

August Vollmer: Why every police leader should know his name

Vollmer spearheaded revolutionary ideas that today's cops take for granted, like police call boxes and vehicle patrols. However, he still has more to teach.

By Nicholas Blauth

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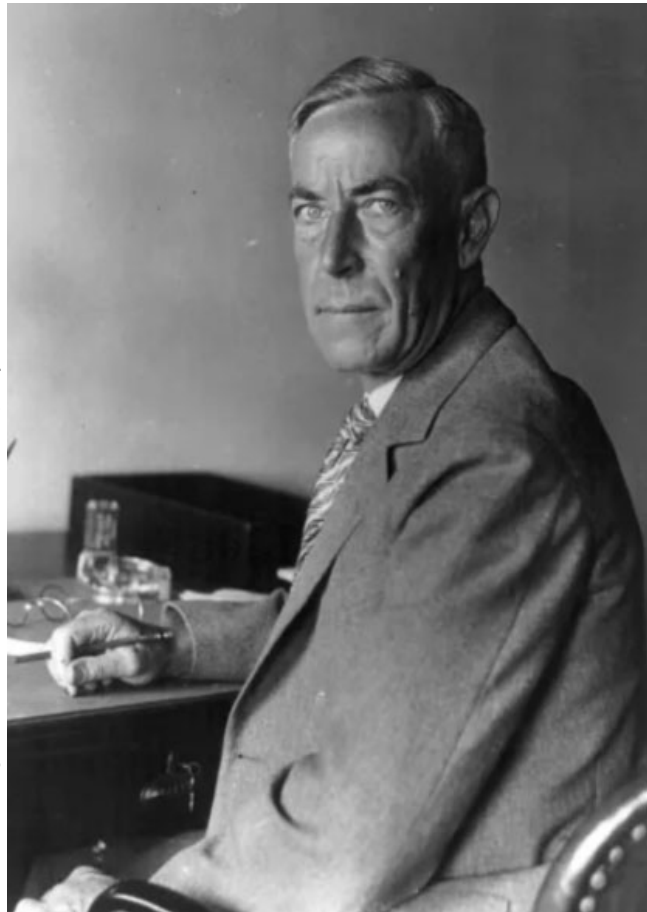
"The police are the public; the public are the police. The police are paid to give full-time attention to duties that are incumbent upon every citizen in the interest of community welfare and existence."

[Sir Robert Peel](#), 1829

Berkeley is known as one of the safest cities in California, boasting a flourishing community rife with academies and family life. However, it wasn't always this way. At the turn of the 20th century, the town saw an uptick in public crime like prostitution, gambling and local corruption.

It was in this environment that a young [August Vollmer](#), a veteran of the Spanish-American War with a humble education, would run for town marshal of the Berkeley Police Department. Vollmer would quickly turn the agency into the most modern police force in the country by implementing dozens of reforms that revolutionized American law enforcement as he sought to bring professional, academic changes to policing at a national level. He would end up labeled the "father of police administration" and the rest would be history.

But who was August Vollmer, and why was he so influential? Most importantly, why should he matter to modern law enforcement? The answer is simple: his leadership. Through everything he did, Vollmer reflected the values of courage, integrity and open-mindedness. These values directly led to his personal success in his fight against crime and indirectly raised his agency and subordinates to greatness. By reflecting the values Vollmer endorsed and lived, law enforcement may be able to replicate the great successes he had in such a turbulent era.



August Vollmer early career

Vollmer lacked a college diploma, but he made up for it with his inquisitive nature and impressive resume. In his youth, he sought out university lectures wherever he went and devoured books, pamphlets, essays and other academic work. Vollmer also helped create Berkeley's fire department, started a fuel and feed business, and liquidated all his earnings to fight as an enlisted soldier in the Philippines. Upon returning, he would make himself famous by jumping onto a runaway freight train and pulling its brakes to prevent a catastrophic crash.

With this varied background, Vollmer ran for police marshal at the behest of his friends, campaigning on a promise to rid the university town of "vice." He took the position in 1905.

Open-minded reform

Unlike others in America who saw the main role of police officers as guardians against outsiders and the crime they bring, Vollmer saw police as a crucial part in correcting public ethics, combating vice and creating a healthier society. He applied a holistic and almost sociological approach to law enforcement. He saw his job as a reflection of the people in their fight against disorder amongst themselves. Rather than label criminal "moral imbeciles," as was popular at the time, Vollmer derided the term as contributing nothing to the facts of the case or the reform of the

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criminal.

While not inherently creative, Vollmer's open-minded nature is what allowed his officers to excel. Vollmer would read countless journal articles published by criminology schools in Europe and then use their research to form the basis of his own department. These articles pushed Vollmer to incorporate many revolutionary ideas into his own police force. Like applying *modus operandi* to catch internationally notorious bank robbers and becoming among the first agencies in the United States to use new technologies like the automobile, fingerprint catalogs and polygraphs.

Vollmer would also apply his own experience to support what he read in these journals. While based in the Philippines, he saw that quick and decisive action often played a critical role in suppressing insurgent action. As such, he pushed for bike patrols so that officers could get to crime scenes faster than on foot. Ridiculed at first, these bike patrols evolved into automobiles and motorcycles, staples of any police agency across the globe today. Likewise, when Vollmer saw that reporting crimes accurately and quickly led to better success rates in catching criminals, he pushed his department to install police phone stations across the city. This innovation enabled officers to rapidly ask for reinforcements and report crimes in progress.



A leader with courage and conviction

Vollmer's open-minded and scientific approach to law enforcement was also a key part of how he wished officers to act. An advocate of both rigorous testing and higher education for officers, Vollmer writes, "With intelligence, with training, with honesty and sincerity of purpose, the criminal element can be controlled." Vollmer would actively recruit UC Berkeley students to fill his ranks and advocated for all agencies to require police officers to attain a bachelor's level education.

One of the Berkeley students-turned-cop was [Walter Gordon](#). While teaching a criminology course, Vollmer convinced Gordon to work for the police department while Gordon finished his law degree. Gordon accepted and would go on to work at Berkeley as a law enforcement officer for over a decade.

Yet Gordon was a controversial hire at the time because he was Black. As the first Black police officer in the city, Gordon policed majority-white neighborhoods in a majority-white police force. Vollmer received dozens of notes demanding he revoke Gordon's official status, and the public pressured Gordon so heavily that he debated giving up entirely. Gordon walked into Vollmer's office one day and asked to be stationed in another district, to which Vollmer replied that Gordon would be placed where he was needed, and he was needed precisely where he was currently.

When several white officers confronted Vollmer and threatened to leave the force if Gordon didn't leave, Vollmer told the officers that all they needed to do was leave their badge and gun at the door. Vollmer's courage and his faith in Gordon would inspire Gordon to flourish both as a police officer and eventually as a very successful lawyer in his own right.

Vollmer's career was full of many unpopular decisions. Still, he always endeavored to put the fight against crime above politics. Many times throughout his career Vollmer would be presented with the easy path, but he would push through to create a more effective law enforcement agency.

Whenever presented with an issue, Vollmer would solve the problem at its core rather than brush it aside. For example, when accused of having a child out of wedlock, Vollmer could have easily used his prestige to dismiss the case. Instead, he brought the case to court, where scientific results were used to prove it was genetically impossible for him to be the child's father. When presented with crowded jails, Vollmer expanded facilities and improved the common prisoner's way of life. Many of those incarcerated would go on to thank Vollmer for treating them kindly, and he himself would go on to advocate on the national stage for prison reform aimed at nurturing the character of delinquents instead of seeking retribution.

August Vollmer final years

Vollmer retired from the Berkeley Police Department to continue teaching criminology across the country. In 1929,

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at the behest of US President Herbert Hoover, Vollmer and 10 other criminology specialists were tasked with drafting a comprehensive study on American Law Enforcement during the age of Prohibition.

Vollmer used the opportunity to discuss flaws he saw in law enforcement across the country. He saw local police departments in many towns as corrupt, uneducated and preoccupied with local politics over fighting crime. As a result, Vollmer advocated for education and training for every department, and also called out police departments in their current state as incapable of catching criminals without change and reform.

Vollmer ended his career optimistic for the future of law enforcement. He hoped that as scientific research became more prevalent, officers would use this new information to nurture healthy communities even after he passed on. In one of his essays, he wrote, "These alert youngsters, not content to follow in the skeptical attitude of their predecessors, are casting about in all directions for new instruments and methods to assist them in the more intelligent performance of their duties."

After retiring in 1938, Vollmer continued to offer his advice. He would welcome these visitors with open arms and inspire others even up to his last days. Sadly, as cancer and Parkinson's disease took hold of his body, Vollmer would take his own life at the age of 79.

Why Vollmer matters

August Vollmer was a leader of courage and conviction. In everything he did, he took the difficult path if it bettered his community. His leadership turned an overlooked, underfunded and disjointed police organization into a proper law enforcement agency that would earn world renown. He used his position to advance education, scientific research and his personal vision to raise up his city. He inspired his officers to act with tenacity and professionalism that empowered them to do their job: keep communities safe.

Most importantly, Vollmer challenged and advocated for his officers to improve. When faced with ridicule for pursuing new ways of thinking, Vollmer kept moving toward reform. It would be easy for us to say we have already embraced Vollmer's ideas and that we have no need to keep moving forward.

But that would not be in the spirit of Vollmer's legacy. Vollmer calls on all of us to be better. Meet and exceed the standard of your position. Do not simply "walk a beat." Make your community a better place with residents who care about it. Make your town, city or street the best place you possibly can. Be diligent in your profession. With enough commitment to your community, the decline of crime will naturally follow.

About the Author

Midshipman 2nd Class (junior) Nicholas Blauth studies history at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. Originally from Vineland, New Jersey, Blauth earned his associate degree in Homeland Security in addition to four years of education in law enforcement at Cumberland County Technical Education Center. Blauth hopes to add to the field of criminology and modern law enforcement by providing lessons learned from the past. The views expressed here are solely those of the author in his private capacity and do not in any way represent the views of the U.S. Naval Academy, U.S. Navy or the Department of Defense.