Subway Graffiti in New York City: "Gettin Up" vs. "Meanin It and Cleanin It"

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By 1984, graffiti covered every train car in the New York City subway. Every attempt to deter the graffitists had failed. Apologists saw graffiti as folk art; others saw graffiti as the premier symbol of the failure of government to protect citizens from the depradations of vandals and criminals. In 1984, the New York City Transit Authority initiated the Clean Car Program. It was based on the idea that if any new or renovated train car was "tagged" by a graffitist it would be cleaned within 2 hours or removed from service. No graffitist would "get up" again on a train. By 1989, all cars in the subway system were graffiti-free. Key elements of the program included clear delegation of responsibility, interdepartmental coordination, establishment of goals, and strong leadership.

Keywords: Graffiti; subway; vandalism; fear; management; problem-solving.

Introduction

The impulse toward graffiti writing—that furtive defacement of public property through the inscription of messages typically rich in political humor or sexual innuendo, or simple distress calls—can be found in all societies and is generally tolerated or even enjoyed when wittily or attractively executed. During the 1970s and early 1980s in New York City, however, the problem of graffiti writing on subway trains developed into a serious public policy problem. The phenomenon of random scratching of names on transit property blossomed until a well-defined subculture that included hundreds of youths were emblazoning subway cars with

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murals that covered entire trains, obscuring windows and subway maps. These young people not only developed the genre, but also transformed graffiti writing into a way of life—"getting up"—drawing their self-esteem from their ability to keep their names and other creative designs in constant circulation on the transit lines. The New York City government's and the New York City Transit Authority's (NYCTA) striking attempts—and failures—to outwit these youths and deter their spectacular defacement of public property only served to embolden the graffitists (Castelman, 1982).

Apologists such as Norman Mailer (1974) perceived the graffitists' work as vibrant folk art—the colorful self-expression of creative adolescents. Others, however, decried the graffitists' work as the criminal defacement of public property that created a climate of fear in the city's transit system. Giving voice to the majority opinion, Nathan Glazer (1979) argued persuasively that subway riders made an unconscious connection between the visual assault of graffiti and the more serious crimes of robbery, rape, assault, and murder. Riders also associated the chaotic graffiti with other maintenance problems—the shattered glass, broken doors, and vandalized maps—that diminished the quality of public transportation. Furthermore, and perhaps most compelling, the graffiti could be construed as hard evidence that authorities were incapable of controlling the environment and securing it against offenders.

Additional observations led credence to Glazer's argument. Increased fear of the subway resulted in diminished ridership, which, in turn, led to increased danger to those riders who braved traveling at off-peak hours. As significantly, a connection was demonstrated between a youth's career as a graffitist and subsequent adult criminal behavior, suggesting that the subculture of graffiti vandalism served as a training ground for future adult offenders. Internal studies by the NYCTA Police, for example, indicated that a substantial proportion of those arrested for graffiti writing (40%) went on to commit robberies and burglaries (Glazer, 1979, p. 6). Moreover, graffiti writers typically stole the enormous quantities of paint required by their craft.

Myriad policies failed. Police knew who the graffitists were: They had detailed records about and profiles of the some 500 individuals who were responsible for the train graffiti—after all, the whole purpose of subway graffiti was to get one's "tag up" and be renowned. Yet, when police arrested graffitists, they were merely released by a juvenile justice system overwhelmed by more serious youthful offenders (Glazer, 1979, p. 6). Major antigraffiti efforts were launched by both Mayors Lindsay and Koch. The briefly popular program of punishment by detention of offenders, with the requirement of cleaning up graffiti-marred trains, failed for two reasons. First, the supervision proved too expensive. Second, the program furnished offenders with superior technical knowledge that then permitted them to create more durable graffiti on their release—for every technological "fix," there was a counter-technological response (Castelman, 1982). "Target hardening" of the train yards likewise failed to deter graffitists because of the vastness of the areas needing to be secured and the youths' ability to cut through those wire fences that were erected. Police urged group and social work be targeted at graffitists to channel their talents, but few such efforts were initiated (Glazer, 1979). Various (and expensive) experiments with graffiti-resistant train paints failed. Media pressure caused the NYCTA to abandon plans to use attack dogs (Castleman, 1982).

After more than half a decade of failed policies, Glazer (1979) summarized the problem as follows:

> Graffiti raise the odd problem of a crime that is, compared to others, relatively trivial but whose aggregate effects on the environment of millions of people are massive. In the New York situation especially, it contributes to a prevailing sense of the incapacity of government, and the uncontrollability of youthful criminal behavior, and a resultant uneasiness and fear. Minor infractions aggregate into something that reaches and affects every subway passenger. But six years of efforts have seen no solution (pp. 10—11).

The problem of graffiti must be seen within the context of the NYCTA during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The neglect of New York City's infrastructure, which had arisen from New York's 1970s fiscal crisis, was calamitous in the subway: Fires were epidemic; subway trains derailed on the average of one every 18 days; in 400 places in the system, track conditions were so bad that train speeds had to be reduced 75%; and on any given day, a third of the subway fleet was out of service during the morning rush hour. Moreover, as a consequence of liberalized pension laws, skilled and managerial personnel had been leaving the NYCTA in droves: When Robert Kiley, the current Chairman of the Board of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), was appointed in 1983, 50,000 workers were directed by 300 managers (Kiley, 1989). As Kiley noted: "[T]he organization was in utter chaos, its spirit broken, its sense of purpose and effectiveness long since lost" (Kiley, 1988). The subway system was on the verge of collapse.

In April 1984, David Gunn, the new president of the NYCTA, announced the Authority's Clean Car Program (CCP). All new and overhauled cars would be placed in the program. Once placed in the CCP, no car would remain in service if it was vandalized. To implement and maintain the CCP, Gunn created the Car Appearance and Security Task Force (CAST), which represented 15 separate NYCTA departments.

At its initiation in May 1984, two trains were placed into the CCP: One train was composed of new R62 Kawasaki cars on the #4 line, and another, of 20-year-old reconditioned and repainted R36 St. Louis cars on the #7 line. On May 12, 1989, 5 years later, the last graffiti-covered car was removed from service and cleaned. Now, subway trains in New York City are not only graffiti-free, they are among the cleanest subway cars in the world.

The "Clean Car Program"

David Gunn had worked as Kiley's director of operations in the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority during the 1970s, had gone on to direct Philadelphia's transportation system, and rejoined Kiley as president of the NYCTA in 1983. The NYCTA was one of three major units of the MTA, the other two being the Long Island Rail Road and the Metro North Rail Road. Each operates with considerable autonomy.

The transportation infrastructure Gunn inherited is massive. Not counting the bus system, he is responsible for a network of 230 route miles, having 26 transit lines that serve 468 stations. Trains are operated throughout the system 24 hours a day, with headways between trains as frequent as 2 minutes during peak periods and as long as 20 minutes during off-peak hours. Over 5,000 cars are used every day during the peak period, and the Transit Authority has an inventory of approximately 6,000 train cars. When out of use, trains are stored in 25 yards and 45 lay-up sites. Over 3,700,000 riders are carried on the average workday.

Gunn also inherited "the financial means and . . . the political will" (Kiley, 1988) to improve the system. Richard Ravitch, Kiley's predecessor as chairman of the MTA, was responsible for the first 5-year $8 billion capital program that was initiated in 1982. Kiley extended the capital program and provided the administrative mandate to improve the system. Gunn was responsible for administering the renovation of the system.

Gunn, who holds a master's degree in business administration, is both deeply committed to public transportation and a self-confessed train "buff." In a very real sense, the NYCTA is "his." He identifies with the system, uses it regularly,[1] suffers as a result of its problems and incivilities, and was personally aggrieved by graffiti. Not daunted by the failures of earlier attempts to alleviate graffiti, indeed learning from them, he put out the word early in his administration: Ending graffiti was one of his highest priorities—kids were no longer going to make canvases out of Gunn's trains.

The NYCTA's CCP was based on a relatively simple idea: Once a car was cleaned and entered into the program, it would never again leave a storage, maintenance, or lay-up area with graffiti. Its implementation was difficult and included risks: If it meant keeping a car out of service, even during rush hours (as it did 10 times during the program's 5 years), so be it. No one would "get-up" again on cars entered into the program.

The first step was to "chunk" the problem (Peters and Waterman, 1982, pp. 136—144). Two trains, a manageable number, were entered into the program. Crews, composed of supervisory and cleaning personnel, were set up at the end of each line (#s 4 and 7) to immediately clean cars entered into the program if they had been "tagged" by vandals. All graffiti was to be removed within 2 hours or the car would be pulled from service. Police were assigned to ride these trains full-time while they were in service. When out of service, clean trains were stored in yards specially protected by the NYCTA's Property Protection Department. In these yards, lighting was upgraded, cleaning personnel worked 24 hours a day, fences were checked daily and mended within 24 hours if damaged, and police worked undercover as cleaners.

The CAST was created by President Gunn at the initiation of the CCP. Its goals were:

- To heighten the awareness of each NYCTA department about NYCTA goals;
- To focus on problems that have an impact on meeting those goals;
- To indicate the course of action required to resolve any problems;
- To monitor the progress of the CCP;
- To encourage an active role and participation in the program by each department; and
- To familiarize committee members, and through them their respective departments, with their duties and responsibilities to enhance the effort. (Transit Authority Police, 1988).

[1]Gunn is the first NYCTA president in recent history who has forgone his car and driver in preference to using the subway for all personal and professional local transportation.

CAST met biweekly during the period 1984-1987; in 1988, its meeting schedule was reduced to once a month. Administrative authority and overall direction for the CCP was lodged with the chief mechanical officer of the Car Equipment Department.

Yearly goals were established for the CCP. By May 1985, 1720 cars were to be cleaned; by 1986, 3434; by 1987, 4707; and by 1988, 5946. The entire fleet was to be graffiti-free in 1989.

As the program expanded to more trains, and as a result of learning from the past experience with cleaning technologies, the Car Equipment Department tested and approved new cleaning commodities (40 new products were developed) and tools (14 were developed) to ensure swift and sure removal of graffiti. Although total hourly personnel declined in the Car Equipment Department during this period (from 5231 to 5201), cleaning personnel increased from 691 to 1622 (from 13% to 31% of the personnel) (Transit Authority, 1989).

Police tactics changed over time. As more clean cars entered the program, police switched from riding all clean trains to a random approach: ride a clean train for several stops, get off, and then ride another clean train in another direction. They concentrated on times and locations when students and youths tended to ride trains. No longer were summonses to be issued; if action was to be taken against a graffitist, it would be formal arrest. Police focused on repeat offenders by identifying their "tags," contacting their parents, threatening civil action for restitution, and requesting special prosecutorial and judicial responses. Undercover officers were placed on especially difficult lines. When the number of clean cars exceeded the capacity of secured lay-up areas, the police created the Anti-Graffiti Unit for two purposes: to consult about methods of improving security in lay-up areas and to safeguard the trains in unsecured or loosely secured yards until their security could be upgraded (Transit Authority Police Department, 1988, pp. 2-3).

Other departments of the NYCTA Police contributed their efforts to the program. Property Protection increased their patrol and improved security in yard and lay-up areas. Public Affairs developed programs to educate high-school and other youths about the effects and consequences of graffiti. Other departments contributed as well.

By May 1989, the trains were graffiti-free. The CCP not only achieved its overall goal, as *Table 1* indicates it exceeded its annual goals every year.

Table 1. Clean Car Program, Goals, and Achievements, 1984–1989

	Clean Cars	
	Goal	Actual
1984		400
1985	1720	1915
1986	3434	3454
1987	4707	4839
1988	5946	6077
1989	6221	6245

Source: "Clean Car Program," Car Equipment Department, NYCTA, May 1989.

Discussion

What is to be said about the success of the Kiley-Gunn administration in eradicating graffiti in the light of past failures and a resultant growing consensus that perhaps train graffiti was just one more element in "the complex of apparently unmanageable problems amidst which New Yorkers live" (Glazer, 1979, p. 11)? Three basic factors appear to be responsible:

- A management philosophy of "meaning it"—graffiti was going to be eradicated on subway trains—and an administration that delineated responsibility clearly, broke the problem into manageable portions, established attainable and challenging goals, and provided the resources necessary to attain those goals.
- A "problem-oriented" (Goldstein, 1979) approach that looked at the nature of the problem and crafted tactics based on understandings gained through such a diagnosis.
- The creation of a management matrix that coordinated and monitored the activities of responsible units, especially the Car Equipment, Rapid Transit Operations, Transit Authority Police, Property Protection, Station, and Track and Structures Departments.

We will briefly examine each one of these factors.

Meaning It

Gunn established early in his administration that graffiti eradication would be a priority. He lodged authority for achieving that goal with the department responsible for car maintenance, the Car Equipment Department. The plan included on-site supervision of cleaning activities and clear subgoals: Each car in the program, if tagged by graffitists, would be cleaned

in 2 hours or removed from service. The program was initiated modestly, with two trains, and expanded as the organization gained unpretentious but real successes—at first protecting those two trains and later expanding the base of clean cars. Removing cars from service—a drastic measure in a transportation service that was plagued with quality-of-service problems at that time—was meant: Cars were removed from service during rush hour at least 10 times during the 5-year life of the program. Authority to remove those cars from service was lodged with the program's leader, the head of the Car Equipment Department. Moreover, ‘Eternal transfer of resources within the lead department both emphasized the high priority of the effort and the willingness to commit additional resources to problem solution.

Problem Orientation

The CCP redefined the problem of train graffiti as a maintenance rather than a law enforcement or police problem. Reading Glazer's paper, "On Subway Graffiti in New York," from the contemporary perspective, one is impressed by two things. First, the paper is prescient of the current concern about the impact of disorder and incivility on the quality of urban life, citizen fear, and, arguably, the level of crime in cities. One is also impressed by how strongly Glazer and others believed that the solution to the problem of graffiti was to be found in police or other criminal justice agencies. The focus of almost all early efforts was on arrest or deterrence through the action of criminal justice agencies.

The genius of the CCP, apart from its implementation and administration, was that by focusing efforts on immediate removal of graffiti, it attacked graffiti directly at the heart of its motivation: "getting up"—that is, getting one's work up on the sides of trains and having it seen citywide. This drive for recognition was so strong, and the penalties for getting caught so trivial, that it drove an entire subculture.

The CCP simply deprived youths of the satisfaction of having their work seen. Certainly not immediately, but slowly, however, graffitists learned that tagging trains entered into the program was hopeless—the work would be in vain, it would never be seen. In fact, the NYCTA got its first taste of ultimate victory when graffitists who broke into yards in which both program and nonprogram cars were stored painted on previously marred rather than on clean cars. Moreover, the ante had been raised. Not only would not one's work be seen, but police and other agencies would go to extraordinary lengths to ensure punishment of those who marred newly cleaned or purchased cars. For a while, there were plenty of trains to paint that were unsecured and without police or other protection. But gradually the graffiti-marred stock was reduced.

The role of the police, formerly the lead agency in the fight against graffiti, changed to one of support and assistance. The previous focus on the number of arrests as an indicator of success in dealing with graffiti was replaced by meeting the yearly goals of clean cars. Interestingly enough, as the various departments involved in the project worked toward achieving those goals, arrests plummeted *(Table 2).* When arrests were made, as noted above, they were targeted on particular offenders and offenses (against clean trains) and then processed with vigor.

Coordination

The creation of CAST and its empowerment was an attempt to ensure coordination among the responsible departments. The NYCTA, like almost all large organizations, had been characterized by limited levels of interdepartmental cooperation. In fact, the atmosphere of disorganization, failure, and collapse that had dominated the NYCTA during its neglect worsened the problem. Fingerpointing (it's somebody else's responsibility or fault) and boundary maintenance activities ("tell 'em what we can't do, not what we can") were rife in the organization.

CAST, in contrast, emphasized accountability and coordination of activities. Accountability was obtained by closely linking CAST with Gunn. Rather than push the problem off to some committee for deliberation, Gunn developed a vision of the subway and specific goals, set goals for CAST, met regularly with it or its leaders, and monitored both its long- and short-term wins and losses. Coordination was achieved by regular meetings, working under a strong mandate, linking CAST'S activities to achievement of goals, and by noteworthy early successes.

In sum, by thwarting graffitists' delight with "getting up" through an effective maintenance program

Table 2. Arrests for Graffiti/Vandalism, 1984-1988

	Felonies	Misdemeanors
1984	237	2681
1985	147	2560
1986	114	1984
1987	87	1063
1988	114	974

backed up by police, property protection, and public relations efforts, the NYCTA achieved a spectacular success over a seemingly insoluble problem—train graffiti. In retrospect, the solution now seems relatively obvious and attainable. The fact that train graffiti was so intractable a problem is a powerful example of the consequences that occur when unchallenged conventional thinking about the nature of problems and their solution dominates.

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