



Police prepare for Republican convention protests.

By David Morgan

2 July 2000

Reuters News

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PHILADELPHIA, July 2 (Reuters) - Philadelphia's police chief is determined to make sure protesters do not disrupt this month's Republican convention but says he will let them get "in my face" if it means avoiding the violence that has marked protests in other U.S. cities.

"I don't mind taking the first punch. I guarantee you, I will retaliate," police Chief John Timoney told Reuters. "But I'm willing to take the first punch. And so, if someone's in your face, in your face, that's fine. You can be in my face."

Timoney, an Irish-born, New York-bred career police officer, ruled out the use of tear gas. He said the city hopes to minimise ugly scenes by policing crowds with seasoned plainclothes cops who are less likely to snap under pressure than patrolmen in riot gear.

Not that he would fail to get tough if need be. "Nobody is going to disrupt the convention," the police commissioner said last week. "It ain't gonna happen."

The Republican National Convention, which runs from July 31 to Aug. 3, will bring 45,000 delegates, guests and journalists to Philadelphia to witness Texas Gov. George W. Bush's nomination for president.

But tens of thousands of demonstrators from across the United States hope to disrupt the proceedings with civil disobedience aimed at drawing attention to a range of causes from social justice and women's rights to labour and environmentalism.

The U.S. Secret Service is running security inside the convention and at main hotels, the FBI is handling intelligence and state police are providing escorts for dignitaries. That leaves Philadelphia's 6,800-strong police department to keep the streets of the 5th-largest U.S. city safe for delegates and clear of unruly crowds.

A national crime-fighting figure known for his progressive policing policies, the 52-year-old Timoney is a former top New York cop who has policed three other party conventions and devised security for the Democratic National Convention at Madison Square Garden in 1992.

After studying violent clashes between police and protesters at global trade talks in Seattle last year and World Bank meetings Washington in April, his ideas for Philadelphia seem calculated to keep tensions as low as possible.

For instance, where other cities might overwhelm protesters with uniformed police, Timoney said Philadelphia's "first line of defence" will be plainclothes civil affairs cops and detectives whose job it will be to deflect verbal taunts and talk down riled protesters.

"If you can take the initial verbal barrage, you can get people beyond it. And these civil affairs people are seasoned veterans. You can't get in their face," he explained. "There'll be uniforms around. But you won't see them in the sense that you see them in other cities - cops at the barricades."

Openly conscious of public relations, the commissioner does not intend to see news photos of protests awash in tear gas. "I've never used tear gas. I don't believe in gas," Timoney said. "In my opinion - my colleagues criticise me for this - but I think you use it only in extreme situations of riot and disorder.

"Pepper spray is a different story," he added, recalling the day several years ago when he had an aide at the NYPD spray the chemical agent in his face to prove a point to the American Civil Liberties Union. "It sucked. It hurt, and it hurt for about half an hour. But it's not going to kill you. Don't worry about it!"

Timoney will not talk in detail about his convention plans. But the public is likely to find police always close at hand.

"Seattle and Washington brought a new type of protester. They're much more sophisticated, much more organised and better trained than protest groups in the past," he said.

"We got one scheme for one thing, another scheme for another thing, a response mode for spontaneous stuff. We've got rapid response. We've got bikers. There are a whole variety of faces."

If his past strategies are any guide, there will be cops on buses and trains, cops by the dozen in motor patrol units, closely knit foot patrol teams, arrest squads shadowing potential troublemakers, paddy wagons with drivers at the ready and emergency reserves that can be marshaled onto the streets by the hundreds.

And with protesters refusing to limit their activities to prescribed free-speech zones, it is unclear how successful Timoney can be in avoiding clashes.

"This doesn't mean it won't come down to fisticuffs. It may," he said. "You can always reach agreement with people will meet you half way. But protesters are not going to come in and say, 'I think I'll block up Centre City. We're going to protest in front of the hotels.' No you're not. No you are not!"