



CURRENT QUANDARIES OF MUSEUM PROFESSIONALS

BY STEVE KELLER, CPP

Economy and efficiency are not the primary goals of museum administration--except, of course, as they relate to the issue of security. Gallery walls can be painted over and over until just the right color shade is obtained. Perfectly good pedestals and vitrines can be discarded or relegated to off-site storage and new ones more fitting to display the Crown Jewels of Cadiz must be constructed, since the old ones were once used to show a mere pocket watches. As for sending the chief of security off to Washington to attend the Smithsonian's National Conference on Cultural Property Protection, that's out of the question. The budget just won't absorb one more trip, lest the delegation of fifteen other museum employees not be able to attend the various national and regional meetings required of them. And so it goes, security is the stepsister in a museum.

Education and aesthetics come first in most institutions, even at the expense of economy and efficiency. "Administration," being less important, must, however, remain efficient and lean. Even though the first paragraph of nearly every museum mission statement mandates that the institution "preserve, protect and display" the collection. The "protect" part often takes a backseat. Too



often it is totally forgotten until the major theft, fire or vandalism occurs.

The museum protection professional faces a unique set of obstacles in helping his/her institution achieve its goals and objectives. He/she is usually not considered a "professional" in all but the largest institutions. "Get me someone from the military. They know about these things," is something we hear every day. "Hire a retired cop." It doesn't occur to anyone that museum security is 99% public and employee relations and 1% muscle and that a retired Marine or a retired SWAT team member may not be the right person for the job. So, we often start off our mission ill-prepared for the tasks ahead of us, with a security chief oriented toward a different type of security than the museum wants or needs, and guards who haven't a clue what it is like to work in an institution where wide-eyed kids are actually welcomed and blue-haired old ladies are an asset, instead of an annoyance. The museum mind-set is tough to change. "We've never had a problem here, so why spend money on security?" We

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can always say that if the security chief needs something, let him/her compete for the resources in the normal budget process. But that implies he/she is able to write a good memo or make a good pitch. The competition is tough. After all, the chief is competing with a group of Ph.D.s who presumably can write quite adequately. I'll bet the Ph. D.s already have the director's ear, whereas the security chief is viewed as a nuisance--a drain on limited resources who detracts from the institution's mission (to preserve, protect and display). I know... I know... If you wanted a security chief who could actually compete, you would have hired one.

All of this leaves the security chief in a quandary--and the museum less protected than it might otherwise be. Besides the need to "professionalize" the security operation, the problem is compounded by the fact that the security field is making quantum leaps in technology. Like the leaps that the conservation profession has made in recent decades, requiring as much a scientist as an artist to do the job properly, security people must be sensitive to the need for litigation avoidance. They must understand their power and authority to protect the facility, and they must be technicians in an ever changing marketplace of microprocessors. All of this, and we want them to be pleasant, too! Now if we could only get them to volunteer their time we could avoid that minimum wage we have to pay. Two years ago, only a handful of security managers in museums had personal computers. Now, they had better be prepared to

jump aboard the information highway, or they will be left far behind. One major quandary of the museum security professional is that the museum crooks increasingly use high-tech means to defeat our security systems.

In July 1994, thieves broke into a small museum in the Eastern U.S. by defeating the alarm system. The loss was high and the theft ranks among the top three or four in the history of the United States. What is of greatest concern is that this could have happened at as many as a quarter of all American museums. What's worse is the fact that security experts have been predicting that this technique would be used. What was surprising was the fact that it took so long for it to happen.

Of concern to those of us who observe from a vantage point which permits a broader view, is the fact that "Bubba" is quickly becoming more professional than the average small museum security chief. In California, thieves have learned to override alarm systems using a hand-held microprocessor. Criminals now have a device to "pick" the combination lock on vaults and safes. Cellular phone calls from museum alarm systems can be picked out of the air, decoded, and "phantom" calls placed to the museum's central alarm monitoring station. This confuses the alarm monitoring company to the point that the alarm systems, using cellular equipment to transmit alarms, can be defeated if we don't compensate with our own high-tech safeguards.



Adding to the problem is the new global economy. No longer is the world forced to use American standards, such as those written by Underwriters' Laboratories (UL), when buying security goods and services. As the de facto "United States of Europe" develops and the EEC nation states standardize on such technical issues as cellular telephone and wireless communications formats, European standards like DIN, the German equivalent of UL, will become the true European standard. And as this happens, Europe will become a growing economic force. The result will be that DIN and other European standards will overtake UL. In order to compete, the U.S. will be forced to meet (and thus accept) European standards when producing security equipment.

The problem here is that it is hard enough for the average security professional to master UL let alone DIN or whatever the standard du jour may be. Political correctness is playing its part, too. In Europe, ionization smoke detectors, which contain a small radioactive particle to make them work, are either no longer legal or are highly taxed. Thus, Italy can't send their radioactive waste off to Utah or Arizona for disposal and must consider other alternatives. So the smoke detector of choice in museums is no longer available in some parts of the world and may eventually be unavailable here.

One needs only to look at the Halon controversy to understand how this complicates matters. Production of Halon, a fire suppressing gas used in

collection storage rooms, was banned or production strictly limited worldwide, and now security professionals must understand a complicated issue in order to do their jobs. Of course, we all know that in smaller institutions, and even in some larger ones, the responsibility for security ultimately falls on the shoulders of the Administrator, Deputy Director, Registrar, or someone who has even less time or expertise in this technical area than the retired cop hired to guard the doors.

There is also the problem of litigation avoidance. A woman visited McDonalds, bought coffee, and burned herself as she removed the lid from the cup. She sued and won more money from the restaurant than many museums' annual budgets. Could this happen to you? Perhaps not if you don't sell coffee, but let your guard look cross-eyed at someone and look out. Museum directors and administrators can be sued for what their guards do or fail to do. Typically, they can be sued for failure to properly train, failure to properly supervise, improper hiring, and improper retention. If a guard makes a mistake, you can be sued if you didn't tell him/her not to do it or if you didn't supervise him/her, and that fact contributed to his mistake. Hire a child molester to work in your Children's Gallery (Do you do background checks?) and plan on giving the victim everything you own. Do you have any problem employees in your institution? Well, if you have a problem employee and you fail to dismiss him/her and that employee "harms" someone, it's your problem, too. When I say "harm," I mean harm in the loosest sense of the



word. If a guard lays his hands on a visitor, embarrasses a visitor, humiliates a visitor, harasses a visitor, startles a visitor, or makes a visitor feel anything less than welcome, you can be sued. You don't have to lose to lose. Litigation is expensive and even the winner is a loser.

Another area of exposure is the failure to foresee a crime that might have been foreseen by a reasonable person. Do you have assaults or thefts in your parking lot? Well, if you have had some, you better not let them continue, because you now can be expected to foresee more crimes of this type, and guess who is responsible. The security professional has a major quandary in his/her role as litigation avoider. That's a tough responsibility for a retired Marine whose sole work history in the area of security was to stand post along a razor ribbon fence shouting, "Who goes there" and aiming a rifle at passers-by. It's even tougher when he must, in spite of his title of security "supervisor," "manager," "chief" or whatever, spend all day on post guarding the door. This leaves him no time to manage, supervise, train, or do other important tasks.

I'm reminded of a commercial on television a few years ago where a young woman, about 18 years old, walks out of a row of urban brownstones and heads for the school bus. She looks at the camera and says something to the effect that she just joined the Air National Guard, and when she graduates from high school they will send her to school. "In six

months," she says with enthusiasm, "I'll be an air traffic controller." Every time I board an airplane I think of that commercial and say to myself, "Gosh, I hope it's harder than that."

And so it is with the management of security manpower and resources in a museum. The modern day security manager must be up to the job—even in a small facility. We need to re-think the type of person to whom we give this job. I, personally, would rather have a housewife returning to the workforce for the first time after raising a family, than a retired Marine. I'd rather have a sharp junior college grad studying security management than the retiree who is looking to give only half of his energy and attention.

As a security consultant to museums, hired by museum directors and administrators to help them decide how much security is enough, I, too, have a quandary. My quandary is getting my clients to believe that security isn't all that easy, and that they ought to consider hiring someone to run their security programs who possesses slightly more qualifications than a warm body. It's not brain surgery, nor do we need to hire rocket scientists. But a good understanding of law, public relations, burglar and fire alarm technology, electronics, closed circuit television technology, security and fire codes and standards, hiring practices, scheduling, and museum security techniques as well as an appreciation for the mission of the institution wouldn't hurt. If museums would spend the bucks to send their security chiefs to Washington to attend



the Smithsonian's conference and to learn to network, they might not need to call me as often with questions. I charge more than minimum wage.