Who Runs the Streets of New Orleans?

How a rich entrepreneur persuaded the city to let him create his own high-tech police force.

By DAVID AMSDENJULY 30, 2015

On the morning of Sunday, March 29, Sidney Torres was sipping an espresso in the kitchen of his mansion on the edge of the French Quarter when a jarring notification lit up his iPad and two iPhones. *Pimps fighting with drug dealers and johns. Man has gun. Hurry.* The message came from a neighbor 10 blocks away, on St. Louis Street, and was sent through a venture Torres started four days earlier: a private police patrol that could be summoned via mobile app. Torres, who made a vast fortune as the founder of SDT Waste & Debris Services, a sanitation company that cleaned up much of New Orleans in the years following Hurricane Katrina, spent $380,000 to fund the enterprise after a crime wave put Quarter residents on edge for the better part of a year. Between November and January, there were more than 60 robberies in the neighborhood, and the crimes became increasingly brazen, including a vicious stabbing and a spate of random beatings. It became a personal issue for Torres on Dec. 17, when his 8,000-square-foot home was burglarized; three weeks later, the bar next door was held up by two masked gunmen. Torres's crowdsourcing approach to crime, conceived throughout February and March, was the impulsive byproduct of his belief that the New Orleans Police Department, which has shrunk by around 500 officers since Hurricane Katrina, was no longer able to protect even the neighborhood less than a square mile in size that contained the city's most valuable real estate.

Seated at his kitchen table, Torres began furiously refreshing his iPad. The screen displayed a digitized map of the Quarter, a grid of 78 city blocks that, as a national historic landmark and the center of the city's $6.7 billion tourism industry, draw upward of nine million visitors each year. A red dot represented the incident in progress on St. Louis, while a green arrow indicated a member of Torres's squad, the French Quarter Task Force, which at all hours had three armed officers zigzagging the neighborhood in matte black Polaris Rangers that resemble militarized golf carts. When Torres, who is 39, had deployed the same vehicles in his garbage business, the decimated city became cleaner than ever. ''Basically, I'm handling crime the same way I did trash,'' said Torres, whose brooding good looks and penchant for self-promotion earned him the nickname of Trashanova before he sold his sanitation company to a national conglomerate in 2011.

The task force's Polarises had been retrofitted with blue halogen lights and a dock for an iPad, which served up requests in a manner similar to Uber. Torres was especially proud of the GPS chip he embedded in the chassis of each patrol, which now allowed him to watch the green arrow closing in on the red dot. Still, there was a three-second delay with the GPS, and he was not satisfied. The previous June, a shootout between two men on Bourbon Street's commercial strip left nine wounded and one dead; worried a similar event was about to unfold, Torres telephoned a member of the dispatch team, which he was paying $20,000 a month.

''We have a possible gunfight on St. Louis. What's going on, man?''

''We have a guy en route.''

''I see that, but he needs to step on it.''

For the next few minutes, Torres stared at the screen with the twitchy intensity of a day trader. The report came from Gail Cavett, a 30-year resident of the neighborhood who had parked her car on St. Louis to discover a commotion breaking out among a group of about a dozen people. This was not uncommon. The block had become so rough in recent months that, as Cavett later explained, ''I wouldn't take out my garbage without a gun.'' From what she could gather, one of the men had failed to pay a prostitute for services rendered, and in response her pimp and his entourage — the ''drug dealers'' in her report — were now chasing the man down. They caught up with him in front of her home, where they started beating him. When he scurried away, Cavett ran inside and observed the scene from her balcony. The man returned wielding a gun, which he began waving in the street. That was when she sent in the report, opting to use Torres's mobile app instead of 911, because, as she said, ''everyone in New Orleans knows that 911 is a lost cause.''

A Polaris turned the corner within two minutes, or 26 minutes faster than the N.O.P.D.'s average response time for the district. At the sight of the flashing blue lights, the men put their guns away and scattered.

''Crazy, right?'' Torres later said. ''I kind of felt like Bruce Wayne.''

In the United States, private police officers currently outnumber their publicly funded counterparts by a ratio of roughly three to one. Whereas in past decades the distinction was often clear — the rent-a-cop vs. the real cop — today the boundary between the two has become ''messy and complex,'' according to a study last year by Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. Torres's task force is best understood in this context, one where the larger merging of private and public security has resulted in an extensive retooling of the nation's policing as a whole. As municipal budgets have stagnated or plummeted, state and local governments have taken to outsourcing police work to the private sector, resulting in changes that have gone largely unnoticed by the public they're tasked with protecting.

A recent report by the Justice Department, which has become one of the most prominent advocates of such collaborative efforts, identified 450 partnerships in the country between law enforcement and the private sector. Nationwide, there are now more than 1,200 ''business improvement districts'' in which businesses pay self-imposed taxes to fund improved services, including security. In many cases, officers covered by corporate entities have become indistinguishable from those paid for by taxpayers. Last year, Facebook entered into a three-year partnership with the Menlo Park, Calif., Police Department in which the social-media giant agreed to pay the $194,000 salary of a police officer whose job was going to be cut. One of the largest private security forces in the nation today is the University of Chicago Police, which has full jurisdiction over 65,000 residents, only 15,000 of whom are students. More than 100 public housing projects in Boston are patrolled by private security, including one company that has been authorized to arrest suspects under certain circumstances.

Torres's security detail is unique not just in the prominence of its beat — a major American city's most-visited neighborhood — but also in the fact that it was conceptualized and financed by a single individual, with government support. Staffed by off-duty N.O.P.D. officers in vehicles that bear the N.O.P.D.'s star-and-crescent logo, the force became part of a larger initiative for public-private policing that Mitch Landrieu, the city's mayor since 2010, had been working to put in place since the shooting on Bourbon Street last summer. In addition to Torres's force, set to run for a two-month pilot, Landrieu brought in as many as 60 new State Police troopers in the city, paying their salaries through the end of the year with a $2.5 million grant from the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau. While critics argue that such plans undermine traditional police departments and heighten the fragile socioeconomic and racial tensions that already plague urban policing, Landrieu, a progressive Democrat, presented it as part of New Orleans's newfound embrace of entrepreneurial innovation. "We all have skin in the game," the mayor said at a news conference announcing the plan, "so I'm confident this will be successful."

Nevertheless, Landrieu's path to working with Torres was contentious, to say the least. Back in January, following the robbery of his home and the neighboring bar, Torres produced a television ad squarely blaming the mayor for the recent crime wave. "The French Quarter is under siege by criminals," it began, with Torres himself, who spent $100,000 to air the ad prominently statewide over the next month, providing the voice-over narration. "We should hold the administration accountable for the failures of not protecting the French Quarter." It was a message that resonated with the neighborhood's 4,000 residents, a predominantly white and wealthy subset of a city with a majority black population. The week his ads began airing, a hundred or so people gathered for an anti-crime rally in Jackson Square, the city's historic center, where some waved placards printed with the words WELCOME TO LANDRIEUVILLE! HOME OF ROBBERS, STABBERS & RAPISTS! Dozens of homeowners in the neighborhood had taken to hanging signs from their wrought-iron balconies reading CAUTION. WALK IN LARGE GROUPS. WE ♥ NOPD. WE JUST NEED MORE. Because Torres had the means to express these collective frustrations on air, he quickly became something of a neighborhood folk hero, albeit one with a Gulfstream jet. "He was giving voice to what everyone had been saying for months," said Meg Lousteau, the executive director of Vieux Carré Property Owners, Residents and Associates, a preservationist group. "The whole groundswell wasn't about just one neighborhood, but an expression that something in the city was deeply, deeply wrong."

Crime has dropped to record lows in most major American cities, but New Orleans, where wealthy neighborhoods sit side by side with some of the nation's poorest, continues to struggle. The persistence of crime today stands as the most dominant threat to the resurgent image the city has had since Katrina. Though the murder rate has been in decline, it is still second in the nation, just below Detroit. Nonfatal shootings rose 23 percent last year, leading criminologists to argue that any decline in murders had more to do with advances in emergency medicine, not law enforcement. And with 107 homicides recorded so far this year, the current rate is on pace to increase for the first time in three years, potentially by as much as 20 percent. Meanwhile, over the past few years, other types of violent crime — assault, rape, armed robbery — have risen, some by more than 30 percent, giving credence to Torres's image of a French Quarter "under siege." As Peter Scharf, a professor of criminology at the Louisiana State University School of Public Health, explained: "What happened is that the residents of the Quarter, who have always

had great unease with their more impoverished and sometimes violent neighbors, have realized that there is no Green Zone that will protect them from the reality of the city. Whether he meant to or not, Sidney brought up some issues that a lot of people are uncomfortable thinking about. Is the French Quarter a present-day Brooklyn Heights, or is it Bedford-Stuyvesant in the '70s?''

Photo

Sidney Torres, center, in his home with members of the Louisiana State Police and the New Orleans Police Department. Credit Edmund D. Fountain for The New York Times

Responding to Torres's attack ads, Landrieu presented Torres with something of a schoolyard dare — one that would ultimately lead the mayor to grant a private citizen extraordinary influence over matters of public safety. ''He made millions and millions and millions of dollars

off garbage contracts in the French Quarter,'' Landrieu remarked on a local news channel. ''Maybe he should just take some of that money and do it himself, if he thinks it's so easy.''

Three months later, on an evening in early April, Torres, dressed in skinny jeans and a flowing linen shirt, sat grinning at an outdoor table of an Italian restaurant in the Quarter. ''When the mayor said that thing about me putting my money were my mouth is, I didn't plan on any of this,'' he recalled. His decision to take Landrieu up on his challenge was, in Torres's view, similar to the circumstances under which he founded his sanitation company. In 2005, after Katrina hit, Torres was housing emergency medical workers in the hotels he owned at the time; trash collection had yet to resume, so he rented a truck to haul his garbage to the dump. ''Other businesses asked me to pick theirs up, and so I slapped my name on the truck. One of my first contracts was the Quarter, and within a few years we were picking up over 14,000 homes in the city and state.''

As he spoke, one of the N.O.P.D. officers in his employ — making $50 an hour, a premium rate for off-duty details — drove past in a Polaris. The force had been on the streets for two weeks, and while small in numbers, the sudden ubiquity of their flashing blue lights, combined with the privately funded presence of the State Police, provided something the Quarter had been lacking: the sense that the police were always nearby. ''What I'm doing now isn't all that different from the trash thing,'' Torres said. ''It's about seeing a need — an unfortunate need — and stepping up to fill it.''

Torres made it clear, though, that he did not view himself as merely a generous patron. ''I'm already getting calls from other places, like Arkansas, that are interested in the app,'' he said, citing as an inspiration Michael Bloomberg, New York's billionaire former mayor, who popularized the notion that governmental institutions are most efficient when run like businesses. Torres involved himself in everything from hiring the officers to coordinating which routes they patrolled, and he became a regular presence at the French Quarter police station, arriving during the shift changes and hanging out in the anteroom that was dedicated to his dispatch.

Although the city presented the task force as a complement to the N.O.P.D., Torres seemed at times to take a more competitive view. Rather than work directly with the N.O.P.D., he deputized a fellow resident named Bob Simms, a retired rocket scientist who had been trying to corral businesses into funding private security measures, to help manage the enterprise. (Of his role, Simms said, ''I'm Robin to Sidney's Batman.'') When The Times-Picayune reported that ''regular N.O.P.D.',' rather than one of his men, was first on the scene after an armed robbery occurred during the force's first night patrolling the Quarter, Torres insisted on a correction.

''All these different agencies and egos, they've never had anything like this in terms of accountability,'' Torres went on. ''If someone doesn't show up, I can see it on my phone: Why's the truck still at the station?'' Torres rewarded the officers who did a good job — like the one who broke up the potential gunfight a week earlier — with $100 gift certificates to Ruth's Chris Steak House, something his partners in City Hall worried would foster a divisive atmosphere. ''The government loves its rules, so many pointless rules that just slow everything down,'' said Torres, who was raised in neighboring St. Bernard Parish, where his family ran the political machine for decades. ''Look, it's cool that the city supplied me with cops who can arrest people

and use their guns. But I pay their salaries, I own the app and the vehicles. They've got two months to make this work, or I'll take it away.''

Torres also became involved in setting policy. Earlier that week, his force had coordinated with the N.O.P.D. in two huge arrest sweeps of so-called transients, whose familiar panhandling presence in the neighborhood (ragged clothes, mangy dogs, rusted harmonicas) had not been the subject of recent outrage. But Torres believed them to be a nuisance. ''It's the whole 'broken windows' theory,'' he said. ''You go after the little things in order to send a message that nothing will be tolerated.'' He prioritized the sweeps during a meeting with Jeff Walls, the N.O.P.D. commander who oversees the Quarter. ''Commander Walls told me they've wanted to do something about the gutter punks but didn't know how,'' Torres explained. ''He made it sound so complicated — because they had dogs; they needed diabetes medicine. So I coordinated with the A.S.P.C.A. to figure out the dogs and got on the phone with the sheriff to get the medicine in the jails. Easy.''

The targets of the arrests had not been connected to any serious crimes, and some of the city's residents saw the move as questionable. ''I'm not O.K. with a rich businessman paying cops to do his bidding, and ridding the Quarter of the bohemians and salt of the earth that make it such an interesting place to begin with,'' offered a commenter on the Times-Picayune website. But after months of being fearful of walking home from work, Torres's neighbors seemed to welcome his eagerness to take action of any sort. Strangers began to greet Torres in the streets, offering their vote should he decide to run for mayor in the future.

Toward the end of the meal, Torres was approached by a middle-aged couple who had arrived at the restaurant in the back of a pedicab, sipping wine from plastic cups. The man, tall and fit with a military buzz cut, turned out to be Col. Michael Edmonson, head of the Louisiana State Police; he and his wife joined Torres at the table. Edmonson, who had visited Torres at a resort he once owned in the Bahamas, praised Torres's efforts. ''A safer French Quarter means a healthier Louisiana,'' he said, describing Torres, half-seriously, as being ''almost like a police chief.'' A week later, the colonel invited Torres to sit in on an undercover sting targeting human traffickers being conducted by the State Police in a French Quarter hotel.

The windows of Mitch Landrieu's office, in City Hall, provide a panoramic view of a city that has had to contend with more adversity than any in America over the past decade: Katrina and subsequent hurricanes, the BP oil spill, the national recession and, these days, a citizenry fed up with the persistence of crime while the cost of living rises sharply. ''We have a pretty good feeling that we're moving in the right direction,'' the mayor said on a rainy afternoon in mid-May, reflecting on the public-private security initiatives that had now been in place in the Quarter for six weeks. While the Quarter's crime wave had not been entirely stanched — a young African-American man in the neighborhood was shot just a week earlier — there were significant improvements. Assaults and armed robberies were down as much as 30 percent; Torres's force alone had confiscated 10 guns over two months, and it was the first on the scene during the recent shooting, assisting the State Police in the subsequent arrest of the suspected gunman. Some 9,800 people had downloaded the app, or more than twice the population of the neighborhood. ''We know that it works,'' Landrieu said of the task force. ''Now it's about looking for ways to scale it and fund it on a permanent basis.'' Landrieu had recently proposed a

small sales-tax hike in the Quarter, to be voted on in October, which would bring in funding to make the task force and State Police neighborhood fixtures.

When the mayor came into office, in 2010, he put a hiring freeze on the N.O.P.D. in order to balance the budget; that same year, in a move similar to one recently adopted in Baltimore, Landrieu invited the Justice Department to overhaul a force tainted by corruption, inept management and a history of civil rights violations. While the mayor acknowledged that these measures contributed to an understaffed and shrinking N.O.P.D., he went to great lengths to convey that they were intended to create a more efficient and transparent force in the long term — a difficult enough task without being harassed by a garbage tycoon who appointed himself a public safety advocate only after a flat-screen television was stolen from his home. Landrieu conceded, though, that Torres was the ''impetus'' that led to many of the current measures falling into place. ''We have a way here of reaching out to the private sector in everything that's happening in the city,'' explained Landrieu, who has accepted on his city's behalf more private grants than any mayor in the nation, including $4.2 million from Bloomberg Philanthropies in 2011. Noting similar arrangements in areas like the city's sewage department and its recreation programs, he said, ''It's a new government model that's emblematic of what the rest of the country should be doing.''

'Everyone in New Orleans knows that 911 is a lost cause.'

Yet the mayor added that the successful efforts in one neighborhood had the potential to raise turbulence in others — namely, the poorer, blacker, less prominent precincts where crime is far more endemic. ''The French Quarter is numerically the safest in the city,'' said Landrieu, the city's first white mayor since his father, Moon, vacated the office in 1978. ''That doesn't mean that what happens down there from time to time is not bad. But in the world that we live in, it creates a little bit of anxiety for the people who live out in Algiers and the Seventh Ward'' — two far more violent neighborhoods — ''where a number of murders are taking place between African-American men.''

He paused for a moment, as if weighed down by the pressures of having to manage two vastly different cities that happen to occupy the same 170 square miles: the white, affluent one that has dominated the city's resilient portrayal in the national media, and the other, more tenuous place, where 52 percent of African-American men are currently out of work and nearly 40 percent of all children are born into poverty.

''And people are complaining about panhandlers in the Quarter?'' the mayor continued. ''You can see the juxtaposition that adds to unrest like you see in Baltimore.'' Landrieu's police chief, Michael Harrison, offered a similar sentiment in a conversation a few days earlier: '' 'Hey, why didn't you put the State Police in my neighborhood? How come there are no Polarises riding around my neighborhood?' I'm getting asked these questions now every day.'' Such tensions echoed those expressed last year by Ray Lewis, a retired captain of the Philadelphia Police Department. Lewis joined the protests in Ferguson, Mo., following the shooting death of Michael Brown to bring attention to what he believed was a dangerous precedent being set nationwide by

the rise in public-private policing — one that was transforming law-enforcement protection into a privilege of the few rather than a basic right of all. ''Corporate America is using police forces as their mercenaries,'' Lewis declared.

Landrieu, for his part, acknowledged that allowing a private individual such significant participation in policing had not been without its growing pains. Torres's hunger for credit, his disregard of regulations, his habit of leaking sensitive information that could make it harder to prosecute suspects — all this had resulted in more than a few heated arguments. ''Sometimes, and I say this respectfully, but sometimes people get excited about their roles,'' the mayor said. ''I don't want to diminish Sidney's excitement, but I'm very clear in saying, 'Listen, you don't run the Police Department.' ''

By June, Torres's vigilante enthusiasm was clearly waning. Though he had agreed to fund the force for a third month, he began spending time outside of New Orleans — traveling to New York, to his Miami condominium — and was overseeing a $5 million renovation on a new home he purchased across the street from his current residence. He now spoke with irritation about the reluctance of other businesses and wealthy individuals to contribute funding to the patrol. ''People say, 'Hey, I already pay taxes,' '' Torres said. ''Well, I pay taxes, too, but the fact is that people were still getting beat up for no reason, and I've built something that works. It's time for someone else to step up.''

Stephen Perry, president of the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau, which was paying for the State Police, ended up doing exactly that at the end of the month, putting together a plan to keep Torres's force financed, at $900,000 a year, for at least the next five years. The package includes a larger sum earmarked to maintain around 45 State Police troopers for the same period, transforming the policing model for the French Quarter into one in which most city and state entities will be paid for by the private sector. ''Frankly, it's a gigantic paradigm shift in terms of how this city has approached public safety,'' Perry said. A more diplomatic businessman than Torres, he described the new partnership as a means for allowing the N.O.P.D. to both rebuild slowly and deploy officers to more vulnerable neighborhoods immediately: a win-win situation for the entire city, and one he credited Torres with helping to realize. ''The private sector rose up and took the bull by the horns,'' Perry said.

A few days after Torres handed over control of the force, he took a walk through the Quarter. It was a sultry, humid night, but he walked quickly, buoyed by an undercurrent of vindication. A resident passing him in the street whispered, ''Thank you,'' and Torres thanked her back. ''I don't even know her,'' he said once she had passed. He continued on to the neighborhood's police station, where inside the room dedicated to his task force — no longer technically his, having been officially adopted into something resembling government policy — Torres ran into an officer named Patrick Guidry, who had just finished his shift.

''How's everything going?'' Torres asked.

''We hardly have any work these days,'' said Guidry, the officer who had interrupted the potential gunfight during the force's first week on the streets. ''That block has been

transformed,'' Guidry added. ''Sometimes the old players come out and test the waters, but they know we're there and don't hang around too long.''

''That's awesome,'' Torres said.

The boundary between order and chaos, however, remained precariously thin. A few weeks later, two blocks away from the one the officer had praised, a shootout broke out at 2 p.m. just outside the Quarter, in front of a shop that rents small electric cars to tourists. The shop's owner counted between 12 and 20 shots fired. Five days later, a more violent incident occurred on the neighborhood's periphery, in which a midday gunfight among multiple men left two with nonfatal gunshot wounds. Witnesses reported hearing at least 20 shots and seeing one man running down Canal Street, Downtown's main commercial thoroughfare, carrying an AK-47 assault rifle. Another suspect crashed his car into a sedan, injuring its driver, a doctor at Tulane University.

''Crazy, but that's not the French Quarter,'' Torres said the day after the shootings. ''I'm just saying — '' He suddenly cut himself off, aware that his competitive drive at times fostered a myopic view of the larger challenges facing New Orleans. ''What's going on in this city right now,'' he continued, ''will take way more than just me to fix.''

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