

#37 (BILL BRATTON)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Reducing Crime is a podcast featuring influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers. Bill Bratton has been Chief of the Los Angeles Police Department, Chief of the New York City Transit Police, Commissioner of the Boston Police Department, and New York City Police Department Commissioner twice. We talk about his career and his new book, "The Profession."

Hi, this is Jerry Ratcliffe, and welcome to Reducing Crime. If, like me, you instantly recognize the television theme that just played, then I pretty much guarantee you have a few gray hairs, or like the eponymous hero of the show, an absence of hair. Across five seasons and 118 episodes in the mid-1970s, this slick NYPD homicide detective show garnered a couple of awards and a couple of spinoff movies. If you know the show I'm talking about, then all I'll say is, "Who loves you, baby?"

By the way, the guess theme for the last episode was the British police drama, Juliette Bravo. My guest this month is Bill Bratton. Bill's on a virtual national tour promoting his latest book written with Peter Knobler titled, "The Profession: A Memoir of Community, Race and the Arc of Policing in America." As part of the promotional effort he's appeared on national television, been interviewed on NPR and featured in The New York Times. With the help of Deb Piehl and Bob Wasserman, I managed to convince his poor publicist that this is a legitimate podcast, with production values and a team of people and stuff like that, and not just me chatting with folk while I sit in my bedroom. And bloody hell, it worked!

So, I got to Zoom for an hour with Bill and talk about some interesting quotes I dug up from his book. Bratton served in the Military Police in Vietnam before returning home to Boston where he joined the police department in 1970. He ultimately served as Chief for the Los Angeles Police Department, Chief for the New York City Transit Police, Commissioner of the Boston Police Department, and served two three-year terms as New York City Police Department Commissioner in 1994 and 2014. For the last 20 years, he's been one of the most high-profile police leaders in America.

We talk about, well Bill talks about, comparisons between the US and British policing, moving ideas between police departments, Peel's Principles, Compstat, accountability, George Kelling, ivory tower academics, broken windows, protests, defunding and de-policing. Oh yeah, and angry white kids with really good teeth. Here's my chat with Bill Bratton. You know, I just hope his publicist Gail gets to keep her job. She seemed really nice...

REDUCING CRIME PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Bill Bratton:

Hey Jerry, how are you?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Bill, how are you sir?

Bill Bratton:

Great. Can you hear me?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes, I can hear you. The technical issue is you've got an idiot at this end whose unable to press one damn button that says unmute.

Bill Bratton:

We're all set now.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

All right, great. Thanks very much for doing this.

Bill Bratton:

My pleasure.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You must be exhausted. I've seen you doing like 100 places.

Bill Bratton:

You are literally the 30th podcast in the last couple of weeks.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, good grief. That's crazy.

Bill Bratton:

I had a good day yesterday. The New York Times will be running what had been on the web, the actual review of the book, which is very, very favorable. It will be running this Sunday in The New York Times Book Review.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's fantastic.

Bill Bratton:

It's being very well received. Very little negative criticism, and generating a lot of positive discussion. So, very, very pleased with it. It took a long time to put together. My colleague, Peter Knobler, really did a great job putting it all together.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We actually met before a couple of times, because I've done some work with Chuck Ramsay and Bob Wasserman.

Bill Bratton:

Oh, sure. Bob has been a colleague, as I referenced in the book, for 45 years and Chuck Ramsey I first met in 1991, we've both been presidents of PERF and major city chiefs. Chuck is actually working with me currently on two projects that I have in my company, one with Verizon and another one with the Saint Louis County and City Police Departments.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Does Bob know that you've described him as Bugs Bunny at one point in the book there?

Bill Bratton:

Yeah, I heard that he said that was the only negative connotation. But really, he had an overbite, that it was not meant in a demeaning way. Basically, that was how we was described in Boston. Bob is probably the most brilliant person I've met in policing in terms of overall all the issues. Jack Maple was brilliant on crime. George Kelling, wonderful on his many, many theories. Bob was and is, thank God he still is, credible in his understanding of many of the issues we discussed in the book.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, you described as one, and I'm quoting from the book here, "One of the underappreciated heroes of the evolution of American policing in the past 50 years." Obviously I know Bob, and it strikes me that people like Bob, and Nola Joyce, they're a whole bunch of these people who have just been beavering away at the background, trying to move policing forward.

Bill Bratton:

He's purposely sought to stay in the background. He's never been anybody who wanted to get on the stage. I've regretted that, and I've told him that many times, that he would be the perfect person to actually write a book because he's involved in every major initiative in America policing in the 50 years, so much of what I am in the sense of what I advocate with new opportunities that Bob created. We spent quite a bit of time working together in London, for example, with TFL.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Transport for London, yep.

Bill Bratton:

Transport for London brought Compstat to that agency, lobbied effectively to get 1,000 Met officers assigned to TFL to help with traffic and safety patrols. Again, at some point in time he will get some acknowledgement. I tried to do that in the book.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I've actually got a bunch of great quotes that I've pulled out of the book "The Profession", and I'd like to chat about some of those with you. You talk about the job when you started. When you said, "When I joined the Boston Police Department, what I found was not a profession. Policing may have been called a profession, but it wasn't one. There was no body of knowledge, few highly educated people were at the top, and by and large it's workforce were considered laborers rather than professionals, grunts, people who had to be controlled."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This sounds just like when I joined the Metropolitan Police in London in the mid-1980s. It feels like we've come a long way. The public rhetoric doesn't suggest as much, but it kind of feels like we've really improved since then.

Bill Bratton:

The difference with the Brits is, and I'm very admiring of the British police services to some respects.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They'll be pleased to hear that.

Bill Bratton:

No, you had Bramshill. Your senior people are all required to go through that unifying experience.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Quick editor's note here, just for folks that don't know, Bramshill was a police college and the National Police Staff College for England and Wales for over 50 years until it closed in 2015. The senior officers selected for Bramshill were picked from a very competitive pool.

Bill Bratton:

And they tended to be very well educated to begin with, but you had what a profession needs. You had a body of knowledge, even if the knowledge is flawed in certain areas.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But it keeps growing.

Bill Bratton:

It was a think tank. You were always very good in Britain on technology advancements and acquisition, and you always wrestled, as we did in the United States, with race issues as you became less homogeneous as a population with the influx study in the 40s and 50s from your various commonwealth nations. What I found when I went over there is a very educated leadership in the force, but also just what was missing was some of the creativity that we had in the states.

Bill Bratton:

I've often said you were five to 10 years behind our experiences, both positive and negative. I enjoyed my experience. The CBE that I got from the Queen was in recognition of trying to draw the two police services.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, we all get one of those eventually. I've had two or three of them.

Bill Bratton:

Well, I finally understand what those initials are on the [crosstalk 00:07:54].

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's pretty much it. It's a code. You get inducted into a secret society. You actually know what the hell all those things mean.

Bill Bratton:

When I call restaurants when I'm over in London, I try to throw my letters about. I don't know if it works or not, but it's nice to have that acknowledgement.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I make sure to never tell anybody the doctor side of those. They expect me to do CPR on some bloke that's dying in the corner of the restaurant. Mentioning Bramshill, they've morphed that, and it's having some teething troubles but it's heading on the right track into England to Wales now as a kind of national college of policing. Is that something that we need here?

Bill Bratton:

I would think that would be wonderful to have here. Starting in the 70s, the US began to invest in training for our supervisors, for managers. I still remember attending at Boston's Logan Airport a week-long course on managing investigations, and another course on supervision. These were some of the first college courses ever offered on a national basis by the national government. We also had a police foundation that Pat Murphy formed, a police station in New York, and ending up heading up initially a grand \$20 million for the Ford Foundation, which in the 1970s was a huge amount of money.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's not exactly chump change today. That would be fantastic, right?

Bill Bratton:

First significant investment in American policing to create a profession. Subsequent to that, the National Institute of Justice was created that in PERF, the Police Executive Research Forum, which I was one of the first members of, had been active with and president of twice. I would be very much in favor of something along the line of if the academy tries to do a three-week course, which is really more about the FBI trying win friends and influence future police chiefs as much as educating them, but it's not of the quality if you will of what would be truly a college or a university.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It doesn't have the caliber?

Bill Bratton:

It's probably of the highest caliber in what we have in the United States in the sense of the instructors and setup. The reputation of the FBI, it's done at the FBI Academy. I would be favor of something that I was fortunately exposed to some of my contemporaries, if you will, a step-by-step move up in the organization, training for supervisors, training for mid-level managers that would then prepare you with your real-life experiences for it. Basically, training should be for a Police Chief.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

My kind of gut sense is that we needed... Some of the benefits of the FBI and National Academy are people get to meet police chiefs from other places because-

Bill Bratton:

You network.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've had that capacity to work in Los Angeles, and in Boston, and in New York, but too many people have the tendency to spend their whole life parochially in just one organization. It seems like it becomes harder to make reforms happen if you can only ever see that you've done it one way, if that makes some sense.

Bill Bratton:

I just had a conversation this morning with a colleague who formerly worked with me in the NYPD talking about the selection process for the next New York City Police Commissioner. Apparently, at least one of the candidates has indicated that he basically wants a minority woman. There's a lot of speculation on one or two candidates in the NYPD. The limitation of those two candidates is they never really had outside experiences in law enforcement except in the NYPD. I'm not sure what outside experiences such as the FBI and National Academy, SMIP at PERF that they've had that would have increased their exposures to other creative minds around the country.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, in the British perspective you can't take on the Chief's job as a Commissioner or a Chief Constable unless you've spent some time as a deputy in another force. It's part of the educational experience, because when you come in from outside, or even if you go away and then come back again, you're often brought in, as you've been brought in, as a reformer. If you're brought in from the outside its because people, often they're unhappy with what's going on at something internally.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You wrote in the book, "Among the cops in their union, there's a widespread belief that all police reform is anti-police. This is wrong-headed. I'm a police reformer and I defy anyone to call me anti-police," which I completely get. Where does this myopic view that we're doing everything perfectly all the time, where does this defensive posture come from? It drives me nuts.

Bill Bratton:

I'm trying to think of the expression that there's two things that cops hate: the status quo and change. In other words, you're never going to satisfy cops. That's just the reality of the business. I constantly strive as the outsider. I benefit as an outsider because I come in with experiences elsewhere that then help me to identify deficiencies in a new organization, as well as strengths. As I move around, and I'll use for a prime example LA and New York, the two leading police departments in America bar none, there's a lot of very good police departments in America, but those are still despite some of the deficiencies at both agencies, the two leading police forces in America.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I can't agree with you. I'm going to keep my mouth shut at this point, otherwise I'm going to run out of Philadelphia. But yeah, carry on.

Bill Bratton:

Yeah, no well Philadelphia has unfortunately, despite having had John Timoney and Chuck Ramsey is still unfortunately a mess. And I was asked to take over the Philadelphia police by Ed Rendell back when I was at the... I couldn't take it at the time. I had just taken-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It must have been around the late 90s.

Bill Bratton:

Yeah, I had just taken a very lucrative job in the private sector, actually the NYPD. I recommended John Timoney. John went in and had a great time there and was one of the great commissioners there, then Chuck [Ramsey] came in after Washington, DC. But Philadelphia, it's still dealing with the legacy of Rizzo unfortunately. No, I'm very proud of both LAPD and NYPD recognizing deficiencies and their strengths.

Bill Bratton:

What I tried to do with LAPD was bring some of the strengths of the NYPD to it. Compstat, for example, better use of data basically emulating after 9/11 what New York had developed for counter-terrorism. Myself and John Miller created a model after New York counter-terrorism and intelligence entity in LA, coming to New York from LA I brought the use of the firearms investigation division that we had created in LA which is still the leading entity in America equal only by what New York now has to investigate use of force by police.

Bill Bratton:

I brought the senior lead officer program concept from LA into New York, which is now their NCO program. All of this is described in the book, "The Profession." Thirdly brought back from LA their police academy training that we totally revamped the training at the NYPD to emulate much of what LA was doing. LA still has some of the best training. And, this is where Bob Wasserman's creativity comes in. Bob worked with me in every department I've ever gone into.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Did you give him advance warning, or did you just say "Hey, guess where I'm going, and you're coming with me"?

Bill Bratton:

In some instances, he was already there. He was already there, for example, in New York City Transit Police, he and Kelling were the ones who recruited me there. He was already there in the NYPD with Lee Brown when I came in in 1994. LA, he was not there so I bought Bob in to help on that transition.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm just intrigued by the notion that at some point Bob picks up his phone and it's a text message from you saying, "How's your Japanese?" Or something like that.

Bill Bratton:

In some respects, it's kind of like the Batman light in the sky. Look up in the sky, there's a Batman light. So, basically this is a message to come on down. One of the fun things about the second NYPD experience was that I recognized that was going to be my last significant police experience. I was able in those three years to... I don't know if you're familiar with the movie "The Sting" with Robert Redford and Paul Newman.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's a classic, yep.

Bill Bratton:

Classic, and the touching the nose. Everybody wanted in on that last sting. It was going to be the swan song. In the NYPD, I think there was a recognition, this was my last adventure. I was able to literally surround myself with 40 years of incredible challenges. There's never been a team of people in one place at one time like I had in 2014 in New York

City, except for 1994 in the NYPD first go around because then I had the magnificent Jack Maple, John Miller, John Timoney, Louis Anemone.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Which is great, but here's where there's kind of a bit of a problem with that, because we've got 18,000 police departments and some of them are in a shocking state and could do with reform and to do with change, and you often need to bring that reform and change in from outside. You had the capacity to bring all of these people with you. You could form a team. How do you do that when you come in as a police commissioner somewhere, or as a police chief, and you can maybe bring one person, one or two people, but largely you're coming in and the team that you inherit is the team that you are stuck with. How do you make those kinds of changes in reforms?

Bill Bratton:

Respectively, that's what happened at the MVGA, the 68-person organization that I took over in 1983. I was able to bring in Al Sweeney. I was able to bring in as a consultant Bob Wasserman. But I had to basically work with what I had, which was a force much too small for the responsibilities it had. This is one of the hallmarks of being a leader, the idea you're given a set of circumstances but with that set of circumstances you should not feel yourself totally limited by it.

Bill Bratton:

What I've been able to do is basically identify additional resources that allow me to bring in consultants, additional opportunities that give me access to people who not necessarily came in as paid consultants, but who were willing to lend their expertise. The hallmark of my times as a leader is always being able to stop with the organization and crises, which is what look for. I don't want to go into something that's being well run. I want to go to something that's a mess.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, at that point you can only fail, right? Or just maintain somebody else's status quo.

Bill Bratton:

Little successes mean so much more than magnified. Out of crises, I've often said such an expression, "Comes opportunity to meet the challenges that you're going to have to face in an organizational crisis." The skill of a police leader, and this is the idea of exposing upcoming police leadership to experiences in the sense of other chiefs who have been there before them, who have had challenges and how they met those challenges. That's what SMIP - PERF's program - offers it.

Bill Bratton:

In three weeks, these up-and-coming captains, deputy chiefs are exposed to the Bill Brattons, the Chuck Ramseys, and some of the leading people in the profession, some still in the profession, others like myself on the outside-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I don't think anybody's going to claim that you're on the outside, Bill.

Bill Bratton:

Well, I'm outside but I'm like a bee pollinating. I wrote a quote at the beginning of the book, John Timoney's favorite quote, "Those who don't know the history are doomed to repeat it. Those who know police know we don't know our history."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, that's the truth.

Bill Bratton:

We don't teach history... I happen to be a history buff, so I know a lot about policing history in our country here in the US, and I'm informed by it. Thank God that I'm a history buff, because I was exposed to Sir Robert Peel's Nine Principles, that it is the foundation of what a modern police department should aim to be.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Absolutely, the primary objective of the police is the prevention of crime.

Bill Bratton:

Right, well the basic mission of policing, and I indicated those as the five most important words in policing, to prevent crime and disorder. Prevent crime and disorder. 70s and 80s, we were responding to crime. In the 90s with community policing, we started focusing on prevention, partnership, problem solving. The three Ps if you will. It was the idea also in the 70s and 80s we gave up focusing on disorder as the streets were becoming more chaotic. Nobody was really recognizing with the exception of myself and a couple of others, Bob Wasserman and others, that George Kelling and certainly Wilson, that you had to deal with both at the same time.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What strikes me about that piece of history, and I was reading about it more in the book, is that Compstat was a role to bring these things forward. You've just talked for a moment ago about identifying these young leaders. You talked initially about Compstat being about data, but it was about more than data. I really like this quote, you said, "Compstat ultimately became extremely useful not only for crime fighting accountability, but also for pinpointing how effectively those leaders were managing the resources in their precinct, their platoon, their squad."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's a hell of a mechanism for identifying which people have got the skillsets to actually be the managers that... If you think about a precinct captain in New York, or a district captain in Philadelphia, you're the equivalent of a police chief in a moderate-sized city.

Bill Bratton:

Basically what I emphasize on decentralization of power, in large organizations the appropriate level is usually the district, the precinct, the division. I describe that as basically being a captain on a very large ship and going down into

the engine room to really understand what's moving that ship forward. Compstat initially was a one-sided sheet of paper talking about all the crime issues. I had them add on the second side a profile sheet. The profile sheet looked at the captain, his objective offers and eventually brought into play many of the squad commanders.

Bill Bratton:

It had detailed information about them, how long they'd been on the job, et cetera so that when promotion time came and I got a list of names, I had over 1,000 captains and above in the NYPD. So, impossible to effectively know all these people. In Compstat, I could sit there and just watch and listen, and then add on that profile sheet their photograph. Basically, when I went through a promotion list, I went to the profile sheet, looked at the crime numbers on one side and on the other side back on this person.

Bill Bratton:

Compstat was multifaceted in the sense that it was an efficient use of data to drive the organization, but it was a tremendously efficient tool to identify who could drive the organization.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

People wanted you to remember them in Compstat, but ideally for good things.

Bill Bratton:

I've never been shy about raising my hand. That's how I get noticed. Sometimes I'm being accused of being too ambitious. In Boston, ambition was a dirty word. New York, it was something celebrated. In LA, the whole town is ambitious. Everybody comes to LA to become a movie star, or to become a more successful police chief. So, I am ambitious, and one of the ways ambitious people get noticed is to get noticed.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In all the places that you've been, you've often had to deal with issues around discipline and oversight, and that's come up a lot in conversation recently around policing, especially after the murder of George Floyd. I don't think we're ever really going to be able to quantify how much damage Derek Chauvin did when he murdered George Floyd, and how far it's put American policing back, and in fact arguably put policing back in many countries.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This area around discipline and oversight has come up in pretty much everywhere you've been to. If you had carte blanche you could control the union contract, you could decide whether you were going to have in-house oversight investigations or civilian, or external. Is there an ideal discipline system that you could design?

Bill Bratton:

No. The reality is that you have more of an opportunity for that in Great Britain with the 49 agencies over there. You have an inspector and constabulary for all of them. Here in America with those 18,000 police departments with the average department 25 or fewer officers, you get state laws that interfere with things, you get city and town

ordinances. So even if you were to advocate a best case scenario, it would be inapplicable in the vast majority of American police departments.

Bill Bratton:

It creates phenomenal confusion. I'll give you an example, the case of Derek Chauvin. The fact that the police chief there was able to dismiss those four officers within a few hours basically of the murder, everybody applauded him and then everybody applauded that he testified in the trial. Most police chiefs in America would not have that power. I cannot fire somebody outright in the NYPD or the Los Angeles Department. They have to go through a whole disciplinary process that oftentimes is controlled by an outside entity.

Bill Bratton:

So, in the case of that particular municipality, he had that power. In Los Angeles and New York, you could not go to court because you are the administrative officer whose going to see the administrative discipline process. So you could not go into a criminal court prior to the administrative hearing because it would taint the ability to be impartial in that administrative hearing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There really is no one perfect system then. You have to try and design the best system given the legal constraints of where you are.

Bill Bratton:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's crazy.

Bill Bratton:

In L.A., I was a Chief of Police reporting to a board of five commissioners. All of my disciplinary decisions would be reviewed by them. They could make recommendations that would be counter to mine, but in the final analysis I was the final determinant. That was the power I had, that I had significant oversight. In the NYPD, the Police Commissioner is the final say. We have Civilian Complaint Review Board that's assumed more powers recently. There's even a move to take the disciplinary powers away from the Police Commissioner, which would be disastrous.

Bill Bratton:

As a Chief or a Commissioner, you have to have that power over your people. Otherwise, you're a toothless tiger if it's controlled by an outside entity.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The outside entity one's interesting because this is going a really logical direction here, but this is how my mind works, is that when you have internal investigations and it's done by police officers, they know the system. They know how people sneak around the system. They know how people cheat the system. They know where the floors are. It's a little bit like George Kelling and his work. What I loved about George was that he would actually get out and go on the ground.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When I have PhD students and say, "Well, you're going to work with me. Here's a vest. We're going to go out," because you have to see what's really going on. You have to see policing on the street. You have to throw on a vest. You have to go and see the crime victims. They're not just a dot on the map. They're somebody weeping on a police officer's shoulder because they've lost their life savings, you know, and it was a tiny amount.

Bill Bratton:

Thinking of George and the comment about going out and walking the walk and walking the talk, he was frequently vilified by the armchair academics who never get out of their offices.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The air conditioning is very comfortable in the Ivory Tower.

Bill Bratton:

Yeah, and George basically wrote in easily understandable sentences. Any time I would look at a criminologist paper that had formulas, $X + Y = Z$, close the book. The average American Police Chief is not going to get into algorithms, et cetera. George wrote in wonderfully articulate language based on real life experiences. He liked cops, which was a big help, that he started with a promise of understanding cops and that the majority of them wanted to do good.

Bill Bratton:

He also recognized the many flaws that they had. That's why George and I got along so well. I'm a walk around Chief. He was a walk around academic.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, and as you say, armchair academics, I see a lot of critiques coming from people and I've never heard of them ever stepping outside of the hollow grounds of a university. The absence of academics who are actually prepared to work with police is a challenge for moving the profession forward. There is now a division of policing with the American Society of Criminology, but it's pretty much on first name terms. All the academics, and even fewer of them are like me, I'm an ex-police officer who became an academic, we're all on first name terms. We could sit around one dining room table.

Bill Bratton:

I still remember with great delight as Police Commissioner of New York going up to the American Academy of Criminology meeting Boston, and to take them on because they were attacking Compstat. The reason they were attacking Compstat was that I had implemented it in every precinct in the city at the same time. They would have preferred that I had done a placebo in half the precincts and fought crime in the other half so I could watch the rising death count in one place, and basically only take care of half the city. What said so during that meeting, that's flawed where academia is, in the sense you think in the verified air of the laboratory, I breathe the smog-filled air of the streets.

Bill Bratton:

It's one of the reasons I've been attacked, re a lot of the things that were put into place for the champions. They wanted to research things for years and years and years, and as a practitioner you don't have years and years. You've got to make split second decisions that is basically dealing with lives. You're dealing with lives that can be lost in a moment.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, and the average tenure of a Police Chief is less than four years.

Bill Bratton:

That's actually down to three years now.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is it now under three? With the current environment, at the last chapter of the book you talk about the defund movement and essentially the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd.

Bill Bratton:

It had been building going back to Trayvon Martin, the young man who was killed by that neighborhood watch patrol character. That was when the Black Lives Matter movement began, the three women who basically started it. It was slow to get traction.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And then Ferguson happened.

Bill Bratton:

Then Ferguson, because Eric Garner happened in the same year as Ferguson, but had happened much earlier in the year. It attracted a lot of attention in New York: demonstrations, marches. It had then quieted down, but then when Ferguson happened it was like a match was thrown that gave BLM a stronger platform to stand on. George Floyd was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It was a match and there was gasoline everywhere.

Bill Bratton:

That's the truth. There was kindling everywhere. I thought we were doing so much better. New York, the fact that we got through Garner, because we had relationships with the African American community, I had a mayor that had good standing with them, that we were implementing in New York everything that Obama had recommended in this 21st century paper.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's become politicized, but it's a really good report. It's a really interesting and insight piece of work.

Bill Bratton:

A lot of good recommendations, but it didn't have, if you will, a plan for going forward. It was like Sir Robert Peel's Nine Principles. It served as a good foundation, but then it required implementation, and implementation a lot of times requires funding. It effectively was launched, but then we entered the Trump years. The last thing he was going to do was fund an Obama initiative.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is the job of a Chief even tenable nowadays? Can anybody survive?

Bill Bratton:

Actually, it's becoming increasingly untenable for several reasons. The caliber of some chiefs are just not up to dealing with the incredible challenges of the 21st century. Some of the best are leaving, are aging out, or just want out. We still have not got that pendulum back to center. The pendulum is still wiggling over to the far left, the attacks on police, et cetera.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I will say there was part of your book that actually had me laughing out loud. You were writing about the rights and the disturbances after George Floyd. Then you wrote, "When the schism between the black leadership and the anarchist calls both to temporarily quit the field, cops notice that suddenly most of the marches could be characterized as angry white kids with really good teeth." I'm sorry, but that just laugh out loud.

Bill Bratton:

Actually, I purposefully put that line in. That line actually was from John Miller, who was at all those demonstrations. One of the things that we discussed, police chiefs and those of us that are still associated with them, is that we fail to detect that the race issue was still as explosive in the black community. In New York, things were going along pretty well. We had dealt with Garner, which wouldn't normally be as explosive as George Floyd, but because we had developed the relationships we got through it.

Bill Bratton:

Then where did the anger come from, from all these white people? The 20 million that were out there demonstrating, probably 80% of them were whites. If you look at the age of them, the old college crowd, the older people with the gray hair, but all these young kids, 19, 20, 21, 22. Part of it was that they had only lived in the 21st century, and the 21st century was a relatively safe period in America, except in some inner cities.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They have no memory of the 80s and the 90s.

Bill Bratton:

So that anger toward the police, what did the police ever do to them? I think it's reflective of the challenge frustration for so many professions in the 21st century is social media. All these kids live on those devices. The ability to attract a flash mob in an instant, and then the ability to gin up anger, this is something that chiefs are wrestling with. How do we effectively deal with the 21st century? It goes back to my point about the myriad of challenges that police chiefs have to face, and many of them are not prepared to face them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It seems like the last chapters especially, you're shooting to provide a roadmap as a way out because I think police chiefs right now need it. I think there's a real struggle to figure out how do we get out of where we are? How do we appease or at least temper some of angry white kids with really good teeth? I'm sorry, I'm stealing that and I'm going to keep using it. How do we move forward?

Bill Bratton:

It is a memoir. Random House wanted, through my eyes, experiences, the history of policing over the last 50 years, the arc if you will. It's also a lot of wonderful stories of events and people. It's also a tutorial, a tutorial in the sense. What I've tried to provide is through my perspective, definitions of contemporary language of the 21st century. Stop and question first, what is it in reality versus the hype? Defund the police. What is that? What is its real potential impact?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

One of the things that you said about it is that you can't take the money from the cops and throw it to other failed agencies that don't know what they're doing. This phrase I really like, "You can't defund an institution to punish it and think that this action is going to make it better."

Bill Bratton:

That's still what some of these cities and politicians are trying to do. Also, the idea of, for example, the hot button issue that's holding up the George Floyd bill in congress, qualified immunity. I would be willing to bet you ask nine out of 10 politicians who are advocating to do away with it or change it to define it, they couldn't tell you anything about what they're actually advocating for.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

As you say in the book, there's certainly no call to advocate that we should be taking away complete immunity. We give it to judges and prosecutors.

Bill Bratton:

And politicians.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Bill Bratton:

Can you sue a congressman? They basically have absolute immunity for bills they pass, actions that they take. Also, qualified immunity really can stay out to two terms. It's the idea of lawful, that the officer has engaged in a lawful police action and that his actions were reasonable. The courts however, over time have made it so restrictive that you have to be able to show a similar case in the same jurisdiction.

Bill Bratton:

I'm all for criminal justice reform. It's needed. Qualified immunity can't be reformed, but take it away and the disincentivization of new people that come into the business and the encouragement to existing people to flee the business, it's going to be a potentially significant negative impact on the police profession.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's striking that balance though, isn't it? It's striking that balance between having some degree of oversight, but also understanding that people have got to make in many cases split second decisions, and human beings sometimes make mistakes. I don't think we're in a world in 2021 where there is much tolerance on this in genuine mistakes.

Bill Bratton:

The case in point, going back to the smartphones, the Eric Garner case is a prime example. That snippet of that 10 second take-down, New York... One night, I counted it, in the space of a minute they played that snippet six times in the space of a minute. So, it sinks into the public mind. With the Garner matter spread over a number of minutes. It's officers talking to him to a period of time.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right at the back end of the book, page 472 something like that, it's an interesting way to finish because I'm wondering what it's like to look back on a career that's lasted 50 years to write, "Sadly, at some point I came to feel that despite the efforts of so many highly talented, wise, sensitive and positive thinkers with whom I've worked, all of our gains have been erased. I fight that uncomfortable thought every day, and I refuse to allow it to take hold."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is that where we are?

Bill Bratton:

Let me give you the example I got from when I said this a little earlier when I had the discussion about going to this point about 50 year arc we're kind of back where we started. In the 70s, George Kelling writes and talks eloquently about this, and I use his comments and break it down.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's a shame that so many people don't have the opportunity to see him speak, because he was a fantastic speaker who could talk about victims and just the support and the need to support victims in the worst hit communities. He was a fantastic speaker with real passion.

Bill Bratton:

In some respects, the frustration I have at the back of the book echoes some of his frustration. His great frustration was the effort on the part of many of the anti-Kellings to equate broken windows with racist policing. Broken windows is all about community policing. It's true community policing, because what are police responding to when they're dealing with 311 calls to deal with a prostitute in a car, or the gang acting up in the park?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The dice game that attracts shootings.

Bill Bratton:

All the stuff that makes quality of life in the neighborhoods face fear, where all that's going on now down in Times Square with the intimidation of tourists, et cetera. George talks about in the 70s that three things happened that are basically being repeated right now. We de-institutionalized in the 1970s. Well-intended, as government policies often are, to let the mentally-ill out of the institutions get them into neighborhood treatment centers, get them back into their homes with self medication.

Bill Bratton:

Hundreds of thousands around the country are well-intended, but what did we unintentionally create? Most of those self treatment centers in the neighborhoods weren't funded. Many of those poor souls ended up on our streets, and created what was called 50 years later "The Homeless Problem", which is now exploding. Secondly, we're also decriminalizing a lot of activities in our public streets. Public drunkenness now no longer was a crime, it was an illness. It happens to deal with loitering, all types of behavioral issues were now effectively decriminalized.

Bill Bratton:

The police were told "Don't pay attention to that. We have more important things to focus on. More serious crimes. Don't pay attention to the graffiti. Don't bother all those dice games. Don't bother about the drinking in public." So we

were decriminalizing a lot of that aberrant behavior. We got the compounding of the emotionally ill on the streets, decriminalizing a lot of things that went on in the streets, and we were adding also is the drug problem. We're starting to experience many more drug addicted people onto the streets.

Bill Bratton:

Thirdly, we were de-policing. Many police departments shrunk during the 1970s.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That burgeoning of the disorder problem disproportionately affected the communities that were unable to police themselves. That's the part that I think is lost on how people interpret George's work, because he was really about trying to do something for the disorder problem in the communities that didn't have the-

Bill Bratton:

[crosstalk 00:38:54] how to do it, because the de-policing also was the idea that we no longer had cops walking the beat. I started walking the beat [inaudible 00:39:01].

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So did I, yep.

Bill Bratton:

Then in '77, '78 we got air-conditioned cars. We could roll the windows up and we got even more isolated.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I don't think we have those in Britain yet.

Bill Bratton:

De-policing was literally fewer police, but police policing differently in cars, and being consumed with 911 calls. The majority of those 911 calls were about the increasing disorder on the streets, which police manages and administrators are pushed off to the side. We have to focus on serious crime. That's 1970s, and we saw the results of that in the 80s, leading to 1990 the worst crime and disorder year ever. What is going on in 2021 that has exploded in the last year?

Bill Bratton:

We have deinstitutionalization of what are prisoners are jails. We are pushing people out, and similar to 1970 with the mentally ill, there were no facilities for them. So, deinstitutionalization is happening once again. De-policing, defund the police. We are cutting budgets of police departments around the country. In the 1990s, with the Crime Bill of 1994, we had 800,000 police. The latest headcount is 670,000 and declining. We have fewer police to deal with the deinstitutionalization issues, but we also have the decriminalization.

Bill Bratton:

So many of the laws that were left for police to work with, prosecutors are no longer willing to prosecute. Legislators are now so intent on basically passing laws that penalize the police than the criminals. So, *deja vu* all over again. Back in the 70s, 80s and 90s I had the answer to it. I'm not sure that if I had been given the opportunity in 2021 to get back on the stage that I could basically have a hit on Broadway because I just don't think we have the necessary orchestration to put on a hit.

Bill Bratton:

We don't have the answers that we had in the 90s, and that's what worries me at the moment.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Which is why you wrote "All of our gains have been erased."

Bill Bratton:

If you think of it, everything that I think was beneficial, community policing is being attacked as racist. Compstat is being attacked as racist. Stop, question and frisk is being attacked as racist. We have become so racially conscious that we're losing sight of the people that benefited most from these gains, were the minority population.

Bill Bratton:

How are you going to solve the problem? It's kind of like congress in the United States. They can't get together on anything. Well, on the issue of race we're having difficulty getting together on the central issue in America today, and that's some of what I speak to in the book.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I got to say, 50 years, incredible commitment, a life dedicated to public service. To be back where we started, how does that feel?

Bill Bratton:

Isn't that great, because everywhere you look there's a problem to be fixed. [crosstalk 00:41:42].

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Really? You're going to finish on a glass half full, this is an opportunity situation?

Bill Bratton:

Somebody looks to a crisis to basically accelerate change. That crisis is building. At some point in time, it'll accelerate change. I just hope that some of my contemporaries basically have some of the answers that we get in the 70s, 80s and 90s, and simply going into the 21st century. We've been there before. We've succeeded before. We'll be there again, and hopefully we'll succeed again.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I got to tell you, I don't normally fluff people this much, but as a kind of history of 50 years of policing from somebody whose made those commitments, I read the book in three days. It's a fantastic read. It's "The Profession". Bill, thank you ever so much for your time. I really appreciate it.

Bill Bratton:

It's been a pleasure talking with you, and good luck with the broadcast. All the best.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Cheers, Bill. Take care.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was episode 37 of Reducing Crime, recorded online in July 2021. New episodes are announced on Twitter @_ReducingCrime. When they become available, I also announce new three-day Police Commanders Crime Reduction courses there. A transcript of this and every episode can be found at ReducingCrime.com/podcast. If you are a college instructor planning a class or two around any of the podcasts, DM me @jerry_ratcliffe for a free spreadsheet of multiple-choice questions.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Be safe, and best of luck.