In the nineteenth century, as America was sorting out when and how and under what conditions the military could be deployed domestically, the country was also growing. By the 1830s, US cities were swelling and becoming more diverse. Predatory crime was increasingly a problem. The country needed new ideas and new institutions for maintaining day-to-day order—instltutions that could be scaled to accommodate growing urbanization. Once again the country would look to England for inspiration.

A QUICK HISTORY OF COPS IN AMERICA

Democratic law tends more and more to be grounded upon the maxim that every citizen is, by nature, a traitor, a libertine, and a scoundrel. In order to dissuade him from his evil-doing the police power is extended until it surpasses anything ever heard of in the oriental monarchies of antiquity.

—H. L. Mencken, Notes on Democracy

Colonial American towns were usually filled with people who came from the same place, worshiped at the same altar, and shared the same sense of right and wrong. Historian and criminologist Sam Walker writes, “Crime and sin were synonymous; an offense against God was an offense against society, and vice versa. Predatory crimes like murder, rape, and robbery were almost nonexistent. Far more common were punishments for crimes like blasphemy, adultery, or drunkenness. Not surprisingly, law and policing in prerevolutionary America were modeled fairly closely on the English example. Given the rugged conditions of frontier living and the lack of civic structures, trial and punishment were relatively rare.
Mores and shared values were generally sufficient, and when they weren’t, shunning and other forms of informal justice usually worked to keep civic order. Not all colonial communities were the same, and laws varied from place to place depending on the prevailing religion and tradition, but there was little need for state agents to enforce the law. Communities tended to handle transgressors on their own. There were Crown-appointed sheriffs and constables, but again, they largely focused on administrative matters.

As the country grew, three distinctive policing traditions began to emerge, coinciding with three regions—the Northeast, the South, and the western frontier.

In the Northeast, as the cities grew larger and more diverse in the early eighteenth century, their residents encountered more crime. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, early American cities first installed night watch patrols, first voluntary and then paid. The night watches were fairly successful at rounding up drunks and preventing petty infractions, but the low-paying positions would prove inadequate when cities began to experience riots, mobs, and more serious crimes.

The Southern colonies were more agrarian, less compact, and more homogeneous than the colonies of the Northeast. The primary threat to public safety in the South—at least in the minds of whites—was the possibility of slave revolts. As a result, the first real organized policing systems in America arguably began in the South with slave patrols. The patrols were armed and uniformed, and typically had broad powers to arrest, search, and detain slaves. The slave patrols’ main responsibilities were to guard against rebellions and to look for escaped slaves. They had the power to enter slave quarters at will, whether or not they had permission from the slaves’ owner. They could even enforce some laws against plantation owners, such as laws prohibiting the education of slaves. By the middle of the eighteenth century, every Southern colony had passed laws formalizing slave patrols. It became the primary policing system in the South. In many jurisdictions—most notably Charleston, South Carolina—slave patrols would eventually morph into the official police force.

On the western frontier, early policing was more piecemeal. Northern settlers tended to congregate together and set up systems in the Northern tradition, while pioneers from the South followed the Southern tradition. But the expanse of the frontier didn’t always accommodate either system. Often there was just too much ground to cover, and the territory was too sparsely populated. That gap was often filled by vigilantes and private police for hire. The vigilante groups came together in response to some threat to public order, then dissolved once the threat had subsided. As the name implies, they tended to operate outside the formal legal system and were naturally more prone to pop up where the legal system either didn’t exist or was too weak to maintain order. In some cases, vigilante groups were better than no justice at all. In other cases, they were quite a bit worse.

The first modern police force as we know it today was created in 1829 in London by Sir Robert Peel. He and his father had been pushing the idea for decades, but British concerns over the nation’s civil liberties tradition had repeatedly killed the idea. Concerned about the worsening conditions in the city, Parliament finally gave its approval in 1829, but only after Peel put in place assurances and checks to retain some local control over the force and ensure that police officers’ responsibilities were limited to fighting crime and protecting individual rights—his task was to convince the city that a police force would not be an army enforcing the will of a centralized power.

The British police force began with three thousand officers. They wore uniforms to make themselves recognizable, but Peel made the uniforms blue to distinguish them from the red worn by the British military. Peel was sensitive to concerns about standing armies, but he also believed that a successful police force would need at least some of the structure and discipline of a military influence. Peel appointed a retired colonel as one of his two first supervising justices. Thus, the inaugural police force took on a
military-like top-down administrative structure, and even borrowed some military titles. It’s a tradition that continues in most police departments in the United States today.

Peel and his justices set out a strict code of conduct. Officers were to avoid confrontation where at all possible. They were to be civil and polite when interacting with citizens. Most of all, Peel hammered home the principle that his police force worked for the people of London, not against them. Nevertheless, it took a while for the public to warm to the idea.

Across the Atlantic in rapidly urbanizing America, larger cities began to adopt the British model, albeit with some Americanized adjustments. The first modern-style police department in the United States was established in New York in 1845. Boston and Philadelphia soon followed. New York began its experiment with eight hundred policemen. Fearing that the London force was already too much like an army, the New York cops began their patrols unarmed, and without uniforms. Early American police departments were also much more democratic than the system in London. Peel and his aides handpicked the officers to work in London. In the United States, early police officers were nominated by ward leaders and political bosses, then appointed by the mayor. Cops were required to live in the wards they patrolled. All of this tended to make early police departments more like service agencies than law enforcement bodies. Since ward leaders were elected, they found they could pressure local commanders to prioritize police duties in ways that would help get them reelected. In some neighborhoods, police officers ran soup kitchens and homeless people were given shelter in police stations to sleep. This democratic style of policing also gave police (or more accurately, their commanders) discretion to enforce laws in ways that reflected the priorities of the communities they patrolled. Alcohol laws, for example, might be strictly enforced in one part of a city, but rarely if ever enforced in another.

In some ways, this wasn’t all that dissimilar to the way laws had been enforced before police departments existed, when transgressions within a community were handled by its members. But there were some clear drawbacks. The job of police officer had quickly become a patronage position. The only qualification for becoming a cop was a political connection. Mass firings were common when power changed hands. The ethnicity of a ward’s police force tended to be exclusively that of the majority of the ward’s population. This could be problematic for, say, an Italian caught in a majority Irish neighborhood. Training was nonexistent, beatings were common, and, perhaps most importantly, the system had little effect on crime—neither preventing it nor helping to bring criminals to justice.

Ironically, the more centralized, less democratic London model proved to be more protective of individual rights than early American police departments. Centralization allowed Peel to set high, consistent hiring standards based on merit. Because he was so aware of the English public’s fears about violations of their civil liberties, Peel knew that the survival of his police department was probably contingent on his ability to alleviate those fears.

And so by the end of the nineteenth century, London’s “bobbies” (the nickname derived from Peel’s name) had managed to win over the public within a couple of decades, while the reputation of the American police officer had hit bottom. With no training or standards, and with jobs based on patronage more than merit, the police in America were best known for corruption, brutality, and incompetence. Wealthy citizens looked instead to private organizations like the Pinkertons when they needed reliable security or knew of a crime they wanted solved.

By the early twentieth century, police reform had become a cause of the progressive movement, whose adherents saw corrupt cops as just another consequence of cities being run by political machines. There were two competing voices for reform. Progressive academics and elites wanted not only to rid police departments of patronage and corruption but to mandate a more paternalistic role for police. They wanted cops to enforce good habits and morals among the urban poor, especially immigrants.

The other voice for reform came from administrators within the law enforcement community. They too wanted to free police
departments from the political machines, but they focused less on ideology and more on fighting crime. They wanted to give more freedom and autonomy to police chiefs, who were often held responsible for the actions of their officers but had very little power to actually change their behavior.

In the end, the administrators won the long-term debate by embracing the concept of *professionalism*. Through the adoption of best practices, they successfully transformed the job of police officer from a perk of patronage to a formal profession with its own standards, specialized knowledge, and higher personnel standards and entry requirements. To be a police officer was no longer just a job; it was a career. The first thirty or so years of the twentieth century saw the formation of professional societies like the Police Chiefs' Union, the sharing of knowledge and "police sciences" like fingerprinting, and the creation of specialized "squads" to tackle specific problems like alcohol, prostitution, and gambling.

The champion of the professionalism movement was August Vollmer, who served as chief of police in Berkeley, California, from 1905 to 1932. Vollmer pioneered the use of police radios, squad cars, bicycles, lie detector tests, and crime labs. As Walker writes, "The professionalism movement created the modern police organization: a centralized, authoritarian, bureaucracy focusing on crime control."23

But the morals-oriented progressives also had some victories, at least in the short term. They succeeded in passing anti-obscenity laws, and in some cities (most notably New York) they were able to put shutting down brothels, adult-book stores, and other sex-related businesses high on the list of police priorities. Their biggest victory was of course the Eighteenth Amendment, which banned the production, sale, and importation of alcohol.

The amendment was enforced by the Volstead Act, passed in 1919. The prohibition of alcohol has some clear parallels with the modern drug war. Homicides spiked during Prohibition, as did public corruption. The federal government had created a lucrative new black market. In legal markets, businesses compete by providing a better product, a less expensive product, or better customer service. In black markets, they compete by warring over turf. Disputes are settled with guns, not in courtrooms. As the bootleggers obtained bigger guns to war with one another, law enforcement agencies felt that they needed bigger guns to go after the criminals. In larger cities, the ensuing arms race produced heavily armed police forces.

Like today's drug prohibition, the Volstead Act was a failure. It almost certainly reduced the amount of alcohol the country consumed, but it came nowhere near stamping out booze entirely. The true believers responded by calling for tougher crackdowns and less coddling of bootleggers and drinkers. In his book *The Spirits of America*, journalist Eric Burns writes that some politicians and civic leaders suggested sending drunks and booze distributors to Siberia or the South Pole. Burns notes that David Blair, the federal commissioner of internal revenue at the time, "recommended that all American bootleggers be lined up in front of a firing squad and shot to death."33 Foreshadowing the cries the country would hear from drug warriors sixty years later, Henry Ford wanted the military to enforce the laws against illicit substances. Anti-alcohol activist Clarence True Wilson demanded that the Harding administration call up the Marines, "arm them to the teeth and send them to the speakeasies. Give the people inside a few minutes to depart, and if they chose not to, open fire anyhow."44

But as hard as the temperance activists tried, they couldn't demonize and dehumanize drinkers the way drug warriors have since succeeded in denigrating drug offenders. One likely reason was that the Volstead Act didn't criminalize the possession or consumption of alcohol, only its production and sale. So the feds could raid speakeasies, but they couldn't raid a home based on a tip that someone had a cupboard full of gin—unless they suspected there was a distillery inside. Since simply ingesting alcohol was not a criminal act, it was more difficult for Prohibition's supporters to cast drinkers as villains. The country was also more federalist in the 1920s. Even after the Eighteenth Amendment passed, some states, cities, and counties simply refused to enforce it.
A Quick History of Cops in America

...in them the notion that they were all that stood between order and anarchy—all of this could make police view the citizens in their districts as at best the other, and at worst, the enemy. Consequently, while Parker’s management rid the LAPD of political patronage and corruption, and instilled some needed structure and standards, he seemed oblivious to growing animosity toward police in the city’s black and Latino populations.

Parker’s efforts at instilling professionalism provide a good segue into the age of militarization for a couple of reasons. For one, as we’ll see, when the racial tension in LA finally blew up in the form of the Watts riots, it went a long way toward scaring middle America about crime, to the point where they were willing to embrace an all-out “war” on crime and drugs to clean up the cities.

But Parker also had a much more direct impact on militarization. Shortly after taking office, the chief made a young LAPD cop barely a year into the job his personal chauffeur, and eventually his protégé. That set the young cop’s career on a fast track. By the time of the Watts riots in 1965, Parker’s young protegé would take command of the city police department’s response. The experience would scar him. The protegé would eventually become LA’s police chief himself. And in large part because of his experience in Watts, he did more to bring about today’s militarized American police force than any other single person. His name was Daryl Gates.

There are two forms of police militarization: direct and indirect. Direct militarization is the use of the standing military for domestic policing. Indirect militarization happens when police agencies and police officers take on more and more characteristics of an army. Most of this book will focus on the latter form of police militarization, which began in the United States in the late 1960s, then accelerated in the 1980s. But the two forms of militarization are related, and they have become increasingly intertwined over the