

An Exposition of Police Badge Policy: Ten Reasons in Support of a Single-badge

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Modern police departments allow for a variety of police badges, i.e., one for patrol officers, one for supervisors, one for detectives, etc. While the rationale behind this policy may have been embedded in tradition, its continuance may speak unfavorably to the department's managerial sophistication.

In multiple-badge departments, badges vary from a basic stainless steel version which is small, crude, and of limited appeal, to a golden version which is larger and has ornaments attached to it. The reasoning behind this is certainly one that is motivated by a desire to signify rank or function, to stimulate motivation within the force, to make a better impression on the public, or a combination of all of these. Yet, despite the elegance of this reasoning, the policy may have a counter-effect on the overall performance of the department, and, if so, should be rethought.

In addition to the higher cost of having to order a limited number of different badges, this essay will expound the intrinsic benefits of the single-badge policy. Also, while the lessons to be learned may be more germane to larger police departments where the numbers are immense, the arguments that will be presented should apply equally well to smaller departments.

The Basic Premise

The basic premise of this essay is that a single-badge policy can help achieve the following goals:

1-empowering officers below the rank of sergeant (a clear majority in any department) by removing another unnecessary symbol of

segregation within the ranks; this should benefit most and spurn only a relative few;

2-increasing the department's productivity by focusing on shared values and common direction; one force, one badge, one pride, one commitment, indivisible;

3-reinforcing institutional loyalty by demonstrating that managers care for *all* officers, not just for themselves;

4-displaying the civility of leadership by demonstrating the willingness of superiors to give up what appears to be a coveted privilege to improve the department's overall morale;

5-enhancing the professional status and good will of management in the eyes of local police unions and associations;

6-assuring the political community of the department's true concern for quality; it values substance over appearance and performance over decoration;

7-proving to the public that the department is truly responsible; it can rectify its policies without being asked or pressured; and

8-achieving all of the above without any serious disadvantage to the status quo of the department.

Three Basic Assumptions

The following assumptions should be considered:

1-Because multiple-badge policies may have been supported by a large number of police departments, that, in itself, does not justify the continuance of such policies.

2-Augmenting the self-esteem of lower-ranking officers does not mean reducing the self-esteem of superiors. Both groups win when the department wins.

3-Adopting a single-badge policy does not necessitate using any of the current badges; departments should select the badge that can best capture their true essence without dividing their members between "Stainless Steelers" and "Golders."

A Methodological Qualifier

The best way to ascertain the propriety of a one-badge vs. a multiple-badge policy is to conduct a survey asking department members to indicate their preference. In para-military organizations, however, the survey method may be undesirable, because of the distraction of tradition, authority, discipline, or a combination of these. Also, given the size of large police departments, the survey may be particularly unproductive, because, based on numbers alone, its results should be easily predictable. The only other legitimate way to determine the issue is to rely on "pure reasoning;" the use of qualitative arguments that can logically show the advantages of one policy over the other. This I shall do next.

Ten Arguments in Support of a Single-Badge Policy

1- The idea of badges is unrelated to the idea of rank. A badge signifies police authority which is constant throughout one's career. A badge also serves as a miniature "Coat of Arms" which, in old English tradition, indicates "identification with, and pride in, a denomination or a clan." Rank, on the other hand, is a symbol of bureaucratic power that is depicted by a different set of tokens—stars, eagles, or chevrons. Using the badge as a symbol of rank is contentious because authority emphasizes "inclusion," while rank, "exclusion." A single-badge policy can resolve this tension.

2-In police organizations, superiors need no "ego boosters" because they get them from the "aphrodisiac of power." Police officers, on the other hand, need "every ounce of ego boosting." The organizational structure makes them "subordinates" and bureaucracy places them at the "bottom of the totem pole." Eliminating the multiple-badge policy can help alleviate this sense of subjugation.

3-The use of gold badges is a two-way disappointment; it fails to impress the public, who can't tell the difference, while discourages the majority of officers who are too crudely reminded of the difference. The unnecessary display of power symbols represents a "negative motivator." It deepens the division between the "powerful" and the "powerless" and frustrates the latter's aspiration to excel. A single-badge policy can minimize that frustration.

4-If gold badges were truly meant to signify importance, the meaning may have been misdirected. In the objective reality of importance, those who fight crime, encounter the dangerous, and endanger their lives for the citizens are undoubtedly the more important officers. Denying this is denying the truth of policing. Yet, these are rewarded with stainless steel while those with gold. Philosophically, it is paradoxical.

5-Differentiating police officers by badge undermines their professional pride. Pride is intrinsic, constant, and indivisible. Relegating pride to what amounts to "first class pride" and "second-class pride" is demeaning. A single-badge policy, on the other hand, ensures the solidarity of *all* officers regardless of rank, status, position, or function; hence its classical positioning over the heart.

6- There is an internal contradiction in the multiple-badge policy. If it can be shown that a gold badge is necessary to differentiate between the status of a sergeant and that of an officer, it *should* also follow that plenty of "diamonds and gems" must be necessary to differentiate between the status of a police chief and that of captain, lieutenant, or sergeant. This contradiction makes the multiple-badge policy arbitrarily divisive.

7-When police departments commit themselves to community-policing, they are expected to also commit themselves to a community-policing mentality, one that is based on professional maturity and collegial collaboration. Using the badge as a symbol of rank or status betrays that mentality and reminds the officers of the old habits of organizational elitism. The continuing use of multiple badges can, as a result, weaken the officers' confidence in the fidelity of their department's to community-policing.

8- If military tradition is a guide, there is strong evidence to support the single-badge policy. The Air Borne, the Rangers, the Submariners, and similarly distinguished services all have a single-badge policy. Indeed, dressing down "like a soldier" has been a trait of great military leaders, and serving without a rank insignia has long characterized the Israeli and Chinese armies. The point here is not to make soldiers out of police, but to make dedicated officers out of police.

9-Modern management, especially in the private sector, has been discarding traditional practices and symbols to improve workers' performance. Traditional work environments are being replaced with new motivators including informal meetings, dress-down Fridays, and other means of removing distinctions between workers. Sound police research indicates that similar innovations can work equally well in policing.

10-The vast majority of police officers believe, rightly or wrongly, that departmental policies are intrusive means enacted basically to restrict their freedom and, arguably, to make their lives less pleasant. By adopting a single-badge policy, the department can make a profound statement deflecting this criticism: the leadership is *truly* interested in empowering you, in enriching your career, and in making your pride in the department, and in yourself, shine. This statement, if for no other reason, can underscore the department's nobility and galvanize the loyalty of all its officers.