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COMMENTARY

Dodge City? Never Again

The city's streets are under attack by local gun-toting terrorists, and yesterday a high-ranking police official admitted "we took our eye off the ball."

But the cops are scrambling to put the lid back on the bad guys before crime becomes the epidemic it was in 1990, when a record 2,245 people became homicide victims.

"We're going back to doing the things we did to keep guns off the streets," the high-ranking police source said yesterday. "We let our guard down because our attention was diverted."

That means more undercover detectives will be back working overtime on the mean drug streets, especially in Brooklyn and Manhattan, more scrutiny at the subway turnstiles, more warrants being issued and more arrests.



Dennis Duggan

It also means, another high-ranking police official said, that more officers will be hired in the coming year, despite a looming budget deficit.

"We are losing 20 police a day," that official said. "That's a lot of attrition. A lot of cops now retiring expect to go into security work, but that's not as glamorous a job as they might think. They could wind up standing in a hallway.

"A lot of what we need to do is technology. But you also need bodies, lots of them. You need them to be seen and to make arrests," the official said, adding that some of those bodies could come from the National Guard.

Making arrests is the key, though, say law enforcement experts like Bridget Brennan, the city's special narcotics prosecutor.

Brennan predicted yesterday that arrests would triple in the coming days to convince the bad guys the cops are back on the beat.

"They were getting cocky in recent days," she said. "One of our investigators told me he had seen a handwritten sign in Bushwick that read, 'Drugs sold here.' "

No one wants a return to the bad old days when New York was called Dodge City, when shootings were routine and a hail of bullets raining down on the streets kept people cowering behind locked doors. In those days, tourists went elsewhere, bypassing the city, and companies fled to New Jersey.

When a young cop named Eddie Byrne was shot to death while on duty in South Jamaica on Feb. 26, 1988, the city resolved to mobilize troops for the war on crime.

That strategy, called "Safe Streets, Safe City," was headed by Mayor David Dinkins and a brilliant up-from-the-ranks officer named Ray Kelly, who will return as police commissioner under Mayor-elect Michael Bloomberg.

It was under Mayor Rudolph Giuliani that the strategy took hold and flourished. Cops armed with computer printouts and led by William Bratton and his high-energy team of crime fighters — including Jack Maple, Joseph Dunne and Richard Savage — started sending the criminals packing.

It was Maple, a colorful transit cop who contemptuously called officers with low arrest figures "conscientious objectors," who scorched and embarrassed precinct commanders into doing their jobs. And in North Brooklyn, Dunne, known as the "General," gave the streets back to the city's tax-paying citizens.

One police official told me yesterday that the recent spike in homicides "is clearly an endorsement of the strategies we used to bring crime down, and we are going back to those same strategies major league."

He said it was those strategies that "gave us the ability to engage criminals and to prevent them from doing business."

State Supreme Court Judge John Barone, who has spent years on the criminal court bench in the Bronx, says most violence is infectious, and the war in Afghanistan and the terrorism in New York may be at the root of the recent upswing in shootings.

Most officers say it's a matter of troops — the more the better — to fight crime and keep guns off the streets.

Thomas Reppeto, head of the Citizens Crime Commission, a watchdog group, agrees with that assessment.

"If they aren't carrying guns, there will be fewer murders," he said. A story told to him by a police official illustrates what he means.

"This drug dealer was released from jail. He came back to his neighborhood and found a new drug dealer at his old corner," Repetto said.

"He challenged the new guy and out of habit they went for their guns, but they weren't carrying them because the cops had cowed them."

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