

EDWARD A. FLYNN

Police took appropriate steps during the election

By EDWARD A. FLYNN

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There is a political adage I learned long ago: "If you're explaining, you're losing." The implication is that if you're explaining, you're on defense and that never feels good.

Politics is one thing; governing is quite another. People have a right to criticize their officials and a right to an explanation. Where it gets muddy, is where I am. It's an election year. I have the privilege of leading an essential civic institution. To be effective, that civic institution depends on public trust and confidence. When that trust is called into question by those with obvious political agendas, I must respond.

The Milwaukee Police Department is not in anybody's pocket. The Milwaukee Police Department takes no partisan posture on public issues. The Milwaukee Police Department does no one's political bidding. And no one asked us to.

What the Milwaukee Police Department does is promote an environment in which elections can take place safely. We preserve the peace. We ensure safety at polling places. We see to it that people are permitted to cast their votes unmolested and free of intimidation. And we investigate complaints of violation of election laws. Some election-related complaints are more serious than others, and that's where decisions about priorities are made.

After marking 40 years in public service, 22 of them as a chief executive, I am not going to grow faint at the prospect that I or my department will be maligned for political purposes. And I "get" that who gets to vote, and whose base is affected by that decision, are big deals.

The election of 2008 was a big deal. And the Milwaukee Police Department treated it that way. On election day 2008, we assigned 50 police personnel to respond to election-related complaints in the field. We paired police officers with attorneys from the district attorney's office, and they traveled from poll to poll. The Milwaukee Police Department responded to about 64 election-related calls for service that day.

It is important to know how the process works. The district attorney assigns cases to MPD after receiving them from the City of Milwaukee Election Commission. We are not the first point of contact but work in close partnership with the DA and others to work through the cases as they are assigned. The district attorney and I speak frequently. At no time has he voiced any concern about how these investigations are being conducted.

As for the investigations, we thoroughly investigated every case brought to the Police Department. Some cases were closed as poll worker error. Some were sent to the DA for review. Some cases were charged; about 29 others are still open, including false voter registration allegations, which are extensive investigations that require interviewing numerous persons - many of whom scattered to the four winds after election day.

And finally, there seems to be confusion surrounding a detective who worked on election fraud cases until his retirement in January 2009. He was never transferred out of the unit, nor was the unit disbanded. The unit, in its entirety, was moved from the auspices of the Criminal Investigation Bureau to the Professional Performance Division, consolidating CIB's Special Investigation Unit with PPD's Special Investigation Section. That was the notorious "transfer." The combined unit still exists.

Last week, Wisconsin Attorney General J.B. Van Hollen announced that as a result of the work of the Election Fraud Task Force, of which Milwaukee police are a part, five people were charged March 8 with election fraud. We continue to work in partnership with the district attorney's and the attorney general's offices and the Election Commission as part of the Election Fraud Task Force.

In a world in which e-mail gossip turns up in a political column, then enters the blogosphere and then becomes grist for talk radio and television news, it is all too easy for innuendo to morph into fact; for conspiracy theories based on false premises to become conventional wisdom.

I suspect that, despite the facts as I have presented them, negative campaign rhetoric will be based on the misrepresentation of the work of the MPD. But my hope is that the community, whose trust MPD deserves and has earned, will take the time to separate myth from reality.

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