

just out

The IN publication for the OUT population

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COMMENTARY

BY MARTY DAVIS

Mark Kroeker: Should we beat him with an oar?

Portland's police chief takes another licking...but is he still ticking?

Readers of this paper know that in the past, often to their dismay, I've been reluctant to join the endlessly growing chorus of dissent against Portland Police Chief Mark Kroeker. I was supportive of him through the taped "anti-gay" remarks imbroglio. I gave the bureau the benefit of the doubt about May Day and all the other assorted cases of "overly enthusiastic" crowd control techniques. I'm also not afraid to say I think police leadership should do whatever is needed to control the totally non-productive, anger-inducing behaviors of the monthly Critical Mass idiocy. But now, finally, in the wake of the recent police awards snafu, I realize it's time for me to don my robe, warm up my singing voice and join the choir. At long last I agree it is time for a change in the top leadership of the Portland Police Bureau.

I don't say this because I now think Mark Kroeker is a bad person, an evil man. I say this because I now feel Mark Kroeker has lost his passion for his work, his vision for Portland and the needs of our city.

I think his flame went out when he lost the Los Angeles police chief job. My concern is that "trickle-down" happens faster at the bureau than at other corporations and that a degrading of ideals, standards and behaviors can occur very quickly because of a perceived weakness or disinterest in leadership.

Without an iota of proof, working only on a hunch, I suspect Kroeker wasn't even involved in the decision-making process as to which officers received which award, commendation or medal at the recent ceremony. I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't know who would receive what until he actually stood up to make the presentations. There are others whose job is to make these decisions. There are commanders and captains and lieutenants involved in this type of process.

Regardless of who, somewhere someone made a bad decision when it was decided to commend the officers involved in the shooting death of Jose Santos Victor Mejia Poot. When lives are saved and when procedure results in positive results, then there can be celebration and recognition.

It does fall upon Kroeker, as top man at the bureau, to accept responsibility for the awards whether or not he was involved in the decision. And while he is taking the heat, he doesn't even seem to be sweating. He's got a weary and tired "oh what now" attitude. He appears to be carrying the burden of martyrdom. His demeanor as evidenced in news reports is bothersome. He just doesn't seem to care.

And Portland very much deserves a police chief who cares. We deserve one who cares a whole hell of a lot about our city and all its citizens. All races, all cultures, all identities. So I suggest Mark Kroeker needs to kick back into high gear and act like a police chief with 35 years of experience, or he needs to pack it up and move on to wherever his heart is—or might be.

I am neither unaware nor unappreciative of the stress and dangers

faced daily by police officers. I neither envy nor want their job.

A few months ago I had the opportunity to participate in a "media training" day put together by the bureau. It was quite an organized affair, and the intent was precisely and clearly announced. We were there for one day to walk in the shoes—and, unfortunately, that damn vest—of a Portland police officer. As such, we would leave with a greater understanding and sensitivity toward the actions and reactions of a cop.

Now, having been clearly told I was there to be manipulated and molded, my naive thought process was that you can't manipulate me if I know this is your intent. I'll simply strengthen my mind and shut you down. I am woman. I am strong.

I was also wrong.

When the Portland Police Bureau decides it's going to manipulate a group of reporters, it goes about it in a very effective, very organized and very damn interesting manner. They put us in those god-awful vests, they gave us very real-looking guns for "simulations," they gave us "simulation" (paint balls that leave very real bruises), then we all pretended we were officers.

With only the sketchiest of training, we were sent in to participate in role-playing exercises—exercises where you have to make split-second judgments. Exercises that were play for the media but potentially everyday events to a real police officer in Portland. Exercises where loud, angry and abusive people have weapons; sometimes you see the weapons, sometimes you don't. Exercises where sometimes you react with the wrong decision and respond in an inappropriate and deadly manner.

Even when you know it's a game, the fun stops really fast when you realize you just shot and killed the wrong person. Suddenly it's not a game. Suddenly you understand. I only can begin to imagine how it must feel actually to shoot someone. It's got to be awful.

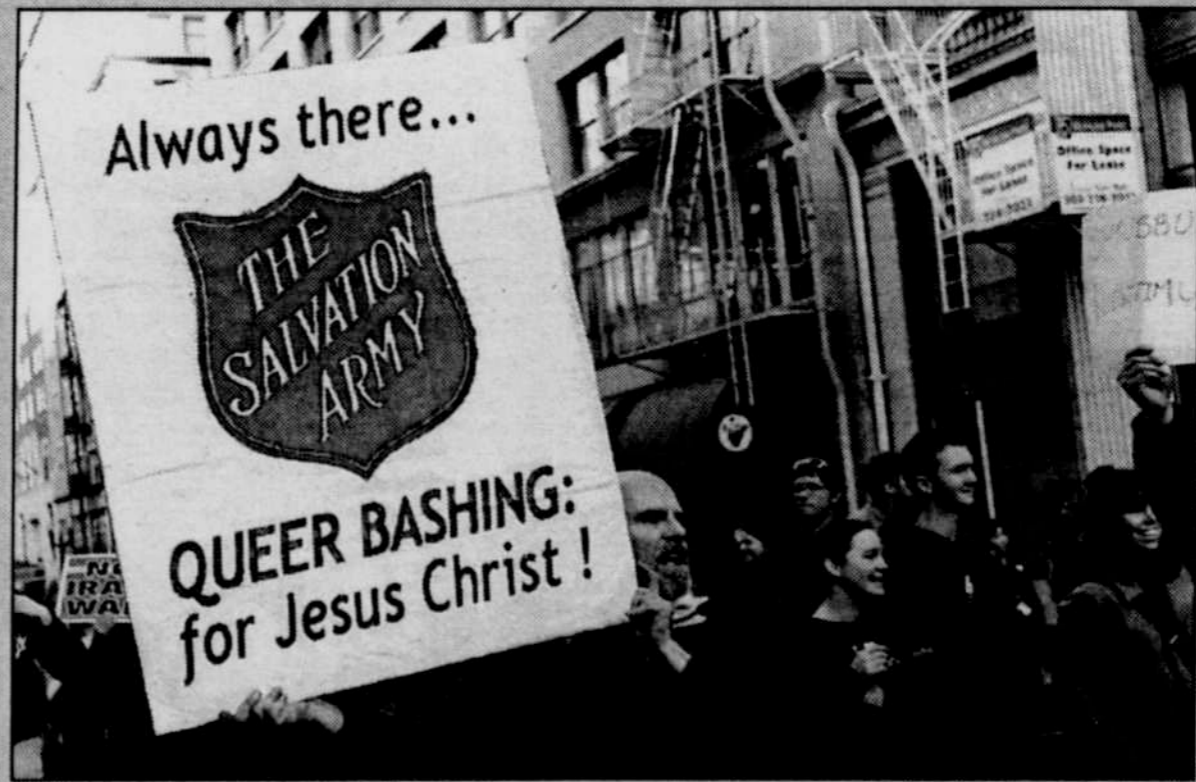
For police officers on the job it's never an exercise and it's never a game. On the other side of every door might well be a whacked-out person with a gun. This is certainly not what I want to face every day when I go to work. I often don't want to take a phone call, let alone a bullet.

Are there bad cops? Of course. There are bad cops just like there are bad doctors, lawyers, mechanics, clerks and every other job imaginable. Which is why it's all the more important that Portland's top cop be fired up with passion and zeal—because his or her leadership sets the tone, the direction and the attitude of the entire department.

Chief Kroeker, your excuses have become tired, weak and overused. Your inertia threatens the quality of all our lives. Portland needs powerful leadership, not more excuses, not more platitudes.

So I ask you, sir, what are you going to do about this? I believe you to be an honest man of integrity. I ask you now to do the right thing for our city. Kick it up or kick back and retire. [M]

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