

# ON THE SIDE OF THE ANGELS: A VIEW OF PRIVATE POLICING

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## INTRODUCTION

This essay first appeared in 1982. Since that time the Guardian Angels have established their presence on the London Underground system. Predictably the socialists and feudal Tories were outraged, as, equally predictably, were the police. It was most amusing to see the sudden unprecedented presence of a few policeman on the underground, in order to demonstrate why the Angels were “unnecessary”. Equally amusing was their speedy disappearance as soon as the media lost interest in the issue.

The idea that police services are different from any other service offered in the market must be destroyed. The degradation of standards is the defining characteristic of *all* monopoly state services, whether police, education, utilities, medical care etc. The overwhelmingly favourable public response to the establishment of the Guardian Angels in Britain provides fertile ground for the libertarian message.

Chris R. Tame - 1989

Statements by Commander Brian Fairbairn, head of the Brixton Police, in 1982 that his men were doing all they can and people had to “help save themselves” from criminal activity seemed like another slap in the face for British citizens by the State. It was a salutary reminder that the police force is no different from any other nationalised industry. Like the National Health Service, the police are unable to offer a satisfactory service to consumers and, as with all state services, the poorest members of the community tend to suffer most. Nevertheless, such developments might be extremely beneficial if they stimulate people to examine the rationale for State police and to question whether nationalised police forces are any more necessary or inevitable than nationalised health services, steel companies, garbage collection or airlines.

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## THE NATURE OF STATE SERVICES

The faults of the police system are similar to those of all nationalised services - since they are (theoretically) “owned” by all of us, they are, in effect, unresponsive to individual consumer control. The requirements of individuals for protection are vastly different, yet they are forced to rely upon an inflexible monopoly service, bearing little relationship to their different needs. While the police cannot patrol streets effectively to prevent muggings and rapes, vice-squad officers harass prostitutes every night in central London. And of course, like the NHS and other State monopolies, the police can sometimes treat their customers appallingly. These are the characteristics of all non-commercial, monopoly State services. It is not simply a matter of a few “rotten apples in the barrel”.

## LESSONS OF HISTORY

The view that only the government can provide law enforcement and protection has not always been universally shared. In eighteenth century England the idea of a “public” police force was frequently opposed on principle as a dangerous enhancement of State power. Law enforcement at that time relied primarily on self-defence (the present pistol licensing system was only introduced in 1920), private “thief takers” (a form of bounty hunter), and private forces like Henry Fielding’s Bow Street Runners. It was not until 1829 that the Metropolitan Police Force was established in London. Historically, law enforcement has frequently been provided privately - and successfully. Two American historians, Terry Anderson and P. J. Hill, writing about the so-called Wild West period have declared it to be the “not so Wild, Wild West”. The Western frontier, they discovered, was a more civilised, more peaceful and safer place than most of contemporary America. Private “vigilance committees” (from which we derive the term vigilante), land claims clubs, and cattlemen’s associations, frequently provided more orderly and effective systems of law enforcement than the State services which replaced them (See T. Anderson and P. J. Hill, “An American Experiment in Anarcho-Capitalism: The *Not So Wild Wild West*”, *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Vol. III, No. 1, 1979).

Another notable and successful example of a private police service, and a long standing example at that, was the private railway police employed by America’s private railroads during their heyday. Numbering more than 10,000 men and earning at least 18 million dollars per year, the private railway police established a record of remarkable effectiveness. Between 1918 and 1929 they succeeded so well in freight theft prevention that freight claim payments for robberies decreased by 92.75%. Statistically, arrest by railroad police resulted in a higher percentage of arrests than those of their municipal counterparts. Their reputation for honesty, ability and good character compare well with the less-than-glittering reputations of the State forces.

## CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLES

A proliferation of private enterprise law enforcement has, however, occurred in America during the last decades. In New York, America's most socialist state, where rampant welfarism, State intervention, almost non-existent law enforcement, and a pro-criminal intelligentsia have had appalling effects, many self-help and private forces have arisen. In Harlem's 82nd Precinct, the Leroy V. George company provides private police patrols for the small businessman dissatisfied with the State force. Many tenement blocks have had to organise their own self-help patrol groups, equipped with dogs and walkie-talkies. In Brooklyn and the Lower East Side, Jewish businesses have called upon the Jewish Defence League. Similarly, the Black Panthers - in spite of their later descent into racism and Marxist terrorism - originated as a black self-defence group, monitoring the State police activities with effects that, as one conservative writer has put it, "were entirely salutary".

## GUARDIAN ANGELS

But perhaps the most inspiring example of private self-help provision of protection has been New York's "Guardian Angels", established in 1978 by a hard-working, individualistic young man - Curtis "Rock" Sliwa, as "The Magnificent 13 Subway Safety Patrol". The patrol, soon renamed "The Guardian Angels", has grown to an over 700 strong group, with patrols in other cities including Los Angeles, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Stamford (Connecticut), Jersey City, Hoboken and Newark. Six new local groups are currently in training in six other cities - Boston, Miami, San Francisco, Albuquerque, Cleveland and New Orleans.

The Angels patrol the worst and poorest sections of their cities, the subways and back alleys ignored or neglected by the state police. Unarmed, but highly disciplined and trained in the martial arts, the Angels have brought a much-needed safety into previously lawless areas.

Needless to say, the Angels were treated with almost universal hostility by the bureaucrats, by the police and the police trade union, and by the socialist intelligentsia - hostility from everyone, except the mass of ordinary people who greeted the Angel's patrols with cries of "you're doing a great job." When an Angel was recently murdered by police, the people took to the streets and protested. Public opinion polls and massive petitions revealed their overwhelming public support, so that politicians and police have now been forced to come to a *modus vivendi* with the Angels.

## LESSONS OF THE ANGELS

A particularly important lesson of the Angels lies in their contribution to the cause of harmonious race relations. The fact is that a disproportionate number of blacks are involved in mugging - a situation worsened by the encouragement of pro-criminal, racist and anti-productive mores by black "community leaders" and white intellectuals. Yet the great majority of ordinary blacks are as much victims of the rise of crime as everyone else. Self-help vigilante groups can help destroy racial stereotypes, and unify all decent people against the criminal minority and their apologists. As Sliwa says: "Our group is predominantly Hispanic and black. You ask an average outsider who doesn't live in New York City who the criminals are, and he'll say, young blacks and young Hispanics. The idea of blacks and Hispanics is negative - trouble makers - the worst dregs of society. What the Guardian Angels have proved is that the

minorities in New York City, those that live in the worst crime-infested areas, have actually picked up the ball first and attacked the problem from a self-help point of view, without asking for any government help whatsoever. So now we're giving pride to any ethnic group or any minority group or any oppressed group, showing them, "Yes, you can make a contribution and not just always be the receptor, or the third or fourth. You can actually be the pioneers of that movement."

## THE ROUTE TO PRIVATISATION

As well as the self-help groups like the Angels, another road to private enterprise law enforcement is, as with garbage collection, privatisation. In West Germany, private patrols have been hired to patrol Munich's new railway system and the Olympic Park grounds. Already in America, private guards are being employed by the government to protect Federal property. "Creeping privatisation" is an undeniable phenomenon. The private security industry, which already employs more personnel than the State force, is increasingly being called upon by local government. Initially, local governments have been hiring private guards for specific purposes (like high-crime housing projects in Lexington, Kentucky; or parks in St. Petersburg, Florida). Complete forces have been provided in other cases. The Rural/Metro Fire Dept. Inc., Arizona, successfully offered police patrol services to the Orto Valley area, although bureaucratic opposition eventually scuttled the scheme. Similar bureaucratic/political sabotage occurred in Michigan, where one local government engaged a profit-making company, Charles Services Inc., of Kalamazoo, to patrol its streets. The private service proved more efficient and cheaper than "direct labour". The courts, outraged by the idea of making a profit from a so-called "public service" squashed the scheme. However, other schemes are still in operation. For example, Guardsmark Inc. has provided policing under contract for the Town of Buffalo Creek, West Virginia.

Perhaps the most interesting example of privatised policing, however, comes from San Francisco, where, since the late 1890s, the Police Commission allows a system of regulated private "franchised" police patrols. The patrols are run by entrepreneurs who "purchase" their patrol beat from the City authority and who do not receive a penny of State money. They are paid directly by their clients to protect the persons and property on their beat. Flexibility and responsiveness to customer requirements are the dominant characteristics of the system. As Linnea Grebmeir, a female patrol officer, says, "We give good service. My husband and I own adjoining beats and take care of about 215 homes and businesses between us. Our service can consist of drive-by to consultant surveyance, depending on what our client desires. The client can dictate what degree of security he wishes." The San Francisco system would be an interesting step towards privatisation in this country, and privatisation would be useful in acclimatising people to the concept and practice of private law enforcement.

## RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING:

- M. & L. Tannehill & J. Wollstein, *Society Without Government*, Arno Press, New York, 1972
- Murray Rothbard, *For A New Liberty*, 2nd edn., Collier-Macmillan, New York, 1973
- William C. Wooldridge, *Uncle Sam, The Monopoly Man*, Arlington House, New Rochelle, New York, 1970