

Turning Point in the Gang Crisis

by TOM HAYDEN

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The funeral of Bo Taylor a few weeks ago last was a testament to the gang peace process he helped inspire in Los Angeles.

Bo died of cancer in August. One thousand people attended his "homegoing" at the City of Refuge church in Gardena, a neighborhood long accustomed to gang-related funerals vastly different from this one. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa lamented the loss of "this invisible guardian of hope." Former police chief Bernard Parks recalled chuckling with Bo about the old days when he chased him on the streets. Sheriff Lee Baca spoke of working with Bo on violence reduction programs in the county jails. The LAPD provided a full-dress motorcade. Over the open coffin, USC football coach Pete Carroll vowed to Bo that "we're not backing down for nothing. This is a movement." The Board of Supervisors and the Legislature adjourned in his memory, too.

It was not always so. The idea of deploying former gang members as street workers has been met with deep skepticism by law enforcement. Bo was an icebreaker, convincing key members of the LAPD hierarchy that street workers with credibility can be useful in sometimes preventing homicides.

When I first met Bo Taylor over a decade ago, he showed me black-and-white footage of the famous 1992 truce between Crips and Bloods which ended, for a significant time, the street wars in Watts. Gang members took buses funded by Jim Brown to City Hall to propose taking up shovels to rebuild the neighborhoods they were terrorizing. A parallel peace process was unfolding in East LA and the north San Fernando Valley, as described in Luis Rodriguez's best-selling *La Vida Loca*.

The police and the *Times* reported in the nineties that drive-by slayings drastically declined in the first years of the truce. But there was no economic peace dividend for Bo's generation. In perhaps the greatest moral default in Los Angeles's history, the city's leaders failed to deliver on a promise of \$6 billion to create 57,000 jobs in five years. The reverse happened; the South Central area lost a net 50,000 jobs in the next decade. As hope turned into hoax, a new generation of young gangsters took to the streets.

As Bo and I later watched the documentary of truce marchers waving their blue and red bandannas in peace, Bo rubbed his balding head and softly described their fates: he's dead, he's in prison, he got shot, dead, still alive, in prison. In the absence of a peace dividend, the truce began unraveling.

The human legacy of 1992 was Bo's generation of self-invented peacemakers, a few hundred gang members who became skilled in mediating truces, squashing dangerous rumors, counseling their younger homeboys, and navigating the institutions in search of what they called "jobs, not jails." Then a state senator, I hired several on my staff and tried to legislate a statewide peace process initiative, with some success. The core ideas were to create a roundtable including former gang members, law enforcement and business leaders, to identify three violent neighborhoods for a pilot project in mediating tensions through deploying former gang members, and a think tank to recommend rehab, training and jobs policies to the

politicians. A few Republicans and state law enforcement officials endorsed the bills, but two governors--Pete Wilson and Gray Davis--vetoed them for fear of being tainted by association.

Those long and bitter experiences taught me that street gangs were the real untouchables in American politics, the perfect scapegoat for law-and-order politics. Here I first encountered the neo-conservatives' domestic agenda: to counter "domestic terrorism" carried out by "super-predators" before it was too late. The theories of adolescent "incurability" put forward by William Bennett, John Diullio, and James Q. Wilson were easily discredited in empirical studies by James Gilligan, Franklin Zimring, Michael Males, David Brotherton, John Hagedorn, Joe Domanick and Luis Barrios, but facts didn't matter much in the new bipartisan consensus. Fighting irredeemable monsters at home was very good politics in the interlude between wars abroad.

The cost was great, threatening the state's fiscal and social stability. California currently has 140,000 inmates in its state penitentiaries, costing \$10 billion per year. Over 2 million felons have been incarcerated in the past two decades, only one-third of them new felons. The policy toward parolees, according to public defenders, is to "violate and send back." Only \$50 million of that ten billion goes to rehabilitation--"We don't want to go too fast," a prison official recently said. The taxpayer costs for police and sheriffs in LA County during a recent decade was \$35 billion.

Yet the quest towards a community-based peace process continued to grow amidst the failures of the wars on gangs and drugs. As long ago as 1927, sociologists like Frederic Thrasher were recommending the hiring of "Boy Men to cover the city and spend their entire time with gangs." New role models, who themselves had turned their lives around, could serve as useful role models in making up for the failures of institutions. Police, prisons and punishment, while possibly deterring short-term crimes, would only foster more gangs born in incarceration.

The most recent cycle of Los Angeles gang wars left more than 10,000 dead in two decades, in neighborhood holocausts that gave rise to Bo's generation of peacemakers.

The question for me at the funeral that day was whether Bo's untimely passing also marked a requiem for his 1992 generation of peacemakers. Fifteen years, after all, is a long time to dodge bullets without meaningful pay, benefits or recognition.

It happened that shortly before Bo's death, the dream of an officially sponsored gang peace process was coming into being in Los Angeles. The Mayor and City Council earlier this year adopted a plan proposed principally by the 1992 generation of peacemakers, including Bo himself. Chaired by Michael De La Rocha (cousin of Zack De La Rocha) and Eduardo Hewitt (son of a former Black Panther), a community task force over more than thirty former gang members spent six months drafting a two-pronged approach: deploying intervention workers on the streets and providing wrap-around social services with community input. With the emphasis on peacemaking and rehabilitation, a critical third prong was implied but never debated: an economic development strategy to create jobs in the inner city. The city council adopted the two-prong policy unanimously on February 13, 2007. Though implementation has been uneven, it was the first time in the nation's history that so many homeboys had so much input into city policies affecting their lives.

The program will provide \$7.5 million this fiscal year to pay 125 to 150 street intervention workers this year, double the number employed last year. That is small change in a city with a \$6 billion annual budget and an estimated 93,000 young people out of work and unemployed. For example, the Homeboy project sponsored by the visionary Father Gregory Boyle has a budget of \$9 million, largely from private

sources. But the City's program gives a new legitimacy to gang intervention and promises expanded funding in the future.

Mayor Villaraigosa insisted that the new gangs initiative be headquartered in his office, stirring an initial friction with members of the council like Tony Cardenas, an ardent sponsor of the proposal who wanted greater council oversight. The mayor's proposal was criticized as too little by civil rights attorney Connie Rice, whose city-sponsored study of gangs resulted in a long-term recommendation of one billion dollars. The Mayor also ruffled some advocates by terminating a popular inner city program known as Bridges, faulting it for lack of tangible results. A new gang "czar" was appointed, Rev. Jeff Carr, a longtime Los Angeles advocate and former director of the Sojourners organization in Washington, DC. Carr, a gregarious white man in a sea of color, is said to be a tough administrator and bureaucratic infighter. Since his appointment, Carr has traveled from neighborhood to neighborhood, listening and gradually earning respect from the bottom up.

The LAPD remains a problem. Despite nearly a decade under a federal court order, last year the department's Metro Unit rampaged through a peaceful immigrant rights rally at MacArthur Park, inflicting beatings on scores of media representatives, who had never seen such levels of misconduct. Citizen complaints about the police rose to 6,400 last year while the department upheld only 4 percent of those filed by the public. Andre Birotte Jr., inspector general for the police commission, told me last year that LAPD officers were still "out of control" in one inner city precinct, driven in part by a numbers-of-arrests measure of performance. The department still harbors a traditional militaristic culture suspicious of civilians, especially ex-gang members. The city attorney has imposed strict injunctions on fifty separate street gangs, prohibiting associations even among family members, or being caught with a spray paint can. Violations of the injunctions can lead to deportation for those with illegal status--and has. Chief William Bratton is known to complain privately about "thug-huggers"--anyone sympathetic to the gang peace process.

Yet there have been significant changes in recent years too, both in the department and Bratton himself. To remove the stain of the federal consent decree and, more important, to prevent explosive public clashes with skeptical community leaders, Bratton has tried to work as closely as possible with African-American leaders, including ministers and especially attorney Rice, whose career includes many lawsuits against the LAPD. Now, however, Rice is funded by the city and, at Bratton's request, leads an exhaustive review of the late-1990s Rampart scandal. She also has accompanied the FBI on gang investigations to El Salvador, and jokes publicly about whether she has gone "over to the dark side."

Rice's theory that police reform can only come from within, by engaging with the police themselves, is yet to be proven. But it is a position that was embodied in the past two years by Bo Taylor, with some risk to his reputation. Collaborating with the LAPD in any way is an extraordinarily sensitive role to play, since a "snitch" is considered the lowest of life forms on the street. Any suspicion of sharing rumors, names or intelligence with law enforcement would destroy the credibility of any advocate, and perhaps lead to consequences far worse. The police themselves rely extensively on paid secret informants from the streets to the prisons, and would naturally be want to know information held in strictest confidence by a lawyer or a street worker. There is no official LAPD policy governing the relationship between the police and independent community organizations, so the process is informal and ad hoc.

Nevertheless, several LAPD commanders gradually were won over by Bo Taylor and his friends to acceptance of a role for the peacemakers. At the February 2007 Council hearing, longtime deputy chief Charlie Beck testified that "the new model is a big step. We will work together but separately. When done

effectively, it has a tremendous impact. We in LA have initiated the problem and we have to initiate the solution." Beck was referring to the recent ending of a cycle of nine murders in the housing projects after gang intervention workers brought an end to deadly rivalries the police could not begin to comprehend.

Until now, the political class has been paralyzed with fear of being tarred as "soft on gangs." Villaraigosa, whose own roots are in the East LA dropout culture, has tried to toughen his image by promising to hunt down "the top ten" shot-callers in the city, a typical public relations gesture for big-city politicians. But his new gangs initiative is the seed of an alternative model. The traditional LA hardline approach is becoming the grim American future. Without much public notice, America incarcerates nearly 25 percent of the world's inmates while having only 5 percent of the world's population. Since Los Angeles is the epicenter of the globalization of gangs, an alternative might spark wide interest.

Villaraigosa and California will be pivotal. In November, state voters will decide on Proposition 6, a harsh measure authored by Mike Reynolds, who drafted the state's original "three strikes" initiative which mandates life terms for nonviolent felonies. Proposition 6, which expands the grounds for incarcerating juvenile offenders as adults and mandates life sentences for home robbery, will be a test of the changing public mood since the frenzied nineties.

On the same November date, Los Angeles voters will decide on an annual \$40 parcel tax to provide \$30 million annually for gang prevention and intervention programs. While public support is over 60 percent, the measure requires a two-thirds super-majority for approval.

Villaraigosa is considering a run for governor, which might pit him against Attorney General Jerry Brown, the former iconoclast now campaigning as a hardliner against gangs. Brown worked overtime to defeat a 2006 citizen's effort to modify the "three strikes" law by requiring that the third offense be a violent, not a nonviolent, one.

Whether he runs statewide or not, Villaraigosa will have to challenge the state to shift funding from incarceration to prevention and intervention. Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, though a critic of the current crony contracting system, has been unable to face down the prison guard union that benefits from the ratio of inmates and has become a top contributor to political campaigns.

As chair of the national mayor's conference on urban poverty, Villaraigosa also can challenge the national priorities that have resulted in increased rates of poverty and inner city neglect during the past eight years.

Beyond a California role looms a presidential contest with huge potential for impacting the debate on crime, gangs and prevention. On the table is an innovative proposal for federal funding for community-based prevention and intervention programs, HR 3846, by Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA), chair of the House subcommittee on crime, terrorism and homeland security. Scott, a strong believer in what he calls "evidence-based programs," has tired of the annual procession of politicians seeking to burnish their credentials with costly "touch on crime" amendments. Whether crime goes up or down, he says, members keep proposing more punishment regardless of results or costs. Scott's is the first measure in years that exclusively funds prevention and intervention, authorizing \$2.9 billion annually. The funds would be channeled through representative state and local councils under performance-based guidelines.

Scott's nemesis is Senator Dianne Feinstein who, with Representative Adam Schiff, has a bill perpetuating a vast expansion of the punitive approach, while including only modest funding for prevention and intervention. The Feinstein-Schiff bill will include more life-without-parole sentences for

teenagers, leading Human Rights Watch to complain that "the United States is the world's worst human rights violator in terms of sentencing youthful offenders to life without parole.... In contrast, there is not a single youth service the sentence of life without parole anywhere else in the rest of the world."

Like many, Villaraigosa prefers the content of the Scott bill but will swallow the harsh provisions of the Feinstein-Schiff bill if LA receives its share of funds. Scott remains adamantly against Feinstein-Schiff, with the permission of Speaker Nancy Pelosi and the support of the Congressional Black Caucus. Scott argues that reckless spending on punishment has failed, and devours state and local budgets for alternatives.

The fate of these bills may rest on the presidential outcome this November, where a vote for McCain-Palin will be a boost for Feinstein-Schiff.

So far the presidential campaign is oddly devoid of the usual rants about gangs and violence, which may be another sign that the fever of recent decades is ebbing at last. With 2.3 million behind bars in America, as against second-place China's 1.6 million, the incarceration race may be exhausted.

Or the latest chapter of Willie Horton is about to begin. The producer of the 1988 Willie Horton ad, Floyd Brown, is raising funds for television ads attacking Barack Obama as another Michael Dukakis. Obama's alleged offenses include voting against an Illinois bill extending the death penalty to murders where "gang-related," and crafting state legislation to mandate that police interrogations and confessions be taped. If elected President, Obama's instincts might be divided between sympathy for the Scott approach and a centrist deference towards Feinstein. But he would be very open to the arguments, Scott says. That's why Floyd Brown already is circulating an Internet spot attacking Obama, asking "Can a man so weak in the war on gangs be trusted in the war on terror?"

It's predictable that the missing issues of gangs, poverty, dropouts, the inner city and policing will return to the center of the presidential debate, with huge implications for the outcome. America will either continue imprisoning the largest number of young people in the world, bankrupting its domestic budget and vainly trying to arrest its way out of a quagmire, or begin seriously searching for more Bo Taylors to help.

About Tom Hayden

Tom Hayden is the author of *The Other Side* (1966, with Staughton Lynd), *The Love of Possession Is a Disease With Them* (1972), *Ending the War in Iraq* (2007) and *Writings for a Democratic Society: The Tom Hayden Reader* (2008).

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