



A New Boiling Point

John Mack was elected as head of the Police Commission to make real changes, but racial tensions remain

By [Bobbi Murray](#)

The August 23 meeting of the Los Angeles Police Commission was just winding down to the "public comments" portion of the agenda, when a door in the back of the small meeting room suddenly opened. Minister Tony Muhammad of the Nation of Islam pushed into the 60-person capacity meeting room - already standing-room only - and demanded entry for the 100-plus people outside in the hallway who had been waiting to discuss the fatal February police shooting of 13-year-old Devin Brown.

"If can't one of us come in, we'll just be disruptive outside," Muhammad said. "No justice!" he called out. "No peace!" The hallway crowd took it up as a chant: "No justice, no peace!"

John Mack, elected not two hours earlier as commission president, calmly moved the meeting to Parker Center's larger auditorium. It later reconvened with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa seated in the second row, where he listened for over two hours as speakers expressed frustration with the department - and some with him. Mack and the other four police commissioners sat on the low stage, along with LAPD Assistant Chief James McDonnell, one of Chief William Bratton's top brass. Bratton usually attends, but when he can't, McDonnell does.

The atmosphere remained tense throughout. But the scene suggested potential for a positive shift in the way the LAPD has traditionally interfaced with L.A.'s African-American and Latino communities. It's hard to imagine, for example, Bratton's predecessors listening as more than 50 people expressed their anger over the shooting of teenager Devin Brown and what they see as the painfully slow pace of justice in the case.

It is also unprecedented to have a veteran civil rights activist like John Mack head up the police department's unpaid civilian board of directors. Mack was a frequent critic of the LAPD during his lengthy tenure as president of the Los Angeles Urban League.

"The mayor has put someone in there that can get things done," said political scientist Raphael Sonenshein, author of *Politics in Black and White*. Sonenshein points to the network of allies Mack can bring together to move an agenda of LAPD reform. "In the old days, when [Daryl] Gates was in the chief's spot, the community was just trying to get him to listen."

But just three days after that commission meeting, that potential for a new paradigm seemed to ebb away. Muhammad faced news cameras, his face cut and swollen following an altercation with LAPD officers. Muhammad says officers cuffed him and that one then kicked him in the face while he was restrained. The incident had taken place the previous night in Hyde Park on August 25, near a vigil for the victim of a fatal shooting thought to be gang-related.

The LAPD account of the clash puts Muhammad among a crowd who swarmed two officers and says he was injured in the melee. Bratton has asked the City Attorney's office to file misdemeanor charges against Muhammad.

The incident upped the ante for Mack, an African-American and L.A. civil rights icon who was already under intense pressure before the incident. "Please don't sell us out," implored Kenneth Gerrard, a mortgage broker who attended the August 23 commission meeting after hearing about it on KJLH radio. "We don't want you to be sitting up there like a mantelpiece or a black figurine."

"There's a lot of hope and expectation around this mayoral administration and police board," said Reverend Dr. Lewis E. Logan II, pastor of Bethel AME Church and a leader (along with Muhammad) of the Community Call to Action and Accountability. His remarks were made before Muhammad's clash with police.

Some also worry that racial and social tensions are already roiling. "With what's going on now, you've got so many elements in this soup," Gerrard says, citing as factors the late-summer L.A. heat, "black-Mexican tensions," and years of unease with the police. "African-Americans and young Latinos are at the mercy of the police," he says, recalling a recent incident in which the L.A. County Sheriffs held him cuffed during a drug raid up the street from a relative's house in Compton. "The city is getting to the boiling point."

James Harris, of the Empowerment Congress Southwest Area Neighborhood Development Council, agrees: "It could reach a tipping point where we find ourselves in a situation we have little or no control over."

Harris says an accumulation of police-related incidents have chafed the community at large and the African-American community in particular: the Devin Brown shooting, still under investigation; the death of toddler Susie Lopez Peña during her father's coked-up standoff with LAPD SWAT teams; and last year's videotaped beating of car-theft suspect Stanley Miller.

Bratton's recent quiet firing of the officer who beat Miller with a flashlight last June - a highly unusual move virtually unheard-of in previous police administrations - drew praise from reform advocates. But it doesn't resonate nearly as deeply as a string of incidents between the LAPD and L.A.'s black community that Harris puts as far back as the 1978 shooting of Eula Love. (Love died after police shot her during a confrontation over an unpaid utility bill.)

There have been a series of community meetings since the Muhammad-LAPD clash and Harris has attended many of them. "I've been to loud meetings and I've been to subdued meetings," he says. But he observes that the people at the quieter meetings "are agitated as well."

The reaction in the African-American community to the Nation of Islam and Muhammad himself varies - many praise Muhammad for his work on gang truces that quell violence on the streets, but express less support for his hard-edged, confrontational style. But, says Harris, "I don't really want to get into his style as an individual because this is not about him as an individual."

"This is about the LAPD and the African-American community," says Joe Dominick, a senior criminal justice fellow at USC Annenberg's Institute for Justice and Journalism and author of *To Protect and to Serve*, a landmark history of the LAPD. "This is part of the legacy of the LAPD."

Bratton, says Dominick, has been making changes, "reacting, changing things as they happen on the street." But the department "still doesn't have any reservoir of trust and goodwill. It takes an enormously long time to turn it around."

Dominick, whose 1994 book scathingly examined the LAPD's historically war-like relationship with L.A.'s minority communities, cautions that the Muhammad incident is still under investigation. "Bratton seems pretty clear on which version he believes. He's gone ahead looking at both sides of something before he acts."

Mack declined an interview for this story, but has said that he supports a full investigation of the incident and sees the current situation as a golden opportunity to advance structural changes in LAPD culture. But it's hard to predict how much he can accomplish if the present tempest grows.

The protesters led by Muhammad at the August 23 police commission meeting were there to press for the firing and criminal prosecution of the officer who shot into Devin Brown's car; an announcement of criminal charges against Muhammad while the Brown investigation goes forward may not sit well. The Devin Brown case, meanwhile, seems to have been lost in the shuffle, at least in the short-term.

And activists continue to view Mack with a mixture of hope and skepticism. "John Mack is an older gentleman who doesn't have the fire in him that he used to," says Harris.

Pastor Logan of the Community Call to Action is more kind. "He's been an advocate for so many years," Logan says. "This will be a paradigm shift for him."

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