



We Trained and Worked Hard to Protect and Serve

by Paul Iovino

St. Paul (MN) Police Department

The dust has settled, and it's time for the men and women of the St. Paul Police Department to reflect, debrief and recover. The Republican National Convention (RNC) seemed to blow in as quickly and with as much punch as Hurricane Gustav before blowing back out of our saintly city.

As we move into the post-phase of the RNC, we have breathed a sigh of relief and begun to evaluate the entire process. Independent consultants have been hired to examine the many different facets of the convention, including the police department's role. Countless hours of planning went into the department's preparation and operational plan for this event. The police department looks forward to participating in a fair and transparent review of the convention. We owe this to the officers who worked it, the thousands of people who attended it, our partners we collaborated with, and our community, with whom we have a long and special relationship.

The months leading up to the RNC and the week of the convention were long and trying for many of us. I wouldn't have missed it for the world, but would also be just as fine never having to repeat a week like it for the rest of my career.

Most days during the RNC started out much the same way for me. I'd wake up early in the morning, grab some breakfast to eat during my commute and head to Arden Hills. I'd fight fatigue from the long hours of the night before and listen to talk radio recounting the media's take on the previous night's events.

As I approached the Arden Hills Ammunition Plant, I'd greet the National Guard soldiers manning the secure entrance to the base. I'd produce my Secret Service RNC and police credentials and head off to meet my team.

The base looked like a gated community buzzing with people and activity. There were hundreds of personnel coming and going. I would make my way through the maze of people and police vehicles to my bike team. Our team was more officially known as the "Bicycle Rapid Response Team" – a highly mobile, tactical team of bicycle officers trained to deal with a variety of different situations, including civil disturbances. We worked in harmony with the mobile field force officers.

Our team would pick up our lunches and new radio batteries. We would then be briefed on the day's activities and go over intelligence reports before heading out in our caravan. We would drive to our headquarters building on Grove and park our vehicles before deploying downtown on bikes for the uncertain events that lay ahead.

The first day of the event was met with great anticipation and relief for me and many of my peers. We had spent two years preparing for this, likely the most significant event of our law enforcement careers. We researched past political conventions and civil disturbances, trained in mobile field force tactics, were briefed on case law and legal updates and combed through First Amendment rights.



As the Capitol grounds began to swell with thousands of people on Labor Day, I began to reflect on my training. I watched as people moved about holding signs and street puppets. I listened as people gave speeches and musicians played music. I watched as small groups of anarchists gathered, and observed them as they watched us in return. It was an amazing sight. I knew what to expect because our department had prepared well. We had planned for the worst and hoped for the best, as we always do.

I watched as a large group of protesters moved south on the Capitol grounds toward 12th Street. This was not the approved protest route. As we moved in to shadow the group, they spilled into the street. A hundred or so people took the whole street and intersection at the entrance ramp to I-94. Several cars were surrounded and immobilized as angry protestors chanted at the occupants, who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I recalled a similar incident that occurred outstate in which a mob tried to flip a car with a family and children inside. The bikes quickly moved in and encircled the vehicles. We were met with cheers and a thumbs-up by a frightened elderly couple trapped in the first car. We led both cars out of the crowd and down the freeway ramp. This was the first of many skirmishes to come that day.

For the next many hours and remainder of that day, it was chaotic. We worked on pure adrenaline, depending on our training. The radio traffic was extremely busy as divisions of officers were mobilized all over downtown trying to regain control as people took to the streets. Small groups wreaked havoc as they smashed department store windows, spray-painted buildings, hurled dumpsters at squad cars and left traffic at a standstill.

We weren't necessarily surprised as much as we were disappointed. We were disappointed by the lawlessness and lack of respect for our citizens, community and the Constitution. The vast majority of the law-abiding protesters exercised their freedom of speech in a lawful manner. We stood behind those individuals and were happy to help them exercise their First Amendment rights during the convention.

At the end of that 17-hour day, we packed up, wondering if the rest of the week would be just as busy. I had donned and doffed my gas mask countless times, assisted with mass arrests and logged countless miles on my bike. The days that followed were almost as long and still intense, but none proved to be as destructive.

In the end, we felt a sense of accomplishment and relief. I have always been proud to be a St. Paul police officer and was standing even a little taller at the end of the convention. I am very proud of our department, civilian employees and our officers. The officers' response was well planned and displayed professionalism, restraint and resiliency.

This collaborative effort with our neighboring agencies has fostered relationships from which we will reap the benefits for years to come. We could not have done this without their help. The St. Paul Police Department's relationship with its community has long been the envy of other agencies, and I believe our relationship with the community has been strengthened. We appreciate the many phone calls, messages and letters of gratitude we have received since the convention.



We were the smallest department to pull off a convention of this size to date. Success doesn't happen by accident, nor is there a secret that will lead you to it. Colin Powell once stated that success "is the result of preparation, hard work and learning from failure."

No police officers or protesters were seriously injured, and the delegates, candidates and other attendees were unharmed and the convention uninterrupted. From my vantage point high upon my Trek mountain bike, it appeared to me that we were indeed successful. I had spent a week in the midst of all the action surrounding the convention. I feel we successfully struck the sometimes disputed balance between freedom and public safety. I'm indebted to our brave officers for their service and to our community for its support.

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This article appeared in the September 26, 2008, edition of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. It was reprinted in the Fall 2008 issue of *IPMBA News*.