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Krieger: Fresno mayor getting to root of gang life

Dave Krieger
email | bio

February 19, 2007

Not to jump to conclusions, but it's beginning to look like the mayor of Denver is not going to take the shooting death of Broncos cornerback Darrent Williams 50 days ago as a wake-up call on the subject of gang violence in Denver.

Still, I wanted to hear what it would sound like if he did, so I put in a call to Alan Autry, Republican mayor of Fresno, Calif., and, yes, formerly Bubba on *Heat of the Night*. Law enforcement, he agreed, was easier when every crime was solved in an hour, often by Carroll O'Connor.

"I think any mayor who's raised his right hand to take an oath, the No. 1, fundamental covenant with the people is their personal protection, their safety," Autry told me by telephone from Sacramento, where he was lobbying for money from another actor turned politico.

"In fact, in California you take an oath to protect our cities against all enemies, foreign and domestic. Certainly, we know who those foreign enemies are. We fight 'em every day in Iraq.

"But there's also domestic enemies, and that's the hopelessness and despair caused by the abject poverty, lack of education and the breakdown of the family structure, which contributes to much of the gang activity. It's the root cause.

"And I woke up one night, literally it was the middle of the night, and I said, you know what, we're not winning this thing with suppression only. We can just macho it up and say, 'Let's round 'em up, lock 'em up, throw 'em away,' and certainly that's an indispensable component, a necessary *component of fighting gang activity*.

"But it hit me with a clarity that I haven't felt since I've been in office on too many issues that unless this strategy is accompanied by equal focus and equal commitment to those root causes of gang activity, we're doomed to failure.

"I think no less than the future stability of this country's at stake. You can't lose this many young people to gangs and the ultimate end, which is prison time. So I said, you know, we can stop cursing the darkness and turn on the light here and realize that what we're doing is not working."

Last fall, Fresno instituted a crackdown on gang activity that combined intensive law enforcement - 573 felony arrests of gang members and associates in seven weeks, according to *The Fresno Bee* - with services such as tattoo removal, job training, anger management counseling and substance abuse treatment. *The Bee* reported in January that the prevention arm was taking longer to get going than the enforcement arm.

Autry calls the program the centerpiece of his remaining two years in office.

"We can't lock 'em all up; the water's coming in the boat faster than we can bail it out. So I said, you know, I'm going to do something here in Fresno and I'm going to see what happens.

"And I don't think it's any different in Denver. It's no different, I think, in any urban area. And if we don't get a handle on this and have the courage and the wisdom to face that we haven't been addressing it in its totality, in a holistic way, that gang members have continued to be created, and we have a responsibility to the people to fight this war in an effective, winnable way, not a politically correct way."

I might have mentioned to him that Denver's mayor believes talking about gangs emboldens them. In fact, I talk about Denver's mayor in the hope that this is true.

"If you talk about them and you don't take action, absolutely it emboldens them," Autry said. "If you have a zero tolerance for young people throwing their lives away and hurting other people in the process, as so often happens, where entire neighborhoods have been terrorized and paralyzed, and if you back up that warning with action, it's effective. And we're seeing that in the city of Fresno.

"By the same token, to not recognize that these gangs do exist, that they do have a name, this whole thing that 'we're not going to honor them by calling their name,' well, that's a lot of tough talk, but that dog doesn't hunt.

"We have to wake up and realize that we have allowed gang activity to take root in most of our major cities, medium- sized cities, and now, rural America. And I don't see not mentioning it or not saying their name.

"Understand, I'm not criticizing your mayor there in Denver. Because he's right, if you just throw out these terms, the gang names, the Crips and the Bloods, with a bunch of talk and you don't back it up, I can understand what he's saying.

"But for example, the colors, the Bulldog insignias, they've been almost removed from our neighborhoods. And then we've told the Sureños and Norteños, 'You're next.' We're just starting."

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About Dave Krieger
According to Dave Krieger's resume, he was a four-year letterman at Steamboat Springs A&M and is the brother of Doors guitarist Robbie Krieger. Unfortunately, no evidence exists to support either claim. The *News* picked him up off waivers from the *Cincinnati Enquirer* in 1981. He began writing a general interest sports column in October 2000 after wearing out his welcome on a succession of beats, among them politics, City Hall, the Denver Broncos and Denver Nuggets. He writes four times a week.

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"Until the mayor acknowledges the gang problem,..."

"Keep it up Dave!!"

"Keep up the good work, Dave. There's too many..."

"Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz. Please turn your attention..."

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