



## COPPING OUT

**Rampart scandal? Federal consent decree? You won't see police reform as a major issue in this year's**

By [Bobbi Murray](#)

Election Day is Tuesday, May 17, turning these final days into crunch time for the campaigns of Mayor Jim Hahn and challenger Antonio Villaraigosa. But one major issue has yet to even be mentioned: police reform. And neither of these candidates is about to risk looking soft on crime by bringing it up now. You're not going to see them out in the street, chanting, "No Justice, no peace!"

The issue of police reform has shaped every mayor's race since Tom Bradley was elected as the city's first African-American mayor in 1973. And up until just a few short years ago, cracking down on a seemingly out-of-control LAPD was front page news. From the 1992 acquittal of five officers accused of the Rodney King beating, which left large swaths of Los Angeles in flames, to the vast, implied web of police misconduct innocuously known as "the Rampart scandal" - ranging from evidence-filching to false arrests to beatings to perjury - relations have been strained between the LAPD and some residents, particularly the African-American community.

And there are still sore spots. Witness the recent flashlight beating of unarmed car-theft suspect Stanley Miller and the shooting of 13-year-old joyrider Devin Brown. But in this year's mayoral race, the issue of police reform has been muted to the point of being undetectable.

So why is reform off the table? One short answer concerns pure campaign calculus, especially as the polls tighten during its waning days. Both camps need to win over undecided white voters, with Hahn busily wooing them with the racially-loaded suggestion that Villaraigosa is a friend to gangs - no reform message there, to say the least. Villaraigosa, who in the past has opposed gang injunctions as unconstitutional, could risk looking soft on crime if he took up the banner of police reform now. But as the campaigns sidestep the subject, the issue still simmers.

A more telling answer concerns the role of Bernard Parks as a police chief and candidate, says Raphael Sonenshein, a political scientist at California State University Fullerton and author of *Politics in Black and White: Race and Power in Los Angeles*.

Chief Parks was no reformer, but is a person in high standing in the African-American community, Sonenshein observes. "The African-American community became of two minds on the issue," he says, "and African-Americans had been a pillar in the efforts towards police reform."

This split the traditional coalition that had sought reform in the LAPD - comprised of African-Americans, liberal whites, and progressive elements of the city's Mexican-American community - and muted any outcry for reform. Parks, a true cop's cop who'd risen from the rank-and-file, dug in against reform throughout his tenure.

Hahn became mayor after 16 years as city attorney, during which he certainly didn't distinguish himself as a reformer, either. But he did oppose Parks on one reform issue: the federal consent decree imposed on the city by a federal judge June 15, 2001. Parks opposed it. "Now Hahn runs against Villaraigosa as a law-and-order candidate," Sonenshein says, "and Villaraigosa is joined to the relatively conservative Parks in a strong campaign that could win."

Reform wasn't the true reason Hahn gave Parks the heave-ho, observers say. It was the low morale in the department related to Chief Parks that had the LAPD losing officers and unable to recruit more, along with his low standing with the police union - a key Hahn political ally.

But Rampart has left a trail of destruction: \$70.2 million in payouts on suits related to false arrests to date, with \$15 million going to one man, shot and paralyzed while handcuffed. More than 100 criminal convictions were overturned as officers' credibility was impugned.

Five officers are doing time, including former Rampart Division cop Rafael Perez, charged with stealing cocaine from the Rampart station evidence locker, who told tales of brutality, theft, and lies which implicated seven fellow officers in the anti-gang unit known as CRASH. Three of the resulting convictions were overturned on procedural grounds.

There have been four investigations in the Rampart scandal, with one more, led by veteran civil rights attorney Connie Rice, in progress and expected to conclude sometime in the fall.

But the Rampart debacle has failed to shape any mayor's race since it bubbled up in 1999, and has zero resonance in this one.

"It's old news. People are not interested in it anymore," says Joe Dominick, a senior fellow at the USC Annenberg School for Communication Institute for Justice and Journalism. "It's a thing of the past because [William] Bratton is chief."

Dominick offers cautious praise for Bratton, citing his relatively quick responses to the videotaped flashlight beating of suspect Stanley Miller last year, which prompted Bratton to impose departmental punishment, and to the fatal shooting of Devin Brown. The chief revised the policy on shooting into a moving vehicle after the 13-year-old was shot, but, Dominick asks, why did Bratton wait so long to do so? The revisions had been underway for more than a year at the time of the shooting.

"He handled the situation and made necessary changes where [former LAPD chief Daryl] Gates or Parks would have simply stonewalled and said 'I run the police department,'" says Dominick, who writes about a century's worth of former police chiefs in his classic LAPD history *To Protect and To Serve*.

Dominick gives Hahn credit for deposing the anti-reform Parks and hiring Bratton. As to how it plays in the mayor's race, "Hahn mentions it every chance he gets. Villaraigosa, other than saying he wants more cops, can't say much." But he criticizes Hahn's attacks on Villaraigosa for opposing a gang injunction as president of the Southern California American Civil Liberties Union. "That's what the ACLU is supposed to do - the injunction that they opposed was clearly unconstitutional."

Defense attorney Gigi Gordon, who has conducted hundreds of Rampart case reviews and is not someone often at a loss for words, goes silent for a moment at the question of why Rampart and reform isn't part of the mayor's race. "A small number of cases resulted in me going to court to get cases overturned," she says. Many of the suspects in those cases were deported so that it was impossible to investigate further.

The public never cared about Rampart, she says, and didn't understand it, in part because of "pathetic" investigations by the district attorney and LAPD. "Who did what to whom? Nobody can tell you. Were cops committing criminal acts? Were they selling drugs out of the building?" she asks. Fifty-six different people interviewed Rafael Perez, she says, resulting in 28 volumes of testimony, which Gordon has read.

"There was no context for the interviewers," she says. Perez would offer that a given officer "had beat the shit out of somebody. You'd think you'd take the arrest record of that cop and check them out." Never happened, Gordon says.

Civil rights attorney Connie Rice, appointed by Bratton to lead a fifth investigation, respects Gordon's views. "Gigi may be absolutely right that this is stuck in granite, that it will take as long as it took to form the Grand Canyon" to change the LAPD, she offers. But Rice, who declined to comment on the mayor's race, says she's trying to give Bratton a full diagnosis of what the city has not yet learned from the Rampart crisis. "How in the world did [Perez and allies] set up that operation and hijack the division?" she asks. She's looking to see what systems are in place that might allow it to happen again.

Rice has a larger goal, conducting 235 interviews with LAPD personnel "from beat cops to chiefs" to figure out what the rank-and-file would need in order to commit to the real changes that she says they're ready to make. Cops realize that they can't get witnesses to cooperate if they are at war with the community, she observes. "When they see it's on their terms and they see it's needed," she says, "they can make it happen overnight."

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