

The Profession

An Interview with William J. Bratton, Executive Chairman, Risk Advisory, Teneo

EDITORS' NOTE William J. Bratton is one of the world's most respected and trusted experts on risk and security issues. During a 46-year career in law enforcement, he instituted progressive change while leading six police departments, including seven years as Chief of the Los Angeles Police Department and two nonconsecutive terms as the Police Commissioner of the City of New York. He is the only person ever to lead the police agencies of America's two largest cities. As the Executive



William J. Bratton

Chairman of Risk Advisory for Teneo (teneo.com), Commissioner Bratton advises clients on risk identification, prevention, and response. Prior to assuming his current role, Commissioner Bratton was the 42nd police commissioner of the City of New York from January 2014 to September 2016. It was the second time he had held the post. During that time, he oversaw 32 months of declining crime, including historic lows for murders and robberies. Commissioner Bratton spearheaded a major technological overhaul, the Mobile Digital Initiative, which gave a smartphone with custom-designed apps to every officer and put a tablet in every patrol car. Commissioner Bratton also implemented major reforms to the New York Police Department's counterterrorism program by developing two new units – the Critical Response Command (CRC) and the Strategic Response Group (SRG) – which now provide the city with more than 1,000 highly trained and properly equipped officers who are dedicated to counterterrorism, large-scale mobilizations, site security, and rapid deployment citywide. In the 1990s, Commissioner Bratton established an international reputation for re-engineering police departments and fighting crime. As Chief of the New York City Transit Police, Boston Police Commissioner, and in his first term as New York City Police Commissioner, he revitalized morale and cut crime in all three posts, achieving the largest crime declines in New York City's history. As Los Angeles Police Chief from 2002 to 2009, in a city known for its entrenched gang culture and youth violence, he brought crime to historically low levels, greatly improved race relations, and reached out to young people with a range of innovative police programs. Commissioner Bratton currently serves as the Chair for the Secretary of Homeland Security's Advisory Council.

What are your views on the current state of policing in America?

I think that there is no denying that American policing is in a state of profound crises, probably more than in any other time over the past 50 years that I have been associated with it. I use the word crises because there are multiple issues happening all at the same time. There is the issue of an increasing crime rate, particularly shootings and murders in many of our inner cities in America; there is an increasing tolerance for

disorder and aberrant behavior as we are tolerating behavior that we would not have accepted when I first came into law enforcement; and there is a significant lack of trust in government entities at this particular time, coming out of the Trump era and continuing now as we go into the 2022 midterms and 2024 Presidential election, and this mistrust of government extends to law enforcement as we see the FBI is viciously under attack from the former President. As a result, this lack of trust, lack of confidence, and lack of success in controlling crime and disorder has led to the challenging state of American policing today. Another major challenge is the need to recruit talented, young individuals of all races, ethnic backgrounds, and sexual orientations to join the industry. What was looked at for decades as a noble profession is no longer perceived to be the case.

Are you optimistic about the opportunity to meet the challenges you described?

I am probably the least optimistic I have been in my over 50 years of being involved in American policing when I look at the various problems and challenges I just outlined. I am still actively engaged with the profession and it is clear that there has not been much success in addressing these concerns at the moment. I am someone who for all my life has seen crisis as an opportunity, but there are only so many crises you can deal with at the same time, and I do not envy my colleagues that are still in the business who are facing these issues. There has been a major turnover of chiefs of police around the country over the past few years which is another challenge as we are losing some of our most seasoned and committed veterans who are retiring for a number of reasons.

While I am clearly concerned today, I remain optimistic that we can overcome these challenges, but we need to be realistic that there is no quick fix, and this is going to take time and commitment to make a real and sustainable impact.

What are your views on the integrity and transparency in police forces today with the incidents of police brutality that have been witnessed in recent years?

The cornerstone of American policing is integrity, honesty, and commitment, and this remains among the vast majority of police officers. At the same time, there is no denying that those in the profession that are flawed are being exposed by technology such as body cameras and artificial intelligence, and while I believe this only refers to a small number of officers, it is magnified immensely through social media and other platforms. I do not believe that it is a fact that there is so much of it, but more that what is there has been played over and over again. There is an old saying in the media that, "if it bleeds, it leads," and today almost every major news network starts its program with not one, not two, not three, but four or five crime stories.

There is a very important and positive aspect of this in that it allows us to detect bad behavior and to corroborate that behavior more than was possible in the past, and it allows us to use those instances where they are corroborated to act as examples of what not to do.

It is important to acknowledge that much of what is seen in clips on the news or on social media is legal, authorized behavior in situations where officers are trained to use force, but those who are angry or frustrated with the police do not view it this way.

What can be done to build back trust between the police and the communities they serve?

This is by far the secret ingredient that is essential – absent trust, the public is not going to respond to police behavior, lawful or otherwise. The challenge for police is to first and foremost regain trust for the men and women of that police department, and for leadership to be transparent when mistakes are made. In 1829, Sir Robert Peel highlighted the "Nine Principles for Policing" and if you look at these nine principles today, they are as relevant as they were in 1829. The essence

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of it is that the people are the police, and the police are the people. Police officers come from the communities they serve, and every police commissioner today started as a police officer, with the vast majority of them, like me, coming from working class families who entered the profession for the right reason and worked their way up through the ranks to be in leadership positions.

The importance of trust between the police and the community cannot be overstated – you can’t do it for them, you can’t do it to them – you must do it with them.

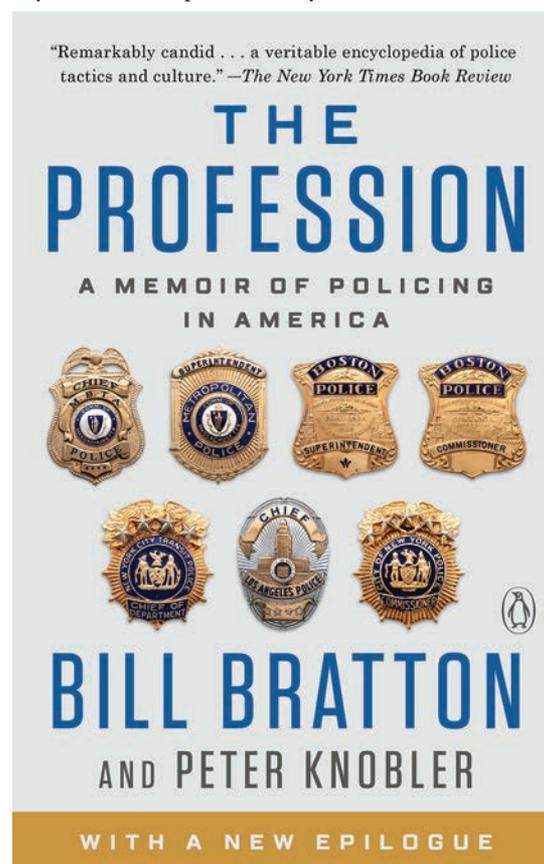
What was your vision for writing your latest book, *The Profession*?

This is my third book. My first book, *The Turnaround*, detailed my time as New York City’s police commissioner, starting in 1994, and the progress we made over those 27 months in bringing serious crime in New York City down by 33 percent and cutting the murder rate in half. I wanted to tell my story about a kid growing up in a working-class family in Boston and reaching the pinnacle in policing. Along the way, I made mistakes, had successes, developed leadership skills, and hired top talent that worked together as a team. The second book, *Collaborate or Perish*, focused on the importance of collaborating across the boundaries of our networked world – those who collaborate will thrive in the networked world; those who can’t are doomed to perish. This applies to policing – if we don’t collaborate with the criminal justice system, if we don’t collaborate with the community, if we don’t collaborate with political leadership, then we will perish. The third book, which you referenced in your question, *The Profession*, is a memoir. It looks at the path of policing over the past 50 years, both the good and the bad, and provides my views on the keys to transformative leadership. I hope that this book helps provide a foundation and framework for future police leaders, and it inspires them through some of the examples of my time in law enforcement which included many successes, as well as many setbacks and times when I needed to get back up, dust myself off, and be resilient.

Did writing these books provide you an opportunity to look back and reflect on your career?

Writing these books did allow me the opportunity to reflect and provided me with a

lot of satisfaction, while at the same time there was a lot of soul searching about things I may have done differently. For example, my relationship with Mayor Giuliani. If I had



known then what I now know about managing above, managing below, managing sideways, I would have done a better job of managing my relationship with him which may have provided the opportunity for me to stay with the NYPD not for 27 months, but possibly for four or five years. We had built tremendous momentum with a 40 percent reduction in crime, and when I left, a number of other very talented and key people also left. My leaving cost them their careers, and in many respects, this cost New York City years of additional victories in the fight against crime. I look back at that time with many great feelings about the impact we made and our successes, but also think about what might have been.

What advice do you offer to young people interested in a career in policing?

I encourage them to pursue this career, while being clear that it is a challenging and

stressful career. This profession provides the opportunity to make a difference every single day and to have a life of significance. When the time comes for you look back at your career, if you did the job with integrity, if you did the job with commitment, and if you did the job focused on making a difference, you will have had a fulfilling and rewarding career. The actions of each and every police officer counts – all you have to do is look at the murder of George Floyd. The actions of that one police officer murdering George Floyd impacted countless lives and set American policing back 20 years.

The profession matters because in this country, you cannot have law and order without the police. Police are an essential element of the criminal justice system. They are the men and women who are in the arena, and the collective work of the profession keeps this country together. I just did an epilogue to *The Profession* since the editors wanted me to address the events of January 6. I truly believe that on January 6, American policing saved American democracy. The actions of the mob, directed by a sitting President of the United States, were intended to destroy our democracy. If not for the actions of the Metropolitan Police and the Capital Police that day, many of whom I believe did not know at the time the full extent of the role that they were actually having in saving our democracy, things would have turned out much differently.

Are you worried about the future of American democracy?

I certainly am. I am a student of history and read about history all the time. I just finished reading a biography of Hitler that is about 1,000 pages long, and I just finished reading a biography of Churchill that is also about 1,000 pages long. When you match up what Hitler and Churchill were battling each other about, in the 1930s in particular, I see similarities to what is going on in America today in the sense of how divided the country is – the move to the far right by some and the move to the far left from others. I do not worry about the police profession because I believe that the police will do the right thing as they did on January 6, and when someone in law enforcement does not do the right thing, they need to be held accountable. When I look to the future, I am concerned, but I am optimistic that our better angels will prevail. ●