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One Bad Cop

By LOU CANNON

The case that would eventually spark the most damaging scandal in the history of the Los Angeles Police Department began early on the afternoon of Nov. 26, 1996, when Javier Francisco Ovando was wheeled on a gurney into a downtown courtroom of the Los Angeles County Hall of Justice for a pretrial hearing. "He was emaciated, frail, such a little man," recalled Tamar Toister, the public defender who was assigned his case, one of seven she would have that day. Ovando was charged with assaulting Rafael Perez and Nino Durden, two Los Angeles police officers, with a semiautomatic weapon. Since the Honduran-born Ovando then spoke no English and the Israeli-born Toister didn't speak Spanish, they conversed through an interpreter. But Ovando could barely talk in any language. A month and a half earlier, on Oct. 12, Perez and Durden, the two officers he was accused of assaulting, had shot him in the neck and chest. Through the interpreter, Ovando softly asserted his innocence and said he did not remember much of what happened except that "bad cops" had tried to kill him.

No one believed Ovando, who had the number 18 tattooed on the back of his neck, signifying membership in the 18th Street Gang, known in Los Angeles for its narcotics dealings and brutal killings. Nor did anyone in the courtroom except Ovando believe that Perez was a bad cop. To those gathered at the hearing, Perez seemed composed and credible as he told how Ovando, brandishing a Tec-22 semiautomatic pistol, had burst into a darkened fourth-floor room of an abandoned apartment building that he and Durden were using as an observation post to monitor gang activity in the street below.

According to Perez's account at the hearing, he and Durden had fired first, dropping Ovando with four shots. When backup officers and an ambulance arrived, Ovando was lying in a pool of blood, the weapon beside him. One of the backups later recalled that Perez, who had fired three times, was surprised that the man he had hit was still alive. But this did not trouble the officer at the time. It didn't trouble Perez either. He and his partner were warriors in Rampart, Los Angeles's toughest neighborhood. To officers of the Rampart division of Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums, called by its acronym, Crash, gang members deserved whatever fate awaited them, whether it was death in the crowded communities they had made so dangerous or prison sentences that would keep them behind bars until they were old.

At the end of the 25-minute hearing, Ovando, then 19, was ordered to stand trial on seven felony charges. Based solely on what Perez had told them, prosecutors claimed that Ovando was a gang assassin out to kill police officers. Toister, the public defender, did not question the theory. She did, however, question the deal being offered by a deputy of Gil Garcetti, the district attorney, who was waging a publicized war on gangs: 13 years in prison. In Toister's view, that was way too severe. Ovando had no criminal record. He had also been shot four times and was now paralyzed from the waist down. Believing that Ovando had been punished for whatever he did, Toister decided to try the case before a jury.

At the time, neither Toister nor anyone else had any inkling that what took place between the two officers and Javier Ovando would grow into the Rampart scandal. It was hard to imagine that an apparently cut-and-dried gang case would lead to the investigation of 70 police officers -- 4 of whom are to go on trial in the next few days -- and the release of 100 prisoners framed by the police. It was even harder to envision that it would result in an astonishing consent decree that for the first time in history will put the fiercely independent L.A.P.D. under the supervision of the federal government. Most inconceivable of all, perhaps, was the fact that the widest, most damaging crisis in the department's history would be brought about by the actions of one crooked police officer: Rafael Perez.

Rampart, west of downtown, is a compact warren of dense, dangerous neighborhoods that leads Los Angeles in homicides, narcotics sales and violent crimes. Out-of-town visitors to other poor sections of the city, even South Central, are often surprised to find homes surrounded by tidy lawns and neighborhoods sprinkled with parks and greenery. Such amenities are rare in Rampart, where open space is scarce, crowded high-rises abound and trees do not grow easily.

Bounded on the north by Sunset Boulevard, on the west by Normandie Avenue, and on the east and south by freeways, Rampart encompasses only 7.9 square miles but has the highest population density of any urban area west of the Mississippi, officially 36,000 people per square mile. Not included in this count are thousands of illegal immigrants. According to an L.A.P.D. report, "many of these people speak only Spanish and are not well versed in the customs and laws of the United States. Some have a history of distrust for law enforcement stemming from their perceptions of law enforcement within their home countries. These factors have proven to be a challenge for every new commanding officer assigned to the Rampart area."

Beginning in the late 1970's, life on the streets in the Rampart area was controlled by more than 60 gangs, often organized along ethnic lines. Amid the gangs from El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala, Javier Ovando's gang, the 18th Street Gang, was notable for its

brutality and its multiethnic and sometimes interracial membership. The gang terrorized neighborhoods, sold narcotics and rented space to drug dealers. But it also functioned as a haven for jobless Latinos who lived on the streets during the severe recession of the early 90's. This is what brought Ovando into the fold. Ovando said he joined the gang because he was on his own at 16 and without a roof over his head. The gang, he said, became "mia familia." His family.

The family Ovando found was at war with crash and the L.A.P.D. Gangs had been a focus of the Los Angeles police since the late 1970's, when violence, sparked by immigration and a bad economy, jumped alarmingly. The department, which traditionally relied on technology and aggressive tactics to compensate for the relatively small numbers available to police a vast area, responded in a multitude of ways. One of its first initiatives was Crash, the elite antigang force. Another was Operation Hammer, the brainchild of Chief Daryl Gates, which rounded up suspected gang members en masse.

The L.A.P.D.'s war on gangs soon led to a series of well-publicized controversies. Operation Hammer, already under fire from civil libertarians, was thoroughly discredited in 1988 when its officers destroyed four apartment buildings they mistakenly thought were crack houses. Then, in 1991, came the videotaped beating of Rodney King and the creation of a commission, led by Warren Christopher, that proposed various reforms in the L.A.P.D. In 1992, the officers accused of assaulting King were acquitted by a suburban jury, setting off fearsome riots in which 54 people were killed. The police department was suddenly on the defensive. Chief Gates retired. His successor, Willie Williams, was not reappointed after his first five-year term. Bernard Parks, the third chief in a decade, has been under fire practically since his appointment in 1997.

Though sometimes criticized for excesses, Crash survived. Crash officers worked in tough places and were expected to confront violence with violence. Rampart Crash, which varied in size from a dozen officers in winter to as many as 20 in summer, when gang activity peaked, was an especially tight-knit group. Officers gave plaques to comrades who shot gang members. Rampart members wore logos and patches, the most notorious of which was a skull with a cowboy hat and a poker hand of a pair of aces and a pair of eights, the dead-man's hand that the frontier outlaw Wild Bill Hickock was holding when he was shot to death. "Rampart was home to a bunch of cowboy cops," said David Smith, an L.A.P.D. captain who had several encounters with the unit.

Rampart Crash became even more independent in 1995 when, because of overcrowding in the main Rampart station house, the unit moved to a substation nearly two miles away. There, the cowboy cops were almost entirely on their own, and they weren't shy about expressing their separateness. While most of the city's Crash officers were required to work in uniform, Rampart Crash members made a point of showing up in street clothes. Captain Smith recounted that when he responded to a call from a Rampart resident who had been roughed up by police officers, he was told to mind his own business. "There were all sorts of warning signals coming out of Rampart," he said.

Notable among these was the "999 key." Along with a gun and a badge, every Los Angeles police officer is issued what is known as a 999 key, which allows him access to all the police stations in the city. When Rampart Crash officers moved to their substation, though, they rekeyed the entrance to 888. Rampart Crash was its own police department with its own rules. And two of its star members were Rafael Perez and Nino Durden.

On Feb. 13, 1997, People V. Ovando went to trial. in the days following the pretrial hearing the previous November, Toister became suspicious about police conduct in the case. Had Ovando been set up? she wondered. Why would the gang member, bent on assassination, burst from a lighted hallway into a darkened room where the officers would have had a much better view of him, silhouetted against the light, than he would have had of them?

Speaking to Ovando and his girlfriend, Monique Valenzuela, Toister pieced together a story that contradicted the L.A.P.D. account. Though his memory was shaky, Ovando told the public defender that before he was shot the officers handcuffed him and a friend known as Nene and questioned them about a Pomona burglary that had supposedly yielded the gang an arms cache. After interrogating them in the trash-strewn room, Perez and Durden let Nene go. On the way out, Nene encountered Valenzuela, who asked about Ovando. Nene told her that he was being questioned and would be released soon. Then they heard shots from inside the building. Nene ran away.

Despite Toister's suspicions, she knew she had a weak case. With Nene's disappearance, the public defender had only the inadmissible hearsay of the girlfriend's statement and Ovando's shaky memory. Moreover, Stephen Czuleger, the Superior Court judge who would try the case, told Toister that if Ovando testified, he would allow the prosecution to cross-examine him about graffiti in the building where Ovando was shot. One piece read "L.A.P.D. 187" -- a reference to the California penal-code number for murder -- and it meant, in gang lingo, "Kill cops." It didn't help that Ovando's 18th Street nickname was Sniper. Toister never called him to testify.

When the trial started, Toister tried to find out from Perez how Ovando had known that the two officers were in the darkened upstairs apartment. Perez, altering an earlier version of his story, explained that he had not seen gang activity in the normally busy street below. The reason, he suspected, was that a gang member had spotted his car, an unmarked blue Taurus. Perez testified that he and Durden left the observation post, scaled a 10-foot-high fence around the building, moved the car, then scaled the fence again and returned to the apartment. According to Perez, Ovando supposedly followed the officers into the building after seeing them climb the fence. What fence? Toister wanted to know. It was not mentioned in the original police report.

Toister asked the judge for a continuance to inspect the building and see the fence. The judge refused. When Toister tried to cross-

examine the officers about discrepancies between their first report and their revised account, the prosecutor objected and the judge sustained his objections. Throughout the trial, Toister couldn't seem to catch a break. "What happened was dirty," she told me later. "I did all I could but I wasn't allowed to put on a defense."

Ovando, stoic in his courtroom demeanor, was becoming increasingly desperate. To complicate things, Valenzuela had told him she was pregnant. "I became very sad," he said quietly. "I cried. I admit I cried. What could I do?" The trial lasted a week and ended on Feb. 20, with the jury finding Javier Ovando guilty of all charges. Judge Czuleger sentenced him to 23 years in prison, declining a request for leniency because, he said, Ovando had shown no remorse for his crimes.

Rafael Perez, who was to become a golden boy of the rampart Crash unit, was born in Puerto Rico in 1967 and came to the United States when he was a small child. After several moves he landed in Philadelphia, where he was reared by his mother. His lawyer, Winston Kevin McKesson, said that Perez remembers standing on a street corner as a boy, watching drug dealers and imagining that he would one day be the cop who arrested them -- just like the L.A.P.D. officers on "Adam-12." Perez graduated from high school in 1985 and joined the Marines. In 1989, he was hired by the L.A.P.D.

After starting out on routine patrol duties, Perez was sent to a narcotics unit and, in 1995, was transferred to Rampart Crash. There, he quickly established himself as a rough-and-tumble officer, valued for his fluency in Spanish and his knowledge of gang ways. Ethan Cohan, who worked with Perez in Crash, told me that officers from the unit sometimes bet on which team would find a gun on a gang member that night. "Perez always won," said Cohan. "I just thought, This guy is really good."

Perez might still be in Crash -- and Javier Ovando almost certainly would still be in jail -- if it was not for three events, all of which conspired to put Perez and Rampart on the radar screen of the L.A.P.D. high command.

The first of these occurred on Nov. 6, 1997, nine months after Ovando had been sent to prison. That morning, two armed men entered a Bank of America branch in South Central and demanded money from Errolyn Romero, the customer-service manager. She gave them $722,000 that had been delivered earlier that day by armored car. The detectives who investigated the robbery soon learned that Romero had ordered delivery of the money. After questioning, she broke down and confessed that the robbery had been planned and carried out by her boyfriend, David Mack, a flamboyant and streetwise L.A.P.D. officer who had served in Rampart and was a close friend of Rafael Perez.

Investigators soon learned that Mack and Perez had gone to Las Vegas to celebrate together two days after the robbery. They were old friends from pre-Rampart days, when they worked narcotics detail. Perez told investigators that, while he knew nothing about the robbery, he looked up to Mack. The older officer, he claimed, had once saved his life by shooting a drug dealer who had pulled a gun on Perez. Police investigators weren't sure if the story was true; two eyewitnesses claimed that Mack shot the drug dealer without provocation, but an L.A.P.D. inquiry found the shooting justifiable.

On March 17, 1999, the 39-year-old Mack was convicted on federal charges of bank robbery and sentenced to 14 years in prison. Because of her cooperation, Romero received a sentence of only two and a half years. But the stolen money has never been recovered and neither the other robber nor the driver of the getaway van have been identified. Investigators thought that Perez might have been the driver, but they had no evidence to prove it.

The second event occurred the night of Feb. 26, 1998, when two Rampart Crash officers detained a young gang suspect. As another L.A.P.D. disciplinary board reconstructed events, Officer Brian Hewitt entered an interview room in the Rampart substation and choked and beat the suspect until he vomited blood. When the gang member was released, he checked into a hospital and reported the incident. Chief Parks ordered that administrative charges be brought against Hewitt and two other officers accused of not reporting the incident. Hewitt and one of the officers were fired.

A month later, officers in the L.A.P.D.'s property division, which is responsible for storing evidence and impounded goods, discovered that six pounds of cocaine had been checked out for a court appearance and never returned. The officer who had signed for the cocaine was Rafael Perez. When officers from internal affairs discovered that the case Perez had obtained the cocaine for had already been adjudicated, a full-scale, secret investigation was launched. It revealed that Perez had checked out cocaine in other cases, including some in which he had not even been involved.

For weeks, internal affairs shadowed Perez, tracking his movements and gathering evidence. Then, in the early-morning hours of Aug. 25, 1998, police officers descended on his house with sirens blaring and led him away in handcuffs as startled neighbors, who had been led to believe that Perez was a wealthy contractor, watched in disbelief. He was arrested and tried in December 1998 for possession of cocaine for sale, grand theft and forgery. The jury deadlocked, though the vote was 8-4 for conviction.

While Perez was awaiting retrial, investigators examining his financial records found unexplained deposits. They also learned that he had remodeled his home extensively -- all on a police officer's $58,000 base salary. Playing hardball, prosecutors threatened to file charges against Perez's wife, a civilian employee of the L.A.P.D. whom they claimed knew of his illegal activities. With a young daughter at home, Perez didn't want to run the risk that his wife might end up in jail. He decided to cut a deal.

On Sept. 8, 1999, Perez's lawyer, Winston Kevin McKesson, a protege of Johnnie Cochran Jr., negotiated an agreement in which his client promised to expose misconduct within Rampart Crash in exchange for a five-year prison sentence, immunity from further prosecution and total immunity for his wife. With time off for good behavior, Perez faces only 16 months behind bars, most of it in a secure Los Angeles jail rather than the harsher confines of a state prison. District Attorney Garcetti realized that this was a sweet deal for Perez, but he had been told by the officer's lawyer that an innocent man was serving 23 years in prison for a crime he hadn't committed. So Garcetti agreed to the deal, and Perez began talking. What he had to say in more than 50 hours of interrogation shocked even the hardened L.A.P.D. detectives who interviewed him.

When the investigators asked Perez about the cocaine thefts that had ultimately led them to him, the Crash officer told them that he had started dealing drugs in 1997. That year, he and Durden had arrested a suspect and found a bag containing a pound of powder cocaine. They kept the drugs -- along with the suspect's pager. When the pager went off, Perez pretended to be a dealer and took an order for a quarter-pound of cocaine. According to Perez, the officers went out to make the arrest, but Durden said: " 'Screw it. Let's just sell to him.' And I completely agreed."

The two men kept the pager and made two more deals, netting $10,000. Perez then turned his attention to the police evidence lockers, which promised a much richer drug harvest. While Perez pleaded guilty to stealing the eight pounds of cocaine, police investigators say it is very likely that he took more, for some of the drugs he checked out and then returned had been destroyed by the time of the plea agreement.

On the topic of the framings, Perez told investigators that in Rampart Crash it was commonplace to set up gang members on weapons and drug charges. He added that such tactics had the approval of his commanding officer, Sgt. Edward Ortiz, who is due to stand trial. "Ortiz was the heart, and we were the arteries," Perez said. "Ortiz had the final say-so on everything."

In his interviews with police investigators, Perez made clear that he saw nothing wrong with setting up gang members. "These guys don't play by the rules; we don't have to play by the rules," Perez said. "They're out there committing murders and then they intimidate the witnesses, so the witnesses don't show up in court. So they're getting away with murder every day."

As Perez saw it, he was evening the score. "When I planted a case on someone, did I feel bad?" he asked. "Not once. I felt good. I felt, you know, I'm taking this guy off the streets."

One of the suspects Perez helped frame was Rafael Zambrano. In Perez's account, a group of Crash officers invaded a gang party and ordered everyone in attendance to their knees. Brian Hewitt, the officer who would later be fired for beating a gang member in the substation, marched back and forth, arbitrarily singling out gang members and telling other officers the false charges on which to book them. Zambrano was charged with possession of a gun; he pleaded guilty to avoid a longer sentence and served 16 months in prison.

Perez and his accomplices did not stop at false imprisonment. They also shot unarmed people, then made up stories to justify the shootings. Running after a group of gang members in 1996, Crash officers opened fire, hitting Juan Saldana, 21, in the chest and back. Instead of calling an ambulance, the officers planted a gun alongside Saldana and calmly concocted a story to tell their superiors. By the time an ambulance arrived, it was too late for Saldana, who died soon after being taken to a hospital. Afterward, the officers celebrated at the Short Stop, a sports bar near Dodger Stadium. Such celebrations became frequent in Rampart Crash, where officer-involved shootings leaped from three in 1995 to a dozen in 1996.

Of all Perez's confessions, however, the Ovando shooting was the most disturbing to investigators. The truth of the Ovando case emerged bit by bit in the questioning of Perez by police investigators and Deputy District Attorney Richard Rosenthal. At first, Perez said Ovando had entered the observation room and was shot by Durden. Perez hadn't seen a gun on Ovando, but his view had been blocked by Durden; he said he moved to one side and fired immediately, hitting Ovando.

This story didn't ring true to the investigators, who questioned Ovando and then tracked down his friend Nene, whose real name is Alex Macias. Though the two men had not seen each other since the day Ovando was shot, they told identical stories about events prior to the shooting.

Ovando, Macias and Valenzuela had been camping out in the vacant building where the shooting took place. On Oct. 11, the day before the incident, they were rousted by Perez and Durden and ordered to leave. They waited in a nearby building until Perez and Durden had left and then returned to spend the night. The next day, while Valenzuela was away, Ovando and Macias were rousted again, handcuffed and led once more into the dark room the officers were using as an observation post. Perez told Macias to go and said that Ovando would soon follow. Macias did not think Ovando was in danger. As Macias and Valenzuela were talking outside the building, they heard shots, just as she had told Toister.

When detectives presented Perez with this account, his memory improved. His new version was that he had heard voices outside the observation room and turned in time to see Durden shoot Ovando. Perez then fired three times. Durden, now awaiting trial, has yet to tell his story, but defense lawyers for other indicted Crash officers question Perez's claim that he shot reflexively. A more malign explanation, as yet untested in court, is that Perez tried to finish off Ovando so that there would be no witness to the crime. The motive for the shooting remains a mystery. Ovando told me that he thinks that he was handcuffed when he was shot and that he still has no idea why the

officers shot him. He agrees with Perez on the crucial point that Durden fired first.

Perez was most explicit in describing how Ovando had been framed. A few days earlier, Perez said that Durden had taken the Tec-22 semiautomatic from a gang member. Durden had filed off the serial number so it could be used as a "throwaway" gun in emergencies. This was one of them. After the Ovando shooting, Perez said, Durden took the gun from his backpack, wiped it clean of fingerprints with a rag and placed it next to Ovando. Perez said he remembered the backpack because he had kidded Durden when it became tangled in the fence the two officers scaled to enter the building.

Oddly, the fence that had aroused Toister's suspicions was one of the few matters on which Perez had been accurate. The rest of his testimony was a series of lies, and the theory that Ovando was a gang assassin a total invention. When Toister learned of the frame-up, she said that she also felt like a victim. Judge Czuleger, who had prevented her cross-examination of Perez and Durden, apologized to the public defender. In an interview, Czuleger told me that he was shocked by the injustice that had occurred in his court. "It was," he said, "the worst day of my judicial career." But it was worse for Ovando, who spent three years in prison and remains paralyzed.

For Bernard Parks, the 56-year-old Chief Of Police, Sept. 15, 1999, started well. That morning, he had presided at a ceremony honoring 18 officers who were being awarded the department's coveted medal of valor. A few hours later, Parks received a phone call that banished his good mood. It was from the district attorney's office, and it was about Rafael Perez. At a hastily called news conference that afternoon, Parks announced the first confessions of this rogue cop.

Rampart was another challenge in what, for Parks, had already been a bumpy ride as chief. A hardened 35-year L.A.P.D. veteran, Parks joined the force in 1965 and worked his way up through the ranks at a time when it was difficult for an African-American to rise above sergeant. In 1997, with the support of reformers who wanted to restrain L.A.P.D. excesses and officers who wanted the department to be run by one of its own, Parks was named police chief by Mayor Richard Riordan.

His honeymoon was short. Early on, he alienated rank-and-file officers with an order requiring investigation of every citizen complaint against a police officer. Complaints soared, and the Police Protective League, the police union, said officers were getting bogged down in paperwork. Too bad, said Parks, who had a reputation as a strict disciplinarian. The complaint system, he observed, was intended to serve the public, not the L.A.P.D.

Parks responded to the Rampart scandal with similar vigor. The day after the news conference, he had Javier Ovando flown from a prison in Salinas, Calif., to Los Angeles, where he was able to meet his 2 1/2-year-old daughter, Destiny, for the first time. Parks also named a board of inquiry that produced a thoughtful report critical of the lack of supervision in Rampart Crash. The police chief then disbanded all the department's Crash units and replaced them with antigang squads that have tighter supervision.

While Rampart started as a police scandal, it has rapidly exposed deep flaws in the entire Los Angeles County legal system.

According to Michael Judge, the city's chief public defender, "The criminal-justice system in Los Angeles County is seriously out of balance." Corrupt police officers have been protected by laws, ballot initiatives and court decisions that have tipped the scale against defendants. "Taken together, these changes in the criminal justice system have made it easier for police to lie and get away with it," said Harland Braun, a defense attorney who represents Michael Buchanan, one of the Rampart officers about to go on trial.

California's "three strikes" law, one of the nation's toughest, has played a special role. The law carries a 25-years-to-life sentence. To avoid being subjected to "three strikes," many defendants plead guilty. Guilty pleas, in turn, reduce the chances of police officers getting caught in lies. "Police officers aren't stupid," said Judge. "They know that less than 5 percent of felony cases come to trial. So the odds are very good they won't face cross-examination on what is in their report."

In those cases when Crash officers were compelled to testify, they were often helped along by Los Angeles County judges. In an astonishing number of Crash cases, these judges showed an almost total lack of skepticism about whether the officers had made legitimate arrests. The L.A.P.D. Board of Inquiry report on the Rampart scandal cites a case in which members of Rampart Crash searched the cars of people attending a gang member's funeral. Drugs were found in one vehicle, and the driver was tried and convicted. Commenting on this case, Dan Koenig, the L.A.P.D. commander who wrote the board of inquiry report, asked, "Where is the probable cause in a case like this?"

Five Los Angeles County judges interviewed for this article said that they have presided over trials in which they suspected police officers of lying. "When police officers lie, it's usually about probable cause," said Judge Czuleger, who handled the Ovando trial. But another veteran judge, speaking on condition of anonymity, said, "An officer who will lie about probable cause will lie about anything."

A Los Angeles judge with long experience, who also insisted that he not be named, believes that judges were perhaps unwittingly complicit in the Rampart scandal. "It's said we need to change the police culture, and that's absolutely necessary," he remarked. "But we have to change the judicial culture too. The judicial culture is hostile to the defense. You'll hear judges talking at lunch about some stupid thing a defense attorney did -- they rarely talk that way about a prosecutor. I don't think they're aware how biased they sound."

Judges are also under tremendous pressure to keep their jobs. "If a judge is labeled soft on crime, it's a sure ticket to no longer being a

judge," said McKesson, Perez's lawyer. A judge who doesn't seem tough enough can pretty much expect an election challenge from an ambitious prosecutor, a daunting prospect in Los Angeles County, where even a bare-bones campaign can cost $100,000.

Taken together, these forces have conspired to create a situation in which there is a presumption of guilt, especially for gang members. Those who have tried to go against this trend have met with little success -- or worse. In 1997, Michael Kraut, a deputy district attorney, refused to prosecute a Perez arrest because he thought the Crash officer was lying. As a result, he was publicly criticized by his boss, Garcetti, and other deputies in the district attorney's office.

In 1995, Evan Freed, a deputy city attorney, grew concerned about the truthfulness of charges being brought against a young African-American man accused of carrying a concealed weapon after an alleged burglary. As a result of inconsistencies in the reports of Edward Ruiz and Jon Paul Taylor, officers in the L.A.P.D.'s 77th Street Division, Freed urged that charges be dismissed against the man, who had no criminal record. Judge Kenneth Chotiner agreed, praising the attorney. A few months later, Freed was fired by the city attorney for supposed professional weaknesses that included "deference to statements made by defense witnesses, recommending unreasonably low sentences and [a] low conviction rate."

The behavior of the officers in this case gnawed at Chotiner, who discussed it with a civil rights lawyer, who in turn reported it to the U.S. attorney. An F.B.I. investigation confirmed the suspicions of judge and prosecutor -- the defendant was innocent, he had no weapon and there had never been a burglary in the first place. The case took five years to play out. In August, Ruiz and Taylor pleaded guilty to violating the civil rights of the man they had falsely accused. They are awaiting sentencing. Judge Chotiner believes that the Ruiz-Taylor case and the Rampart scandal suggest the need for "a thorough citywide investigation to see if such actions are widespread."

The citizens of Los Angeles are not blameless. What distinguishes this scandal from other Los Angeles police scandals is not just its scale (massive) but the sheer lack of public outcry in response to it. The muted reaction may have something to do with the fact that, unlike the Rodney King beating and the assault on the truck driver Reginald Denny during the 1992 riots, the Ovando shooting was not especially suited for TV. Nonetheless, the story has received vigorous coverage from The Los Angeles Times and weekly newspapers -- and still people remain relatively unperturbed over police abuses.

In interviews in the Rampart area this summer, I found residents far more worried about emboldened gangs than police misconduct. Residents say that officers, now concerned about being perceived as overly aggressive, too often cruise down the street in their patrol cars -- a practice known within the L.A.P.D. as drive and wave -- instead of engaging in aggressive policing. "People have to make a choice, and most residents fear the gangs more than the police," said Gregory Rodriguez, a Latino writer who until recently lived on the edge of Rampart, where freshly painted graffiti attest to the resurgence of gangs. Violent crime is up 9 percent this year in poor neighborhoods after years of decline. Gang-related homicides are up 116 percent. Arrests and field interviews of suspected criminals are down.

The predominantly Latino community of Rampart has been supportive of the L.A.P.D. "One reason the Rampart case hasn't produced the public outcry of the King case is that this is not a case with white officers and a black victim," noted Erwin Chemerinsky, a University of Southern California law professor who has reviewed the L.A.P.D.'s Rampart inquiry for the Police Protective League. A 1997 poll by the Center for the Study of Los Angeles at Loyola Marymount University found that Latinos had higher regard for the police than any ethnic group; blacks had the least. After the Perez disclosures, police supporters staged a well-attended pro-Rampart rally; a protest rally scheduled for the following day never came off.

But the main reason for a noticeable lack of outrage may simply be that Angelenos of all ethnicities tacitly condone harsh measures to suppress the gangs. "For a long time, there's been a wink and a nod," said Gary Fullerton, a former L.A.P.D. detective and a lawyer. "That's why we have a war on crime. The people want the criminals caught. The chief wants them caught. The supervisors of the officers want them caught. The politicians want them caught. It's the system. But when something happens, it's the officer. The system goes all out to get him."

But the most immediate victim of the Rampart scandal is not likely to be a police officer but Gil Garcetti, the hard-hitting district attorney who made a point of prosecuting gangs. Garcetti, who is up for re-election next month, lags far behind in the polls to his head deputy, Stephen Cooley. Garcetti could find himself in even worse shape if he loses what he acknowledges will be difficult prosecutions of the four Rampart officers: Sgt. Edward Ortiz and Sgt. Brian Liddy and Officers Paul Harper and Michael Buchanan.

Perez will be the principal prosecution witness in these trials. Harland Braun says that Garcetti struck "a Faustian bargain" with Perez, who "knowingly framed innocent civilians and is now trying to frame innocent cops." On the first point, at least, Braun is persuasive. Instead of arresting gang kingpins, Perez focused his energies on minor gang members like Ovando, described by a prosecution source as "little more than a gang mascot." Amazingly, no one who was framed by Perez and had his conviction set aside has been arrested again.

Speaking in his 18th-floor office with a soaring view of downtown, Garcetti concedes Perez made "mistakes" in some of his recollections. Perez also flunked five polygraph tests. A judge has ruled that this information will be admissible in the trial of the officers because Perez took the tests as a condition of his plea agreement. "Perez is who he is," Garcetti said philosophically in an interview. "He's a liar. He tells the truth, too, but can you tell when he's telling the truth and when he's not telling the truth? That's why it's important for us to corroborate what he is telling. If we can't corroborate what he is telling us, then you don't have a criminal prosecution."

Unlike Garcetti, Bernard Parks, the chief of police, isn't an elected official, but he is also on the defensive. Parks has been faulted on every aspect of the Rampart scandal -- for reacting too slowly and for overreacting, for disciplining officers who were only marginally involved and for not disciplining enough. He is engaged in a running battle with The Los Angeles Times, which he accused on the L.A.P.D. Web site of waging "a holy jihad against this department."

Parks expresses frustration at receiving so little credit for reforming an "unhealthy" department. "We have not gotten the best balanced reporting from our local press," he told me as he sat at a table in his memorabilia-filled office. "Most people are not aware that the Los Angeles Police Department found the misconduct and immediately took action."

Parks went on. "In three years, although people say the civil-service system is very difficult to work with, we have disciplined over 800 officers and terminated 113," he said in measured tones. "We have had 200 officers leave the department while being investigated. We have had a number of officers that we refused to promote because of their prior disciplinary history."

Parks's frustration is likely to grow, for his actions, however impressive, have done little to mollify his critics. Relations between the chief and the rank and file are rocky. A Police Protective League official claims that Parks has tried to "reform by fear." A prosecutor compares Parks's relationship with his officers to a strict parent who raises obedient children who grow up seething with rage. Command officers are also in quiet rebellion. The L.A.P.D. board of rights, composed primarily of captains, fired only 3 of the 14 officers whom Parks sought to discipline in the Rampart scandal. Fifty-one other Rampart officers remain under investigation, but it seems very unlikely that any will be disciplined based on accusations by Perez.

Critics of the L.A.P.D. are angry that Parks has not opened up the force to civilian oversight. According to David Smith, the police captain, the chief's attitude typifies "the arrogance of power that afflicts L.A.P.D. leadership." Jeffrey Eglash, the city's inspector general, is frustrated the L.A.P.D. has not been more willing to let the public play a role in minding the police force. "It is unfortunate that the department seems to view the inspector general's office as an adversary when a cooperative and constructive relationship would better serve the L.A.P.D. and the city," Eglash remarked.

The city has been hit by a barrage of civil rights lawsuits -- 68 at last count, and growing -- arising from the scandal. James Hahn, the city attorney, has estimated this could cost the city at least $125 million.

With the city's recent acceptance of the consent decree, though, the focus now is less on the lawsuits than on reforms that can be accomplished with federal oversight. The decree, administered by a federal judge, has the potential to bring about many of the changes proposed by the Christopher Commission after the beating of Rodney King. It will require the L.A.P.D. to conduct computerized tracking of officers with a history of misconduct. It will monitor arrests to see if officers are using racial profiling. The consent decree will also expand the public's access to information about L.A.P.D. operations.

Parks, for his part, has promised he will carry out the decree, which is aimed at rooting out corruption and ending what the Justice Department has called a "pattern or practice" of civil rights infringements. "We are now committed," Parks told reporters late last month. "We are not going to drag our feet."

Still, the chief may have heeded the call too late. "If Bernie had embraced civilian oversight, he'd be a hero, but he just can't do it," said Katherine Mader, the city's first inspector general and now a deputy district attorney who has just been elected judge. "He's like a figure in a Greek tragedy in which his need for total control is his fatal flaw." The same might be said for Mayor Riordan, who fought tooth and nail against the decree and now seems likely to claim it as part of his political legacy. Riordan's surrender is an acknowledgment that control of the L.A.P.D. has slipped away from both the mayor and the chief.

While the Los Angeles Police Department has always relied on aggressive policing, it has rarely been corrupt. This is largely the legacy of William Parker, who led the force from 1950 to 1968. During his tenure, Parker remodeled the department in his stern image, making corruption a firing offense. He also made the L.A.P.D. a political power, saying "the future of America may well rest in the police."

Rafael Perez was never really part of that culture. Unlike most L.A.P.D. officers, he came from out of state and was recruited at a time when the department, in the opinion of Commander Koenig, was relying too heavily on telephone interviews and not doing a good enough job screening candidates.

Perez's ethnicity also set him apart. "There aren't many Puerto Ricans in Los Angeles, let alone the L.A.P.D," said McKesson, who is black and was raised in South Central Los Angeles. "The Puerto Rican culture is closer to African-American culture in some ways than it is to Latino culture in Los Angeles." The lawyer believes that Perez never felt comfortable in his adopted home. Within the department, his closest friends, including Durden and Mack, were African-Americans.

To many of those who worked with him, Perez remains a mystery. "When he wanted to be Latino, he was Rafael," said Officer Ethan Cohan, a former colleague in Crash. "When he wanted to be black, he was Rafe." During an early interrogation after he became an informant, Perez was asked if he wanted to be addressed as Rafael. "Call me Ray," he responded.

Perez's criminal history is equally murky. It is unclear, for example, when he went bad. Esaw Booker, whom Perez arrested in 1992 for

cocaine possession and whose conviction has since been overturned, has claimed that he was framed by Perez and other officers. What's potentially important about Booker's account is that it dates from when Perez was working with Mack in the narcotics unit -- years before he entered Rampart.

While it's not clear when Perez first broke the law, there's no doubt that he, like his friend David Mack, enjoyed the dual role of criminal and cop. One Rampart officer, who declined to be named, told me that Perez spoke admiringly of a book, "Point Blank," about corruption in the New York Police Department; it includes a chapter relating how cocaine seized in the famous French Connection case disappeared from a property room and was replaced with bags of flour.

Perez, not surprisingly, claims that it was the aggressive L.A.P.D. culture itself that corrupted him. In a tearful statement at his sentencing earlier this year, Perez said he had become consumed by the "us-against-them ethos of the overzealous cop" after he transferred to Rampart Crash. His was a cautionary tale. "My job became an intoxicant that I lusted after," he said. "I began to lust also for things of the flesh. The end result: I cheated on my wife, I cheated on my employers and I cheated on all of you, the people of Los Angeles." Perez warned rookie officers not to be seduced by the "pressure of status, numbers and impressing supervisors" or by "flip, awful statements" like the one that appeared over the door of Rampart Crash, "We intimidate those who intimidate others."

"To those mottoes, I offer this," Perez concluded. "Whoever chases monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster himself."

Monster or not, Perez has had a deeper impact on the L.A.P.D. than any other officer in its acclaimed and troubled history -- even more than the officers involved in the beating of Rodney King. While the King incident was a public relations disaster, many officers dismissed it as an isolated incident that occurred at the distant fringes of Los Angeles. Rampart is in the heart of the city, and it is the division where many officers prove themselves. The crimes described by Perez involved both blatant frame-ups and corruption and demonstrate that there are fundamental problems at the core of the L.A.P.D.

"Things need to be fixed," says Javier Ovando, the Rampart scandal's most famous victim. The fixing will now be done at the direction of a federal judge. Rafael Perez has guaranteed that power in Los Angeles will no longer remain in the hands of the police.

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