duracell now?

Art Acevedo:

No, I think you took these from the department.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh my God, what's going on? So we was just saying that given that politics is, I suppose inevitable, is that the measure of success? If the left love you and the right love you, you're doing it right. And if the left hate you and the right hate you, you're kind of also doing it right? So it's whatever the level hate is in equal measures. How do you find that line?

Art Acevedo:

Well look, when you piss off both sides, both extremes, you're probably in good sweet spot on a policy issue. But the funny thing is that the more you engage people... I like to say that when people run away from activists or critics, I like to run towards them. Because, when you engage people, you can disarm people. And when you get to engage people through relational police, and I'm always talking about they end up saying, "Hey, this guy's all right." Or, "This person's

all right." Because, no matter what we disagree on, I guarantee you, even the most extreme people, there's things that we can't agree on. And if we can't agree, like in the legislature in Texas, I'm a big critic of our AG, but yet I had his cell phone number and when I needed his help, because my judges in Houston were letting hardcore criminals that are killing people in one door and out the other, that are not moving cases. People aren't even plea bargaining anymore, because they know that they get a better deal. The more time that goes by, the better deal they get.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's the case in the few cities now, it's really worrying.

Art Acevedo:

But we don't talk about it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No.

Art Acevedo:

I used to tease my sheriff in Harris County. We just had 12 people shot this weekend in the county and you're tweeting on Monday, "Hey, happy Monday, everybody. The sun came up. Ain't life great?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, not for 12 people and their families.

Art Acevedo:

Come on.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And their community.

Art Acevedo:

So I spent a lot of time in the neighborhoods, whether it's on patrol or just bullshitting with people. And when I would be pushing back on the judges, letting the people out, in and out one door, the hardcore criminals, I'd be in the highest crime neighborhoods, African Americans, Hispanics coming up, thanking me for standing up for us. Because, these politicians, they're so out of touch sometimes with the real communities.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, you hear all this talk about defund and then you look at surveys of black communities. And who knows where those people are, because it's like Gallup national polls. But even they're saying 80%, on what? The same amount of policing or more. So there is that political capture by a small, and this is on both sides, the extremist group can really capture the political conversation to the detriment of communities.

Art Acevedo:

Because, unfortunately too many elected officials are knee jerk. They're not in touch with the people they serve. That's why there's so much frustration in this country. Again, relational police is about the transparency, the respect, starting with self respect, the engaging. In a lot of cities, nobody knows who the police chief is, right? I'll never forget, I go to an event in Austin, the person at the front desk calls me by my first name. "Chief Art." To me, when people are yelling your first name...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's because they can't pronounce your last name.

Art Acevedo:

Well, no, no. It means they think they know you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Art Acevedo:

That's the way I'm going to translate that. You can't buy that. You can't buy that kind of good will.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Speaking of pissing off politicians. Your relatively short-lived tenure in Miami. I know for a variety of reasons, should we say involving lawyers that you can't talk about much of that.

Art Acevedo:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But were there broader lessons that now you reflect on that have given you insights into the role in general?

Art Acevedo:

Yeah. Look, let me just say this. I've had the honor of being a big city police chief for almost 15 years, right? In three different cities, in two of the bigger cities in the country. And I've been able to mentor a lot of young executives, and I've always said several things to them. Do not take the job. If you're afraid to lose the job. Come to work to do your job, not keep your job. And if you're going to get fired, get fired for doing your job. To me, that's leadership. And when I go to Miami and early on I realized, holy, these people just think they're in Cuba still. I think it was God's way of letting me walk the talk. Because, say these things and people think you're full of it. Yeah, sure. No, and that's the problem. Because, if you're afraid to lose your job, you'll be driven by fear. It will handcuff you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And there goes your integrity. And your sense of self.

Art Acevedo:

Everybody sees it. Everybody sees it. And what's funny is that-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You lack authenticity at that point.

Art Acevedo:

You've lost the workforce, right? And it's sad that that community there... I was only there six months. And about eight weeks ago, my little boy and my boy Jake, we're walking down downtown Miami. Transit bus goes by and we'll walk on the sidewalk. Also, we hear, "Honk. Honk." When we look back in this, the African American-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, that was a cow horn, was it?

Art Acevedo:

No, no, it was the bus horn.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay. Just checking.

Art Acevedo:

Stops in the middle of the street, sticks his head out the window and starts yelling, "Chief Acevedo, thank you for sticking up for our community." Because, people do pay attention. And I think that's the mistake that leaders make. And especially in law enforcement, they don't realize that they're constantly being watched. Especially in a world of social media and the world of instant information, the community's watching to see how you're going to react. And when you don't speak out, people are going to make some judgements about you as a leader.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So why do you think we see that so infrequently? Is it because people are too afraid to actually have an opinion?

Art Acevedo:

Job security.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Job security?

Art Acevedo:

Job security.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because, a lot of chiefs are just heading down the beige route. They're just not having an opinion about anything.

Art Acevedo:

I think that policing will not change because we have a crisis in leadership. Most cops are decent and good, hardworking people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Where is the crisis?

Art Acevedo:

It's leadership.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Where is the deficit? Where is the crisis?

Art Acevedo:

There's no job security for police chiefs. Look at Erika Shields in Atlanta, one of the most progressive police chiefs in the country had a couple of bad incidents in a row.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But she wasn't responsible for it and she got bounced so quickly.

Art Acevedo:

Because, Mayor Bottoms wanted to be vice president, so I got to show that, I'm in charge and I'm doing something.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

She got stabbed in the back worse than Caesar.

Art Acevedo:

Look, we have got to create a model where unless it's malfeasance or serious ineptitude, that a police chief gets a five-year term or two five-year term.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That would take the politics out of it in a way.

Art Acevedo:

Absolutely.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Which would be good.

Art Acevedo:

But it has to be for cause. It has to be for real cause, because then police chiefs will start not worrying about the jobs. Because, let's face it. You anger the wrong stakeholder, if it's a strong union city, you're done. Or if it's a strong community, you're done. But if we had some job security for these chiefs, a lot of chiefs would focus on actually doing the job and still keep-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, it does seem to drive a lot of timidity.

Art Acevedo:

Yes, it does. And what's funny is that I've always considered myself a community leader that happens to be a police chief, because I believe that a police chief has to be a leader in the community and they have to see you as a community leader that's invested in that community. And when you put yourself at risk for the community that you serve and the people you lead, believe me, it's a two-way street. My cops in Austin, quite honestly, frequently, just about every option involving shooting is controversial. Some people think cops don't have the right to defend themselves or other. I'm sorry, but they do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Art Acevedo:

It's just... And life's about choices.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In a country with more guns than people, it's going to happen on a regular basis.

Art Acevedo:

Well, I get really upset when the left here tries to compare gun violence with police here to Europe. Okay.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Not exactly comparing apples to apples.

Art Acevedo:

Are you kidding me? Everybody's armed here. Everybody's armed. And that's the answer to everything from the right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Toddlers in America are more deadly than adults in Europe.

Art Acevedo:

And sadly to themselves. Accidental shootings here. Suicides here. Look, common sense, man. It's common sense. Get rid of those straw purchasers, truly universal background check, some real consequences to try to buy one when

you're a prohibited purchaser. By the way, to the left, when somebody uses a firearm, there's got to be consequences, period. There have to be certain... The crooks, the hardcore violent criminals in these big cities, they're not afraid of death. They're not.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Certainly not afraid of the police.

Art Acevedo:

You know what they're afraid of? Prison. That's the only thing that they all talk about. And I can show you some of the audios that we've had over the years over wires. They don't want to go to prison, but they're not afraid, because there's no hope in a lot these folks, right? They've got to know that there's consequences.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Coming back to what you're saying about being out there, letting people know your views, all those kind of things. People would push back and probably say, "Yeah. Well, that's great. But you got fired in Miami," even though you're going to go back and revisit that. For people who want some job security, who've got kids in school and kids in college and stuff like that.

Art Acevedo:

Stay a captain.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Art Acevedo:

Stay a lieutenant, stay a sergeant, stay an assistant chief. But when you're the chief, your job as a leader is to put yourself at risk. And if you're not willing to take the risk, don't take the job, because what we do is too important. It's just too important. And the Miami thing. The one thing that I always told my cops is, "It doesn't matter whether the chief likes you or doesn't like you. Doesn't matter. The one that has complete control of your integrity is you." And in my position, if you lie, you die, that I always talk about with my cops on day one of the academy, by the way. I say, "Look, even if the underlying cause of the discipline is so egregious that you're not going to keep your job, but if you still tell the truth, you get to keep one thing. That's your integrity."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What's policing going to look like in three, four years' time?

Art Acevedo:

I think we're going to be still having the same exact conversations, the same exact failures.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I can just go and to rerun to this podcast then, can I?

Art Acevedo:

Unfortunately, it's really not rocket science. From a policing standpoint, it's treating people right, treating them with respect. And from a leadership standpoint is that you lift up the good when the officers do good and you hold people accountable. And you have to understand not everybody needs to be a cop. And when somebody demonstrates through their actions, through their deeds that they don't need to be a cop, you got to cut your losses. It breaks my heart. Every time I'd fire people over the years, I have to take Pepcid. Not because of them, but guess who I was thinking about that night when I'm home? Their families.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Art Acevedo:

Their families, their children. But I'm sorry, the old Star Trek scene, there's Spock, he's inside some kind of propulsion room or something and he has to put the cat back on

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And he's dying away there.

Art Acevedo:

And he's dying away. And I'm going, "Oh my God, we're losing Spock." And Jim tells him, "Spock, come on." And he goes, "No Jim, the needs of the many outweighs the need of the one."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Never put you down as a Trekkie.

Art Acevedo:

Ah, Trekkie and Star Wars. Those are the two things I love.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Good man.

Art Acevedo:

You know what? And I always loved Darth Vader, even as a little kid. I knew that deep down inside, the good would come out when I saw it at 12 years old. And do you remember how that ended, right? He takes the emperor. Because, I think to me, that means don't give up on people. Keep working on them, right? And what's interesting for me is that I have no regrets really. I don't regret going to Miami, because what they don't understand. I went there with my integrity intact. I left my integrity intact and my firing said more about them than it said about me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Art Acevedo, thank you very much indeed.

Art Acevedo:

Thank you, Doc. Good to see you, dude.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Cheers, mate.

That was episode 53 of Reducing Crime, recorded in Washington DC in May 2022. A link to the full video I played with Art in the post-George Floyd crowd in Houston is at reducingcrime.com/podcast, along with transcripts of this and every episode. New episodes are announced on Twitter @_ReducingCrime if Twitter continues to survive. And I personally lurk @Jerry_Ratcliffe. Don't forget the underscores. Subscribe to this podcast at Spotify, SoundCloud, Apple, or wherever you pod so you don't miss an episode, you know, if Twitter goes south on us.

Be safe and best of luck.