

**August Vollmer**



# August Vollmer

*The Father of American Policing*

Willard M. Oliver

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*To my lovely wife  
Judy Ilaria Oliver  
Proverbs 31: 10–31*



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# Author's Note

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Every word that appears in quotes throughout this biography is referenced to its original source through the endnotes and appears as it did in the original, including all errors in spelling and grammar. The use of the term *sic* to denote instances where these mistakes appear in quotes was not used in this biography so as not to overburden the reader with its repeated use.



# Foreword

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“You prevent people from doing wrong; that’s the mission of a [police officer].”

— August Vollmer’s instructions to police recruits.

Willard Oliver’s biography of August Vollmer is a major contribution to knowledge about policing democratic societies under the rule of law. This detailed account of one man’s life in the twentieth century spotlights many key issues—and solutions—in twenty-first century policing. Vollmer was not only a man ahead of his own time; he was a man ahead of our present time as well. He provides a vision for policing still unfulfilled, the global example police need to solve the post-Ferguson crisis of police legitimacy. That crisis and its dialectic of the police institution with Black Lives Matter reaches far beyond the US to England, Sweden, India, Hong Kong, Australia, the Middle East, Latin America and elsewhere. Yet the stories this book tells about a heroic police chief can help chart a path to progress.

No story about Vollmer is more relevant to that crisis than what Vollmer did one day in 1913. Sitting in his ground floor office as Chief of Police in Berkeley, California, Vollmer heard a commotion outside his window. One of his police officers had just brought a prisoner to the station in a new Model T Ford, only to have the prisoner jump from the car, struggle with the officer and run. The officer shouted in pursuit, and Vollmer bolted from his desk. Overtaking the arresting officer in a long chase down Center Street, Vollmer was joined by two police sergeants in a car. When the three policemen cornered the escaped prisoner in a coal yard, the suspect ran to the top of a high pile of coal. The sergeants drew their guns, but Vollmer stopped them. “There’s to be no shooting,” he commanded. As the 37-year-old Vollmer began climbing up the pile of coal, one sergeant cried “He’ll brain you with chunks of coal, Chief!” Vollmer repeated his “no shooting” order, as the suspect picked up a large chunk of coal and threatened Vollmer with it. As Vollmer closed in at five feet, the suspect threw the chunk of coal, hitting Vollmer on the head, causing a gaping wound. With blood pouring down his face, Vollmer grabbed the suspect’s legs, and both rolled down the pile to the bottom. The sergeants grabbed the suspect, who was taken away uninjured.

If we stop to reflect on how many similar police-citizen encounters in the US have resulted in the death of an unarmed suspect, we see what a powerful example Vollmer offers for our own times. Many police would criticize him today, saying his actions run against the widespread training for police to use their full legal powers to kill in

self-defense. But Vollmer was not interested in using legal powers just because they were there. He was interested in protecting lives, including the lives of criminals and suspects. He would be especially appalled at the lack of modern training and standards for police to provide first aid to people they have just shot, as in a videotaped 2016 case in Tulsa, Oklahoma—the lack of treatment to stop the bleeding that might keep suspects alive.

Later in the week after Vollmer was injured while prohibiting gunfire, the Chief hosted his weekly “crab session” with his officers, where he regularly invited them to voice their complaints about any of his new ideas (like putting a radio in a police car, or patrolling on bicycles, or hiring University students as police, or hiring an African-American university graduate and law student as an officer). These crab sessions can be seen as a form of what contemporary scholars teach police as procedural justice, in which the process of decision-making matters to people as much (or more than) the substance of the decision. By inviting police to his “crab sessions,” he showed his respect for the officers’ views by giving them what justice theorists call voice, or the opportunity to oppose or appeal the decision.

The officers present at that crab session were unanimous in their criticism of their Chief. As the author of this splendid biography, Willard Oliver, reports, the officers complained that Vollmer had

put himself at risk, all for the sake of an escaped criminal. Vollmer explained that he did not want the suspect injured and under the circumstances the other officers were not put at any risk of injury to themselves. Vollmer accepted the officers’ criticism, but did not change his mind that he had treated the suspect fairly and with respect. The Chief clearly had a very different outlook on his profession, and oftentimes his police officers could not understand the things he did. Despite this lack of understanding, there was always a complete sense of trust in their Chief. This was in part because Vollmer never demanded his officers to do anything he would not do himself. He treated them fairly, and his ideas, silly as they often seemed at the time, usually proved successful.

For many police officers in 2016, this story still makes no sense. Vollmer could have been killed, as too many US officers are each year—a 57% increase in police shot to death (44) in the first 9 months of 2016 over the same period in 2015. British police—killed in recent years at the rate of 1 or 2—are trained to use delaying tactics in cases such as Vollmer’s coal-yard confrontation, waiting for the arrival of tools unavailable to Vollmer, such as clear-plastic weapon-proof shields and protective helmets. American police, then as now, can legally shoot the suspect for refusing an order to drop a hard object. That is what police in Pasco, Washington, did in 2015—causing major community protests as well as a highly critical report from the US Department of Justice, but no prosecution because the Pasco (WA) police had acted in a technically lawful way. Yet Vollmer was not worried about riots. Nor was he particularly worried about any public reaction to shooting an escaped suspect. He was worried about it for reasons of what police scholar Justice Tankebe describes as police “self-legitimacy”—Vollmer’s own sense of moral rightness in his practice of policing.

As this often surprising biography shows, Vollmer's reading of whatever criminology from a century ago that could be found in the U.C. Berkeley library had a profound effect on his philosophy of policing. In relation to the coal-yard confrontation, Vollmer often said he did not want "the punishment to exceed the crime." His still-relevant sense of *proportionality* in punishment is exactly what twenty-first century democracies are debating since the 2014 killing of an unarmed Michael Brown by a Ferguson Missouri police officer. Yet Vollmer's 1913 view was heavily informed by an 18th century thinker, Cesare Beccaria, whose 1764 book *On Crimes and Punishments* strongly influenced Vollmer's thinking.

The influence on Vollmer of an Enlightenment thinker like Beccaria may surprise readers who know how little education police had in 1913, Vollmer included. Most cities required police to have completed 8 years of school by then, but Vollmer had even less formal education: just a few years in elementary school. Yet in 1929, Vollmer was appointed by one of the intellectual giants of the twentieth century, President Robert Maynard Hutchins of the University of Chicago, to become first professor of police administration in a major research university in the history of the United States, if not the world. Vollmer's erudition and brilliance as a self-taught scholar was the solid reason for Vollmer's appointment, built on his track record as a pioneer in police education, and the application of knowledge to police work. As Oliver's stories show, Vollmer's thirst for knowledge was fed throughout his career by the happy coincidence of his access to the world-class University of California at Berkeley, where he both began his self-education as a police chief and later continued his career as a university professor after his initial appointment at Chicago.

Long before Berkeley had professors of sociology or criminology, it was a professor of biology who started lending books from the Berkeley library to this passionately curious police chief. The more Vollmer read, the more frustrated he became that there was no job-specific education, or even training, required for police officers of his era. His response was first to create a police academy (taught by both police chiefs and Berkeley professors), and then to start recruiting police officers who were already enrolled as undergraduates at Berkeley, the leading university in the state. He went on to hire Berkeley students and graduates as police officers and to advocate that all police officers should be required to hold a university degree. That view, repeated by presidential commissions in 1967 and 1974, has had modest impact in the US. Yet in 2016, the professional body for policing in England and Wales, the College of Policing, has charted a course to make a Bachelor's-level qualification in policing a requirement for all entry-level officers within a few years of appointment—as well as a Master's degree for senior officers and police chiefs.

It is therefore all the more important that Willard Oliver's story of *August Vollmer: The Father of American Policing* tells the story of a hero-chief. This passionate advocate of higher learning for policing was no ivory-tower intellectual. In Oliver's telling, Vollmer was a classic war hero, risking his life as a "grunt" soldier to pass through enemy lines to convey a strategically vital message to an allied fighting unit. Like President Theodore Roosevelt, Vollmer was a battle veteran of the Spanish-American

War, an athletic and ebullient personality who could infect those around him with his physical and moral authority. Like both Roosevelt and the heroic warrior of Vollmer's parents' homeland, King Frederick the Great of Prussia, he saw learning and knowledge as the most important basis for success. And like the product of so many modern immigrant families, Vollmer greatly admired the educational system of the US—especially as a 10-year-old when his mother took him back to her native town in Bavaria, where there were then no schools at all.

Willard Oliver's story of August Vollmer can be read as the narrative of a hero-scholar, as an exemplar for contemporary policing. Vollmer did not even choose policing: policing chose him, just because he already was a hero. On not one but two separate occasions, he saved countless lives on the streets of Berkeley by stopping runaway rail vehicles, at great risk to his own life. He repeatedly saved other swimmers from drowning, not as a lifeguard but as a fellow swimmer (including one who became a famous opera-singer as well as his first wife). Always on the lookout for page-one stories of heroic deeds, the news media of a century ago was drawn to Vollmer like moths to a flame. His exploits led to his drafting for election as the Town Marshal of Berkeley, a position later converted to a proper police department and civil service police chief. After that, he was seen as the hero chief who could intervene to help save entire communities.

Thus began, for example, Vollmer's year as police chief of Los Angeles. The way that year ended could be seen by some as a failure, but Oliver's telling of it confirms Vollmer's heroic stand against political corruption and maltreatment of city prisoners. "Hero" may not be how everyone would describe a police chief who earns affection from criminals by letting them build a new and far less crowded jail for themselves, but that is what Vollmer did—against the wishes of his political masters. "Hero" may not be the way some would describe a man who was sued by a woman for impregnating her out-of-wedlock, but that is what Vollmer confronted as the vengeance of corrupt L.A. politicians. Vollmer—who was apparently sterile—refused to settle the case, thus stoically drawing even more attention to the claims, but leaving him with a clean record when the complainant was exposed as a serial fraudster.

Vollmer's invitations to help reform police in Chicago, Cleveland, Cuba and even China reflected the appeal of his reputation as a hero-scholar. Yet it was not his public image that made him heroic. It was his refusal to tolerate the behavior of other police whose moral standards did not meet his expectations. At a time when most police chiefs accepted widespread use of the "Third degree" torture tactics in interrogations, Vollmer spoke out against it. Long before the U.S. Supreme Court declared confessions inadmissible if they had been obtained under conditions of physical punishment, as Oliver reports, Vollmer also told his recruits that "if you hit a prisoner in anything other than self-defense, you have just resigned."

In an even more telling story about Vollmer's vision, Oliver describes the reaction of Berkeley's highly-educated police force in 1919 to a new colleague who happened to be Black; Walter Gordon was a college football hero who was later appointed by

California Governor Earl Warren to become Chair of the state Parole Board and by President Eisenhower as Governor of the US Virgin Islands.

Within a week after Gordon went to work for the Berkeley Police Department, a number of fellow police officers voiced the fact they did not want to work with a “Negro.” They talked it over and decided a small group of them would visit the Chief in his office and voice their complaint. After all, the Chief always said anyone could come to his office if he had a problem. So, one morning that first week, a small delegation went to the Chief’s office and stated rather bluntly that Gordon needed to be removed from the Berkeley Police Department because they were not going to work alongside a “Negro,” and that if he stayed, they would resign.

The Chief looked at them with that penetrating gaze which had unnerved so many officers in the past. He then looked the delegation up and down, letting the silence hang in the air. Finally, he looked the leader of the group in the eye. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he said in a very serious tone, “If you mean it, just leave your badges on the table as you go out.” Shock registered on the officers’ faces, but each knew better than to utter a single word. They eased out of the Chief’s office and everyone continued on as if the meeting had never happened. Several months later, the most vocal of those officers continued to espouse vituperative views of Gordon, so Vollmer fired him.

A century after Vollmer hired Gordon, race relations and policing are now far more complex. Even a Vice-Presidential debate had to confront the question of whether Black officers can have implicit bias against Black citizens, and whether shootings of Black citizens by Black officers can be racist. Yet just as Theodore Roosevelt heroically shattered racial barriers by inviting Tuskegee University President Booker T. Washington to dinner at the White House, Vollmer was willing to risk both police and community protests to do the right thing—just as difficult in his own time and context as today.

Amidst this furor, Willard Oliver’s biography of August Vollmer provides a voice of hope for the role of education and knowledge. That voice embraces one of the strongest dividing lines of American politics: the correlation between political opinions and 4 years of post-high school baccalaureate education. While Vollmer would not want to celebrate anything that tends to pull Americans apart, he would also want to find a silver lining in any cloud. If that lining says that a highly educated police profession can achieve greater reconciliation with a highly-educated society, then he would want his own life to be an example to be promoted. As we might say of the meaning of Vollmer’s life for twenty-first century policing, heroism in defense of police education is no vice. Let that be some comfort to our many police professional students whose colleagues may scorn the insights of evidence-based policing or modern social science theory. Heroism comes in many forms, not just battle, or even capturing escaped suspects in a coal-yard. The next time a police colleague dismisses a new idea without studying the research on it—such as police body-cameras—just remind

them that Vollmer faced weeks of headlines mocking him for his “crazy” introduction of a new technology for police patrol: putting officers in automobiles. Even that idea required the courage of a hero.

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The citizen expects police officers to have the wisdom of Solomon, the courage of David, the strength of Samson, the patience of Job, the leadership of Moses, the kindness of the Good Samaritan, the strategical training of Alexander, the faith of Daniel, the diplomacy of Lincoln, the tolerance of the Carpenter of Nazareth, and, finally, an intimate knowledge of every branch of the natural, biological, and social sciences. If he had all of these, he *might* be a good policeman.

—August Vollmer

