

Dealing with Large Celebratory Crowds

After the WTO riots and other such mass disturbances, the science of crowd control has become almost a religion within the public safety community. While there are those who would espouse the belief that crowd control is always a force on force issue, there is a mentality to each gathering that may necessitate a differing approach to rectify the problem. The mentality of a crowd feeds and breeds upon the actions of both the police and individuals within the crowd. How the crowd

perceives these actions will affect the outcome of the gathering.

While most disturbances have a specific known anti-government or establishment focus, such as the Rodney King verdict or WTO riots, there are others that erupt as the result of a celebration such as the incidents that occurred after a recent Los Angeles Lakers championship or in Denver following an NHL championship. Many of these types of recent disturbances have taken place on or near college campuses as a result of major sporting events. Places like College Park, MD, West Lafayette and Bloomington, IN, have all seen large-scale incidents that have been direct results of sporting events or the issues that surround them.

Celebratory Crowd Mentality

While public safety agencies have long recognized what has been termed mob psychology, there are several differing mindsets amongst the celebratory crowd that must be nurtured and those that must be quashed or removed.

Amongst any crowd there is a large percentage who are there for the show. By some estimates this figure can rise as high as 50-60% of the people who are present are there strictly to see the spectacle of the celebration itself. Another portion of the crowd will be there because they truly believe in a cause and the smallest portion, but those of greatest concern to law enforcement,



are those that are there to cause destruction.

The various mentalities all tend to congregate within their own separate categories in differing areas of the crowd. Nearest the center of the crowd will be those who fall within the die-hard fan portion of the crowd. Immediately outside of those people will be those who will eventually become intent upon causing damage and destruction. While many of the people who will eventually become violent would classify themselves within the die-hard fan category, these individuals will become bored and look for other more interesting things to do after the initial celebration is over. These individuals will seize an opportunity to stir the crowd by burning or vandalizing property and will begin violent looting type behavior if given the chance.

On the furthest periphery of the crowd will be those who are there to witness the celebration. These are also the people who, while they are there to see the spectacle, will also become the eventual witnesses to the confrontation between the hardcore and the police. Amongst this group will be found the media, older adults and adults who have children and pets with them. This

crowd will be the calmest and most controllable portion of the gathering.

Focal Points and the Celebratory Crowd

Amongst any celebratory or protest crowd there will come an instant when the initial reason for being there will have long past its time. The crowd will become bored with the celebration and will seek other ways to entertain itself. This is the most highly critical point of the entire law enforcement deployment. It is vitally important that the crowd not be allowed to find a focal point that is riotous or destructive even if it means low-level intervention by law enforcement.

The destructive focal point is something that must be avoided if at all possible as it will usually determine whether the crowd stays peaceable and celebratory or if it devolves into riotous type behavior. The actions or inactions of law enforcement at this critical time will often decide what the crowd will eventually become.

As time goes on after the initial celebration is over the crowd will momentarily lose focus and if no new focal point is found or if there is not one created by outside means the indi-

viduals within the crowd will separate into smaller groups and will begin to filter away from the mass. It is at this time that the crowd can be disbursed with a minimum of energy and resources. This loss of focus will generally occur within one to two hours after the beginning of the incident. Most celebratory crowds, other than possibly those at Mardi Gras, are not self-sustaining. The average adult attention span is not such that any celebration will be enough to sustain the crowd.

It is vitally important that any action taken by law enforcement be seen as reasonable by those in the crowd who are true celebrants or witnesses to the celebration. If, in the back of their minds, the crowd as a whole sees the actions of the police as measured and necessary for public safety they will be supportive. If however they see those actions as heavy-handed many may instantly become part of the disruptive hardcore and will multiply the problems that law enforcement will encounter.

For any celebratory crowd the issue of intoxication must be listed high on the causation of problems list. Sporting events and other similar functions are

forever linked to the consumption of intoxicants so it should come as no surprise that these will contribute to the problems that law enforcement will face. An intoxicated individual is likely to undertake actions that are far beyond the norm for that same person when sober. While controlling alcoholic beverages is outside the purview of the police it is a fact that must be considered in any crowd control operation. Any intoxicated individual, just by means of impairment, must be considered as part of the hardcore crowd and dealt with accordingly.

Intervention into the Celebratory Crowd

There are many theories that have been created, espoused and taught to deal with crowd control incidents. One of these methods is the creation of squads. Squads or platoons, depending upon how an agency wishes to codify them, are an effective means for dealing with a celebratory crowd, as these highly mobile units of six to eight officers are capable of moving in sufficient size to defend themselves if necessary but are not so large that their very appearance creates an immediate incident in and amongst itself. A large skirmish line of officers moving into a crowd to extract one troublemaker will often result in a larger problem than the one that the police sought to remove.

Remember up and until it has been determined that the crowd has turned riotous it is vitally important that the police response is viewed as measured and in keeping with the wishes of the crowd. Those individuals who are inside the crowd and are there to have a good time must be allowed to do so, otherwise the police risk turning the crowd into a large mass that is no longer celebrating a victory but has become very anti-police.

During recent NCAA tournament victory celebrations in Bloomington, IN, the police formed seven and eight officer squads that were highly effective in going into the crowd to remove those individuals who had become violent or destructive. The crowd saw the actions of the police as a measured response to an act that threatened health and safety and as such reacted in a supportive fashion. In

fact during one incident several individuals had uprooted a large tree and taken it to the center of the crowd. These individuals then attempted to erect that tree in the center of the street and climb it while one was carrying a burning flare.

As has been discussed the tree threatened to become a focal point for those in the crowd who would turn destructive. Three squads of officers moved quickly into the crowd, extracted the tree and then withdrew. While there was a momentary battle for control of the tree, those within the crowd who saw the actions of the police as measured, responsible and not heavy handed, assisted in the tree's removal.

Expectations

Within every crowd there will be those who have an agenda. That agenda may be of the best intentions or there may be an underlying factor that cannot be anticipated, but there are certain things amongst a celebratory crowd that can and should be expected to occur.

First agencies can and should expect an initial period of mass hysteria where a large percentage of the crowd will be so involved within emotion of the celebration that any hope of control by law enforcement short of a mass use of force would be useless.

Agencies should expect multiple waves of people that will quickly close down vehicular traffic into those areas that are going to be used as a rallying point for the celebrants. An important point to keep the gathering from turning potentially tragic or immediately shifting focus would be for agencies, if they know of an area that crowds have traditionally gathered for these types of functions in the past, to close down the streets to automotive traffic to prevent cars from becoming involved and intertwined with the crowd.

Doing this will also keep individuals from bringing very large signs or other items that could become potential weapons or fodder for bonfires into the crowd, as most people don't want to carry those items any great distance. If automobiles are kept away from the center point of the celebration most, if

not all, of the large items will not make their way into the crowd.

The celebration will go through several different phases. First there will be the initial shock of the victory. This phase will usually encompass 30-45 minutes after the bulk of the crowd has arrived at the scene. Then for the next 60-90 minutes a large street party will exist. During this time officers should stand ready to move into the crowd, extract any troublemakers and remove them with the minimum amount of force possible.

This is one of the most important times for law enforcement. Any incursion into the crowd puts officers at risk and puts at risk the overall mood of the crowd. One bad move by the police will result in the crowd moving from celebratory to protest. As emotions are already running high and intoxicants are more likely than not in great use, the focus of the crowd can easily and quickly switch from controllable and allowable to riotous, so extreme care should be used when the decision is made to have officers move into the crowd.

Finally once the situation has existed for a period of time, assuming that there have been no external factors to stir the crowd and that law enforcement has done a good job of removing any internal trouble makers, the crowd will begin to break into smaller manageable conversation groups. It will be at this point that the crowd has lost its cohesion and focus. Here is the opportunity to end the gathering that law enforcement must be prepared to exploit.

Once the crowd has lost, cohesion officers will be able to move calmly through the crowd and politely ask for the smaller groups to make their way onto the sidewalk and out of the street. Most of these groups will take direction as they now have lost the anonymity of the mob and see themselves as individuals being asked by an officer to do something that they traditionally accept as the norm. In effect, they will realize the party is over.

Once the majority of the crowd has moved to the sidewalk officers should be prepared to enter the street, retake it by simple presence and keep people from again entering the street. After a

short period of time standing on the sidewalk will lose its luster and the vast majority of the crowd will move along back to homes or into local restaurants and bars where there will be something to hold their attention and allow for them to continue their celebration.

The crowd will normally begin to lose cohesion and will begin to separate into the smaller, more manageable groups somewhere between and one and a half to two hours after the beginning of the mass celebration, assuming it has not been adversely acted upon by internal or external factors.

During the differing phases of the celebration law enforcement should be actively involved in the management of the crowd and should facilitate the smooth and orderly transition amongst the phases. By moving into the crowd only to extract the problems and remove anything that threatens to become a focal point and allowing the celebration to continue, law enforcement can facilitate the crowd into essentially boring itself. Once the idea of the large street party begins to wane, a large portion of the crowd will filter away and the rest can be dealt with effectively by traditional means without resulting in any substantial use of force.

The Media

The media is in one sense driving the celebration. Most of the large victory driven celebrations are built over a period of time. Most of these types of gatherings take place as the result of a sports team victory. In most American team sports there is a succession of victories that must take place for the team reach the pinnacle of success. During each of the preceding victories that lead up to the ultimate championship there will have been a celebration of one type or another and the media coverage of those events will become a factor in shaping the final victory party or large-scale gathering to commemorate the loss.

Agencies can be proactive in their approach to the media and can use the media to help guide and shape the celebration, as the media is usually always hungry for interviews with anyone and everyone who may become involved in

the event. Prior to the event the media will approach law enforcement command personnel or public information officers for sound bites or quotes concerning the upcoming law enforcement activities.

Good control in the placement of the media should be proactively approached and designated media parking areas should be a strong consideration in the pre-planning for these events, as the large satellite trucks common to such events become at once a crowd obstruction and target. Once the television lights go on parts of the crowd will move to get into the picture. This represents an external factor that will act upon a crowd. With prior liaison with the media, particularly the cameramen, the crowd can be manipulated.

Encourage cameramen to feel free to shoot as much video as they want but to do it from the sidewalk areas, or areas away from the main body of the crowd. This will serve to pull portions of the crowd onto the sidewalk areas, which is where law enforcement seeks to eventually put them. Different cameras at different points around the crowd will also serve to break cohesion.

When It Goes Bad

Throughout a two-week span in March 2002 the Bloomington, IN, Police Department found itself confronted with a series of crowd control issues that erupted due to several unexpected victories for the Indiana University Men's Basketball team. The first three of these large gatherings, which at some points featured crowds of well over 5,000 people, were celebratory. The fourth and final gathering was not.

The final event began with the Indiana loss to Maryland in the NCAA championship game. What followed was a crowd that rapidly became riotous and eventually required the combined resources of several different agencies including the Bloomington Police, Indiana University Police and the Indiana State Police.

Immediately following the final game the crowd began again to gather as it had in the three games previous. As the gathering progressed several fires were set and officers experienced

significant resistance moving through the crowd to deal with those and other problems. Each time the squads of officers would move into the crowd they were greeted with physical resistance and ultimately airborne projectiles.

Once conditions deteriorated to the point where previous practice was no longer able to deal with the situation, officers withdrew to an assembly point and a skirmish line was formed to disburse the crowd.

As officers of the Indiana State Police and Bloomington Police Department began attempts to disburse the crowd, the airborne projectiles—mostly consisting of beer bottles, cans and rocks—began raining down in a fusillade. Several officers were injured, including at least two who required stitches. Following those injuries and confronted by a rapidly deteriorating situation, the order was given to deploy irritant gas to remove the crowd from the area. Canisters containing CS and JTS PepperBall launchers firing both OC and Talcum were used to remove the crowd from the area of the disturbance.

Within an hour after the deployment of the chemical munitions order had been restored and officers were able to bring street crews into the area to clean up the debris and damage that had been done.

While the final gathering tainted all that had come before it, it did graphically illustrate the differing crowd mentalities between one that was celebratory and can be dealt with using minimal intervention and careful timing, and one that has become riotous and must be dealt with in a totally different manner.

Law enforcement agencies of all sizes continue to be confronted by large gatherings and will need to be able to contend with a wide range of crowd control issues. It is vital that plans be laid to deal with any contingency and the proper training, equipment and support be in place prior to any such event so that order be maintained and public safety preserved.

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