

Public Misunderstanding of "Officer Safety"

How many times have you been pulled over by a police officer, and when the confrontation was complete you said to yourself, "Boy, was he rude!" or "There was no need for him to treat me like that." Well, unfortunately, the public is prone to misinterpret an officer being safe for being rude. Unfortunately, the actions taken during a "routine" traffic stop which are interpreted as being rude are necessary steps that insure the safety of both officer and civilian.

Imagine for a moment that you are a police officer on duty. You observe a vehicle traveling 36 miles per hour on a 30 mile per hour road. You decide to stop the vehicle and give the driver a verbal warning in hopes that he will slow down and avoid an accident further down the road. As you walk up to the driver's side window, you are shot 10 times in the face and chest and the driver leaves you for dead. This situation actually occurred in San Diego, CA, 18 months ago. Many like it occur every day, and this is in the forefront of the mind of every officer.

Another thing that an officer must keep in mind during a traffic stop is the safety of the civilian driver. Same situation as above, but instead, as the vehicle stops, the driver gets out of his car and is struck by a passing motorist. Again, this happens more than you would like to believe.

The FBI conducts semi-annual research regarding the subject of officer safety and procedural changes which increase the chances of law enforcement officers surviving their high risk work day. These are the some of the procedures which they have published in regards to traffic stops, and which myself and other trainers have used to train their mobile patrolmen in hopes of reducing their risk:

Step #1: Park your patrol car approximately 1.5 car lengths behind, and with the passenger's side headlight even with the center of the violators vehicle. By doing this you allow yourself, as the patrolman, an ample distance for reaction. By parking off center you also allow a "hallway" for yourself to conduct business safely.

Step #2: Turn your vehicle's high beams, spotlight, code lights and any other light on your vehicle on and facing towards the stopped vehicle. This will make it hard for the violator to see where you are and get a good shot in. It also allows you to see what is occurring inside the vehicle clearly.

Step #3: At no time do you allow the driver to exit his vehicle. It is safer for him and again puts him at a disadvantage for completing any violent acts against you.

Step #4: While walking up to the vehicle, look at and lightly press down on the trunk. This reduces the chance of a hidden person coming out of the trunk and firing on the officer. (This does occasionally happen.)

Step #5: When reaching the rear window, place your thumb print in the lower driver's side of the window. If you are unfortunate enough to be shot or severely injured in the process, this allows positive identification of the suspect vehicle.

Step #6: Position yourself at the rear of the driver's side front door. It will prevent the driver from opening his door too swiftly and striking you. It also places you with a good line of sight and the driver at a disadvantaged position making it harder for him to surprise you.

Step #7: When the stop is complete assist the driver in safely reentering traffic.

It is a sad definition of U.S. society that officers must constantly fear for their life and take such severe steps in situations like these, but they have no way of knowing who the bad guys are these days. The violent criminal could be anybody from a raggedy dressed man on a street corner to a upset office executive to the common housewife next door. The line dividing the good guys from the bad guys has thinned and the black and white have run together creating as large grey area.

It is not discounted that there are the occasional genuinely rude officers, but mostly the officer has a job to do and would like to complete it the safest and most efficient way possible, and with the least amount of inconvenience to the driver of the stopped car.

Please remember, next time you are stopped for a violation of traffic regulations, that the officer is just doing his job and if you keep a positive attitude and cooperate then you will be back on your way in no time.