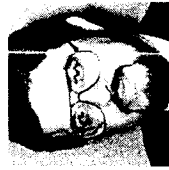


VIEWPOINTS

Police invasion of Oak Cliff dampens Hispanic fete



EDWARD RINCON

Citizens in attendance at the Calle Jefferson Festival in Oak Cliff recently were introduced to Dallas' latest innovation in crowd control, an apparent outcome of the city's difficulty in controlling the violence resulting from winter's Dallas Cowboys parade.

In response to a call that "gang violence" had erupted at the festival, Dallas police administrators deployed an arsenal that even the National Guard would have envied, including helicopters, ambulances, fire engines, paddy wagons and a tactical unit in full riot gear.

According to Chief Ben Click, 146 police officers were deployed to the Calle Jefferson Festival, which seems awesome in comparison to the 125 officers that are assigned to the much larger State Fair of Texas. Indeed, the major

media presented considerable footage of the event, comparing it to the more disturbing violence resulting from the Dallas Cowboys parade.

And what resulted from this "invasion of Oak Cliff"? Very little as described in eyewitness accounts by event sponsors, on-site security staff, attendees and vendors. These observers confirmed that:

- There was no "gang violence" at the festival. Hundreds of families were still enjoying the festivities when the "violence" was supposedly taking place.

- Only two arrests occurred within the event grounds, while the others occurred outside of the event area. By the time the Dallas police units arrived, the sheriff's department assigned to the event already had full control.

- Media-reported injuries to Dallas police were actually self-inflicted. Winds caused police to mace themselves, while a reported "stabbing" was an accidental cut that was not caused by any of the people arrested.

- Hispanic families, corporate sponsors and vendors reportedly felt more fear from the unusual show of force by police.

- Event promoters were not the only ones experiencing embarrassment and financial losses. The Jefferson area merchants received a big black eye from the negative publicity; many non-profits that raise funds for worthy causes were negatively affected; and corporate sponsors seeking to revitalize the Jefferson area may give second thoughts to the next Hispanic event.

- Despite the failure to confirm the existence of a "riot" or "gang violence," the event was forced to close two hours earlier than scheduled.

City officials, while somewhat apologetic, continue to support the police's response to the event, adding that "it's better to be safe than sorry" and "we prevented the further loss of lives." Using this logic, Hispanics would do well to cancel all future plans for celebrating their culture outdoors. However, with

almost a quarter of a million Hispanics living in Dallas, this is not likely to happen.

The decision of Dallas police administrators to shut down the festival despite evidence that the safety and security of attendees were fully restored sends a disturbing signal to Dallas Hispanics and to businesses that target this community. Indeed, the city of Dallas continues to dedicate significant financial resources to encourage businesses to locate to economically depressed areas like Oak Cliff. Businesses that decide to make this investment, like Fiesta Mart, often offer their support to such events and take part in celebrating the cultural heritage of these communities throughout the year.

It makes little sense for the city to undermine this process by deploying such an arsenal to minor incidences simply because someone suspects gang violence. Furthermore, Hispanic families should not be subjected to unnecessary fear and intimidation when they are

peacefully celebrating their culture.

Some observers have jokingly said that the definition of a "gang" by law enforcement officials is any gathering of five or more Hispanics. Certainly, the "invasion of Oak Cliff" suggests that Dallas police administrators could do some more homework on identifying Hispanic gangs and determining whether a Hispanic crowd is out of control.

Hispanics appreciate efforts to keep their communities safe; however, to follow a policy of forced crowd dispersement at events attended by law-abiding citizens can only engender increased animosity toward law enforcement officials, who appear selective in the events that they choose to "control." Worse yet, it tells local merchants that the city's interest in revitalizing their communities is someone's idea of a bad joke.

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