

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Mayors' panel evades youth gang issue

The discussion got interesting when panelists were challenged on the national security dimension of the threat.

You would think by its title that the most interesting panel slated for the Second Annual Conference on Crime and Drugs sponsored by the National Conference of Mayors here Feb. 5-7 would be the one entitled, "Drugs and the Growth of Youth Gangs." That's what many people thought. The room was packed with media as well as conference registrants—most of whom were either mayors or chiefs of police of major U.S. cities.

The local media were out in force because the District has become world famous for its escalating murder rate, now well over one a day, most of which are drug related, and many of which have the appearance of gangland-style executions.

But to say that the opening presentations by the panelists were a disappointment would be an understatement. Instead of talking about the topic, the three panelists spent all their time bragging about the great programs they have in their cities to combat drugs, from enforcement to community participation and education in the schools.

Panel chairman Bill Harris, the mayor of Lincoln, Nebraska, confessed that the subject of youth gangs and drugs was beyond his purview, because there was no evidence of it in his town of only 200,000.

But while Harris couldn't resist the chance to drone on about the wonderful programs in his town before the TV cameras, the audience expected the next speaker, Willie Williams, Police Commissioner for Philadelphia, to have a lot to say. After all, he had his mayor, Wilson Goode, sitting in the front row to back him up.

But when it became Williams's

turn, he amazed everyone by averring that there was no evidence that youth gangs were involved in drugs in his city—and he moved on to bore everyone with a laundry list of local anti-drug activities.

Patrick Fitzsimmons, Commissioner of Police for Seattle, a last-minute replacement for no-show Benjamin Ward, New York City's Police Commissioner, did slightly better than the other two. At least he talked about youth gangs—the appearance of members of the Los Angeles-based Crypts and Bloods in his area over the last year.

He said there are an estimated 50-70,000 members of youth gangs in the L.A. area, and that over 400 of them have been arrested in the Seattle area bringing drugs in. He said the ability to sell single "hits" of the potent cocaine derivative, "crack," for \$3 apiece has led to an unprecedented rise in trafficking. There is so much profit in it that gang members can jump a bus or plane from L.A. to Seattle and still make a killing in a new market in days.

When the question period began, I reminded the panelists of the title of their workshop, and noted that none of them had talked about it. I wondered, I said, why police in Washington, D.C. (like Philadelphia's Williams) officially deny the existence of gangs "when there is every evidence they exist, and officers admit privately they do."

There is a need for a real "threat assessment" of the growth of drug-trafficking youth gangs. "In Latin America," I pointed out, "the international drug cartels are working openly with politically motivated terrorist

groups, with East bloc backing, and have become paramilitary operations. It makes sense that they would insinuate similar operations into their distribution networks in the U.S.

"It may be the case that youth gangs are a foreign intelligence operation and a national security threat," I said. "Would anyone care to comment?"

The room broke into pandemonium. Fitzsimmons attempted a response. "There is a great deal of truth to what you say," he said. "There are very diabolical workings out there." He then took issue with Williams from Philadelphia by referring to the Jamaican networks that traffic on the East Coast as "youth gangs." They are called "posses" he said, "but that means 'gangs.'"

Williams admitted that youths do run drugs in Philadelphia, but only as low-level distributors. "They do not control any operations," he said.

Then, however, Police Chief Charles Reifsnnyder of Lansing, Michigan, jumped up from the audience to take issue, citing the situation in Detroit. "You are talking only about 'scavenger gangs,'" he told Williams. "But in Detroit 'corporate gangs' exist, too. They are administrators, they run distribution networks, they are promoters, and they are between 14 and 20 years old," he said. "They used to make \$3.5 million in a week. Now they make a million a day."

Williams, now sweating, said, "I'll make a call to Detroit about that today."

Pittsburgh's Director of Public Safety chimed in about Detroit and New York gangs arriving in his city. Not only had the meeting begun to get interesting, but concerns about threatened cutbacks in federal funds for interagency intelligence sharing began to surface as well.