

PROBABILITY MODEL FOR MITIGATING CIVIL UNREST AND ENHANCING EFFECTIVE POLICE RESPONSE

By Mark Lomax

Social unrest, civil disobedience, riots, protests and clashes with the police are not novel occurrences in the United States. The country was founded on the principles of civil disobedience — just think of the Boston Tea Party. The 19th Amendment for women’s suffrage was brought to the forefront by the civil disobedience of Susan B. Anthony. While the Civil Rights Act of 1866 gave some U.S. citizens equal protection under the law, it took nearly 100 years of protests, riots and clashes with law enforcement before discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin was outlawed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The freedom to gather and protest against the legal norm is a constitutional right in the United States; however, criminal acts such as vandalism and property damage that may

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accompany civil disobedience must be curtailed and handled by law enforcement to protect the safety of others and property.

Recent civil unrest in places like Ferguson and Baltimore show there continue to be clashes between those who are advocating for what they believe are their inalienable rights under the U.S. Constitution and the government, which is personified by law enforcement.

Law enforcement is never the sole catalyst for civil unrest. Incidents are caused by a perfect storm of several variables that together contribute toward the growing conflict. By looking back in the history of civil unrest, we can find several factors that are repeated in those situations. The ability to anticipate will always be an advantage to law enforcement, yet policing has been more of a reactive process than a proactive tool when it comes to civil unrest.

What if there was a plausible model to anticipate civil unrest? A probability model could be used as a predictor of potential contributing factors that may lead to civil disorder. Looking back over the past 100 years, certain commonalities appear with civil unrest situations, and the convergence of several variables contributes to violent confrontations between communities and law enforcement.

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There is never a lone single action of law enforcement that precipitates a civil unrest situation; rather, it is a single act of law enforcement that ignites the tinder accumulated over time. So what are the commonalities that contribute to the flashpoint, which, as we observed in Ferguson and Baltimore, can catch fire so quickly? Immediately, one finds two overriding similarities in occurrences of civil unrest in the United States: 1) The clashes have usually been between law enforcement and the communities it polices, and 2) most clashes begin in communities of color, though they can involve other marginalized communities.

Looking at this from a STEEPLED (social, technological, economic, environmental, political, legal, ethical and demographic) analysis point of view, it is evident that the aforementioned areas, when skewed, are contributors

to civil unrest situations. One of the first modern race riots, the Harlem Riot of 1935, was sparked by rumors of the beating of a teenaged shoplifter. The riots, which resulted in three deaths and injured hundreds, was one of the earliest documented clashes between law enforcement and communities of color in the United States. The clashes continued through the riots of post-World War II, to the riots of the 1960s, to the Native American upheavals in the 1970s. The commonalities of these include the following:

- Most common months of occurrences — April, May, August and September
- Time of day — evening (dusk or darkness)
 - Precipitating incident
 - Usually starts with a minor interaction between police and citizen
 - False information and rumors quickly spread throughout community
 - Race factor (white police and minority communities)
 - Previous indicators (complaints, protests, etc.)
 - Economic competition
 - High unemployment levels
 - High dropout rate in schools
 - Strained police and community relationships
 - Acquittal or not guilty verdict of police in an incident
 - Perceived corruption and abuse of power
 - Perception of police or government conducting a practice of abuse, harassment, and misconduct against the community
 - Years of strained relationships and perceived inequalities or abuse of power

Based upon a preliminary review, there are overlapping areas that are shared among incidents of civil unrest in the United States. A “Probability

Model for Mitigating Civil Unrest and Enhancing Effective Police Response” would include an in-depth analysis of such events in modern history to identify commonalities in social, economic, environmental, political, legal, ethical, demographic and technological factors. It would also be a proactive tool to anticipate, mitigate and, if necessary, properly respond to acts of civil disobedience. Moreover, effective de-escalation training, proper equipment and the use of community resources, such as clergy, community leaders, teachers, business owners and non-profit associations, would assist in mitigating major civil unrest events.

Developing a probability model of recurring areas of concern would provide law enforcement a barometer for anticipating potential community conflicts. It is recommended that a holistic approach be taken to mitigate civil unrest by being proactive in communications with all stakeholders in a community prior to any act of civil disobedience.

Civil unrest in the United States is never an isolated incident. It is always

an accumulation of unresolved issues that boil over into a violent interaction with law enforcement, who are the most visible arm of the government. Often, there is overreaction from both sides of the confrontation, with tragic results. ■

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