



## Fighting Graffiti in Philadelphia (A)

### Introduction

Wilson Goode, who was elected mayor of Philadelphia in 1983, believed that one of the most important promises he had made during his campaign was that his administration would rid the city of graffiti, the spray-painted scrawl that was defacing houses, stores, schools, libraries, bridges, lampposts and mailboxes in almost every community.

At the time, Philadelphia had two on-going anti-graffiti campaigns in the city, one for the bus and subway system and the other a West Philadelphia neighborhood clean-up program. The Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority (SEPTA) tried to arrest as many of the vandals who spray-painted its property as possible and employed a clean-up program that took a piecemeal approach to removing graffiti, targeting one transit route to clean, and keep clean, at a time. The West Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Task Force, by contrast, believed in "redirecting" the negative attitudes and habits of the wayward youth who had taken up "wall writing," rather than jailing them. Its approach to deterring new acts of vandalism also included using reformed "graffitists" and professional artists to create outdoor murals to cover walls that were prime targets for graffiti. Although keeping an entire city clean of graffiti was a much different task from cleaning the transit system, which could fence in and patrol much of its property at night, the same young graffitiists were writing on trains and buses as on schools and stores. And whether they were spray-painting on walls or trains, no one doubted that their motivation was the same—a desire for recognition among their peers.

But whatever differences and similarities there were, Goode would nonetheless have to choose between adopting an anti-graffiti program that relied on police enforcement and systematic removal of new graffiti, much as SEPTA's effort did, and designing an alternative approach, modeled on the West Philadelphia program, that attempted to give graffitiists alternative ways to express themselves and achieve recognition.

### Background

**Graffiti.** Throughout history people have painted pictures on walls, either to tell stories or simply to say "I was here." Though graffiti have always existed, they began to take on new dimensions in the early 1970s, spreading thereafter at an unprecedented rate. Teenagers in New York and Philadelphia began this movement, making graffiti a ubiquitous urban presence for the first time, by spray-painting made-up nicknames and initials—called "tags"—on the walls of their neighborhoods.

Among graffitiists, a tag—shorthand for "name tag"—was the lowest, but most prevalent, form of graffiti writing. The sole point of drawing a tag, which was done either with spray-paint or Magic

---

*This case was written by Harvey Simon for Michael Barzelay, Associate Professor of Public Policy, for the Program on Innovations in State and Local Government, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. (0493)*

Marker, was to have it seen by as many people as possible. A tag was a squiggled set of initials (sometimes difficult for the uninitiated to read) as small as one square foot, though it could be many times that size. Tags, which were done with only one color paint, or marker, were quick to put up, something even a novice, or "toy," could manage. Tagging, which became prevalent around the country, got its start in Philadelphia in the late 1960s. The most well-known tag in Philadelphia at that time belonged to a young man who was known universally as "Cornbread." Cornbread's fame, or infamy, was due to the large number of tags he painted as well as to their unusual locales. In his most daring show of graffiti bravado, Cornbread somehow managed to paint his tag on an airplane tailwing.

Unlike a tag, which was merely a "I have been here" mark, a "piece," shorthand used on the street for "masterpiece," was a full-blown street-side mural that could cover a whole wall. Pieces, also known as "burners" included an element of design, used three or more colors, and sometimes attempted to convey a story or message.

Graffitiists in Philadelphia also recognized a third form, called a "throw-up" that fit somewhere between a tag and a piece. The distinguishing feature of a throw-up was that it was drawn with two colors. A typical design might include silver initials (which alone would be a tag) outlined in black.

However ambitious the writer, all graffiti included lettering of some type, much of it highly stylized. Graffitiists (and others familiar with the form) could easily read each other's writing, unless it was written in what was known as "wild style," a free-form lettering that oftentimes no one but the person who painted it could decipher. Although tags could be created with either Magic Marker or spray-paint, larger pieces were made only with spray-paint, which writers carried in large quantity when they ventured out, usually at night, to do their work.

Typically, these graffiti writers were male teenagers, according to a police profile. Although some were as young as eight, and some were in their late 20s, most were between 14 and 17. Graffitiists were from all ethnic backgrounds, came from all parts of the city, and represented all economic classes. Many of them had such a consuming interest in art that when they weren't drawing on walls, they were often drawing on paper. Usually, they did not have other time-consuming interests, such as participation in organized sports, that would take time away from their drawing. Their other common characteristic was their family life: overwhelmingly, graffitiists tended to be from broken homes, where they were either in the sole custody of their mother, or lived in households where the elder male did not exercise strong control over the children.

Whether they painted tags, pieces or throw-ups, the primary reason they painted graffiti was to achieve recognition and build a reputation, according to police officers who track graffiti crimes, as well as others who have studied the graffiti culture. To build a reputation, a graffitiist's work had to be seen and, airplanes aside, many believed the best way to showcase their writing was to put it on the sides, and insides, of subway cars, where it would become a constantly-traveling exhibit. Writing graffiti on trains carried its own special mystique, associated with both the danger inherent in working on these metal and glass canvases—the possibility of being arrested, electrocuted or struck by a moving train when working in a tunnel—and with the wide exposure their work received. The larger the area that the graffiti covered, whether part of a car, a whole car, or a whole train, the more visible the

works would be and the more respect the writers' handiwork would win from other writers. Complex graffiti murals required more effort than one person working one night could accomplish and to put up these pieces and burners graffitiists most often painted together in teams of as many as 20 to 30 writers, sometimes working from elaborate sketches that had been prepared in advance.

To the wall writer, graffiti were art; to virtually everyone else, graffiti represented societal disorder. For graffitiists, pieces, especially, were a hybrid of performance art and painting. As painting, graffiti employed a unique and easily identifiable style, the essential elements of which were the use of spray-paint and inclusion of lettering in the work. In apparent confirmation of the graffitiists' belief in the artistic merit of their pieces, some art critics, in the early 1980s, began touting graffiti as a legitimate, avant-garde art form. Moreover, some of the best known graffitiists, mostly from New York, began painting on canvas and other traditional media, and their work was shown at prestigious galleries in the US and in Europe. But this acceptance meant nothing to non-graffiti writers. City residents, whether riding the subway, walking the streets, or simply gazing out the window, viewed the city's graffiti—art or not art—unwillingly, unhappily and uncooperatively. In short, they wanted it to be gone.

#### A Campaign against Graffiti

*A History of Concern.* Wilson Goode had a thing about graffiti. His interest was long-standing, and his outlook on the problem had changed with the passing years. He traces his first awareness of graffiti as a serious problem to a period in his life pre-dating by many years his 1983 election as Philadelphia's first black mayor, when he had been, as he puts it, "in the housing business." To Goode, who had been a community organizer and block captain in his West Philadelphia neighborhood, the "housing business" meant low-income housing, which, as executive director of the non-profit Philadelphia Council for Community Advancement, he sought money for and arranged to have built. It was in this role, between 1966 and 1978, that Goode first became incensed about graffiti. "One of the most frustrating things that happened to me in the housing business was to build new houses in the city and then, before I could finish those houses, to have much of those houses covered with graffiti," says Goode. "And as I looked at it through my business eyes, I saw it as costing me additional money to take this stuff off these buildings, ... more money that I had to raise and more money that I'd have to spend [for developers] to build these houses to house low-income families."

Goode changed his views about graffiti during the early 1980s, when he served as Philadelphia's managing director, and came to see graffiti not merely as an economic problem, but as a social illness.<sup>1</sup> In this important post, to which he was appointed by Mayor William Green, Goode oversaw 10 major city departments. Goode's new responsibilities brought him in contact with a wide cross-section of people from around the city, many of whom complained to him about the graffiti that was advancing ever higher up school walls, and other buildings. During this time he came to think of wall writing as an integral part of the city's social problems, which included a high unemployment rate, particularly for young blacks. "As I moved on," says Goode,

---

<sup>1</sup> Between 1978 and 1980 Goode served on the state Public Utility Commission.

I saw [graffiti] as a way of young people expressing their frustrations at the system. ... What they were trying to say was, "Hey, look, we're frustrated. We don't like all this new stuff [development] going up in our neighborhood. We don't have any jobs, we don't have any stake in what's going on here. And if you put it [new building] up without involving us, then we're going to destroy it in every way that we can. We're not going to burn it down, but we're going to deface it, and we're going to put our stamp, our symbol of frustration on these buildings." And I saw that in the young kids I talked to. I didn't see it just as a naked act of vandalism. I saw it as more than that.

Yet Goode was still thinking of graffiti in business terms too. "I think that graffiti in neighborhoods and on businesses could have a devastating impact on property values in those neighborhoods, upon the willingness of people to do business in those neighborhoods," he says. "It will drive business out, weaken the tax base."

*A Campaign Promise.* In 1983, Goode resigned his position as managing director to seek election as mayor and made graffiti—out of the plethora of problems facing the city—one of the five most important issues in his campaign. He pledged to make Philadelphia "graffiti free." Goode believed that his campaign pledge to take action against the citywide graffiti problem was an issue that would strike multiple chords with voters. Fighting graffiti promised to give residents a more positive image of their city, as a whole, and of their defaced neighborhoods; to help the tourist trade, by leaving visitors to the city with a more positive impression; to raise property values; and to keep businesses from leaving neighborhoods hardest hit by graffiti. But the primary beneficiaries of an anti-graffiti program would be residents who either couldn't vote or who would be unlikely to vote for a candidate running on an anti-graffiti platform. These were the young people who were themselves painting their tags and pieces on the city's walls. Goode's primary aim was to help these young people.

*The Extent of the Problem.* Though graffiti could be seen in many Philadelphia neighborhoods, the bulk of the problem was concentrated in about 40 percent of the city, according to Goode. In those areas graffiti was ubiquitous, covering public and private property alike. Public monuments, libraries, lampposts, stores, and houses were all targets. Large exposed walls, two and three stories tall, that were visible from a distance, such as those that might comprise one end of a row house, were particularly inviting for graffiti artists looking for a place to put up a large piece. Though graffiti might be found on any surface in any community, it was particularly prevalent in the declining neighborhoods of working-class black homeowners, who had long suffered from poor city services, and from which Goode could expect to draw much of his electoral support.

*Two Minds.* During the campaign it was evident that Goode was of two minds about how to solve the graffiti problem—as if his change of perspective on graffiti, from viewing it as simple vandalism to a more complex social problem, had not yet been translated, in his mind, into a clear abatement strategy. Goode still occasionally spoke at that time of punitive measures, though he also

talked of an approach that would address the phenomenon's deepest social roots. Clearly, a strict law enforcement approach was still on his mind when, during a mid-September campaign stop he pledged to make the clean-up of a particularly hard-hit West Philadelphia junior high school a test of his success as mayor. He would keep this school clean "even," he recalls saying in an offhanded remark, "if we have to go and start chopping off [the] hands of people who write on walls." At a minimum, he said in a statement aimed at wall writers, "we'll catch you; we'll prosecute you; we'll put you in jail; we'll make you clean it up, and make sure your parents pay for the damage done." These statements put Goode in the same camp as his opponent, former Philadelphia police chief and former mayor Frank Rizzo, who unequivocally favored a law-and-order approach. But Goode also clearly distinguished his approach from Rizzo's. Other anti-graffiti proposals Goode made during the campaign were based on his view that wall writers were not criminals, but misguided youth with a valid need for expression. This led him to talk about how he would "re-direct the energies of these young people in a positive, constructive manner," he recalls.

Goode's law-and-order impulses about fighting graffiti had already been put to the test at SEPTA, though the new mayor was unaware of the authority's low-profile makeover. SEPTA had used a stern hand to clean the system's trains and buses and keep them free of spray paint. Goode's other tendency to see graffiti as a problem that should be attacked at its roots was being carried out by Timothy Spencer, whose West Philadelphia Task Force tried to give wall writers alternative activities that would fill the same need for recognition that had led them to do graffiti.

#### The West Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Task Force

Timothy Spencer was accustomed to attacking neighborhood problems at their roots. When Spencer was still in his early 20s and already had years of community activism under his belt, the young Philadelphian was leading an active and highly organized civic group in Mantua, his almost all-black West Philadelphia neighborhood, where he organized everything from street clean-ups to the rehabilitation of burnt-out buildings. Among the many social problems Spencer saw all around him during these years, graffiti was not, by any means, the biggest problem. Drugs, which were sold openly on street corners, and murder, which was all too common, were the most serious problems. Poverty, unemployment and homelessness were also rampant. Graffiti, though they were obvious on walls all over the community, were harmless child's play by comparison. Accordingly, graffiti were not a serious concern for Spencer, nor for the community group he directed, Mantua Community Planners.

Then, in 1982, a narrowly averted tragedy made graffiti-fighting Spencer's passion. A local homeowner, who worked on the SEPTA police force, had had his house repeatedly vandalized with spray paint. These graffiti, which he had painted over, only to have graffitiists strike again, had so angered him that he was ready to shoot his service revolver randomly into a gymnasium full of teenagers, where he thought the vandals might be, Spencer feared. Although Spencer talked the man out of taking revenge, the experience convinced Spencer it was time to take graffiti seriously.

*Redirecting Graffitiists.* Spencer, drawing on his social work in the neighborhood, had an instinct, which he never doubted, for how to solve the graffiti problem. "I knew we had to take the

population that was causing the problem and redirect them," Spencer says, summing up his guiding philosophy. "You must keep that population busy and you must provide alternatives," he adds. His plan was to provide graffitiists with other, socially acceptable activities that would fill some of the same psychological and social needs as graffiti writing. To accomplish these goals, Spencer, together with community organizers from other area neighborhood groups and institutions, established a new community organization called the West Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Task Force, which met for the first time in March 1983.

Knowing almost nothing about graffiti at the outset, the task force turned to the graffitiists themselves for help. By interviewing graffitiists he was acquainted with, and others who were referred to him, Spencer and the other task force members sought to learn who did it, when they did it, why they did it, and what they might be persuaded to do instead. "We knew some of the kids that did graffiti and we invited them to come to the meeting and told them that they could voice and say what they wanted to say," Spencer explains. "We told them that we weren't going to lock them up or anything like that but [that] we wanted them to participate, [and to] include them in the process." Through these interviews Spencer discovered that the wall writers were mostly teenagers under 18, though some were older; that they came from all parts of the city; that they painted graffiti to compete with and receive recognition from their peers; and that they thought of graffiti as an art form.

Based on these interviews, Spencer devised these primary means for cleaning graffiti and "redirecting" graffitiists:

- Mural painting. Considered by Spencer to be among the most effective deterrent to graffiti writing, this initiative consisted of graffitiists participating in painting large, pre-approved, professionally designed pictures on outdoor walls, with permission from the owners of the property to be painted. Whenever funding was available, mural painters would be paid a salary as an incentive to switch to this alternative behavior. This activity was intended to deter graffitiists from illegal wall writing in three ways: 1) Mural painting was supposed to tap the desire among graffitiists for an artistic outlet. 2) Murals were supposed to provide graffitiists a form of public recognition that would substitute for the recognition they received from their peers for painting graffiti. The teenagers who painted murals were to receive this praise at formal dedication ceremonies, when the works were completed, and from having their names (given names rather than tag names) on the pieces. 3) Murals were also supposed to deter graffiti more immediately: it was believed that active graffitiists would respect the artistic integrity of the murals and therefore not spray paint those walls. The effect was supposed to be less graffiti overall.

- Public recognition for other alternative activities. Exhibits and auctions would showcase graffitiists' more traditional art works in much the same way the murals did. The perceived status of publicly showing and perhaps selling their art work would encourage these alternative pursuits.

- Lessening the social acceptability of graffiti among teenagers. Spencer hoped that as graffiti writers were "redirected" to other activities, in which they could legitimately take pride, wall writing would lose its cache. "It's going to happen [less graffiti writing] because peers are talking to their peers, saying it's the wrong thing to do, that you should have pride, that there is alternatives to writing on walls," says Spencer.

- Developing a "trust system" between graffiti writers and adults. If graffitiists believed that Spencer and other adults involved with the West Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Task Force were trustworthy, the wall writers would be more willing to permit adults to provide them with alternative activities. "If the YMCA around the corner has 12 computers," Spencer explains, and

this kid said, "I'm interested in computers," but he never felt that he could trust that YMCA because he looked at it as a bureaucratic-type agency, but he trusted the ... West Philadelphia Task Force, he trusted Tim Spencer. So he says, "OK, fine. I can go in that building and use those computers, because they arranged for us to go in there between six and eight on Thursday evenings." ... When a young person feels as though they had somebody they can go and vent to and get some feedback back, that was one of the most ... valuable things to trying to redirect a problem."

- Cleaning existing graffiti. Spencer envisioned using primarily neighborhood residents and unemployed adolescents, as well as wall writers themselves, to remove or paint over existing graffiti. Spencer believed in paying unemployed young people to do these clean-ups, if funding was available.

The Task Force's most visible accomplishments were two murals. One was a "Welcome to Philadelphia" sign at a North Philadelphia Amtrak station and another 100-foot-long outdoor sign near City Hall. The money for these projects, for both supplies and labor, was solicited from private donors. Although Spencer would have liked to have sponsored more murals, the Task Force could not raise sufficient funds. The Task Force's other major projects were a poster and essay contest and an art exhibit. Although Spencer also wanted to organize clean-up campaigns to paint over, or otherwise remove, existing graffiti, insufficient funds, again, prohibited any significant cleanup effort. "We didn't have the resources to get people paint to paint on top of graffiti," says Spencer. With the money it did raise, however, the West Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Task Force claimed to have "redirected" about 40 graffitiists by December 1983.

#### The SEPTA Model for Fighting Graffiti

Though New York City's transit system was frequently cited as the sine qua non of graffiti inundation, transforming the transit system there into a nationally watched barometer of the city's decline, Philadelphia's transit system was hardly better. In Philadelphia, too, virtually all public transit vehicles and stations were scarred with paint or markers, graffiti-plastered eyesores that conveyed a sense of lawlessness. Even windows had become part of the graffitiists' canvas, leaving riders in those vehicles with little or no sense of their location.

In December 1981, SEPTA General Manager David Gunn launched the authority, which operated in the five-county Philadelphia area, on a program to rid its buses, trains and stations of this menace. The decision to try to rid SEPTA property of graffiti was simple, says Gunn. "The policy takes two seconds: We don't like graffiti. Get rid of it." The tough part was the how-to.

The way Gunn saw it, Philadelphia's problem with subway graffiti was not as bad as it seemed. The graffiti that SEPTA vehicles were parading on elevated tracks and on streets through the city in 1982 had not been put up overnight, but had accumulated over many years. The number of graffiti attacks that occurred each day was small—small enough, Gunn believed, that the authority's maintenance crew could routinely clean off the new graffiti on a daily basis. If all the old graffiti were removed, and a daily cleaning regimen instituted, Gunn believed that the trains, buses and stations could be kept clean. "Once you got on top of the problem," he says, "removing graffiti was no different than washing the windows or taking gum off the floor or dusting off the air conditioning vents." In keeping with the concept of graffiti removal as an extension of its routine maintenance, the authority did not launch a large publicity campaign to promote its graffiti-cleaning program.

Under Gunn's direction, SEPTA's anti-graffiti program had two parts:

- *Clean the system of old graffiti.* This was a long-range plan that ultimately took two years to carry out (December 1981 – December 1983). Gunn, a Harvard Business School graduate, approached the cleaning schedule, like the rest of his anti-graffiti program, systematically, mapping out an incremental program by which the SEPTA maintenance department would clean graffiti off every piece of transit property. "You do it line by line, depot by depot, fleet by fleet, station by station," he says.

- *Keep the cleaned equipment and stations clean.* Once a train, bus or station was cleaned it was included in a quality control program designed to keep it clean. The guidelines of the quality control program were strict and straightforward: vehicles that were in the quality control program were not to operate unless they were clean.<sup>2</sup> The quality control program elevated cleanliness to the same priority as safety: a bus was not permitted to transport passengers if its windshield wipers did not operate properly, nor would it be used if it was marred with graffiti. In either case the equipment would be repaired first. Every SEPTA employee knew, says Gunn, "that if I ever found a car or a bus that wasn't in the program, it could look like a rolling billboard, I wouldn't say anything, but if I ever found a bus that had a quality control sticker that had graffiti on it, and it wasn't headed to the garage, I'd call people up: "Get it off the street, what's it doing on the street?"

This task of keeping stations and rolling stock clean was itself a two-part strategy:

- *Detection.* To detect new vandalism, and assure that these marks were expeditiously removed, all SEPTA employees were instructed to act as graffiti watchdogs. Every time a driver reported to work and was assigned a bus, for instance, it was that person's responsibility to check the bus for graffiti, in addition to checking it for inoperable equipment. If the bus had graffiti marks the driver was to request another vehicle. Likewise, if a SEPTA employee saw equipment being written on, the employee was expected either to intervene or to immediately notify SEPTA or Philadelphia police. Also, the vehicle was to be immediately taken out of service.

- *Enforcement.* The SEPTA police department established a 20-member plainclothes unit, the sole function of which was to apprehend graffiti writers in the act.<sup>3</sup> Information collected by a central

---

<sup>2</sup> Stations were to be cleaned by the next day.

<sup>3</sup> Philadelphia police, in addition, made arrests for defacing SEPTA property, though such arrests constituted only about 10 percent of the total, according to a SEPTA police captain.

office from employees throughout the system who spotted graffiti attacks was funneled to these SEPTA police, who used this intelligence to choose likely locations and times to lie in wait for their prey. Battling graffiti writers "was like a war," says Gunn.

In 1982 the Philadelphia Municipal Court established special mediation procedures for handling the arrest of first-time offenders. Each Wednesday juvenile and adult graffiti cases were brought to this "graffiti court," where a trial commissioner (known in some jurisdictions as a clerk magistrate) attempted to settle the case, avoiding the necessity of bringing the offense before a judge and relieving the arresting officer of the burden of appearing in court. If the defendant pled guilty, a fine would be assessed, including the estimated cost of cleaning the graffiti, and the offense would not become part of the defendant's criminal record.<sup>4</sup> Coordinating information and paperwork among the three organizations was a SEPTA detective who served as liaison among the SEPTA police department, the district attorney's office and the municipal court.

By all accounts, Gunn's program was a success, and in January 1984 he left Philadelphia to try to do the same for New York City's transit system. One key to Gunn's success at maintaining a largely graffiti-free system was the relationship between the number of cars that SEPTA kept clean and the number of graffiti attacks. Specifically, the authority found that the more property it kept clean, the fewer attacks there were. And with fewer attacks, less maintenance and police work were required to keep clean property clean. Maintaining cleanliness, which Gunn initially intended as a straightforward way of attaining his objective of graffiti-free transit, proved, through its deterrent effect, to be self-reinforcing. One year after the anti-graffiti program began, the number of graffiti attacks was down 75 percent.

Graffiti-free trains, buses and stations were hit less often with graffiti, Gunn believed, because well-maintained equipment was received with more respect. Gunn received a telling confirmation of this phenomenon when he reversed the standard policy of allocating new equipment. Traditionally, new buses were doled out all through the system so that each area of the city received only a small amount of new equipment at one time. Instead, he allocated an entire order of 298 new buses to three of the poorest sections of the city, where there was the worst vandalism. "We didn't have a big problem," says Gunn. "The buses were treated with a great deal of respect."

Graffitiists also had another, more immediate, reason for avoiding the graffiti-free routes, which Gunn had not anticipated. Graffitiists put up tags, throw-ups and pieces in order to gain recognition. So when SEPTA quickly removed from service and cleaned the trains and buses with the graffiti writers' names on them, the graffitiists' paintings received very little exposure and a primary incentive for writing on SEPTA property was neutralized. This was an effective strategy, but it had not been part of Gunn's original anti-graffiti plan. When Gunn set out to rid the transit system of graffiti, he had not given much thought to what motivated graffiti writers: "We didn't waste a lot of time trying to analyze what the little bastards were doing, or why."

---

<sup>4</sup> If the defendant was a juvenile, the parent could be held responsible for the fine.

**Designing a Solution.**

After Goode was elected mayor he faced the task of transforming his sketchy campaign promise to clean the city of wall writing into a working anti-graffiti program. "You go out, you make these promises," says Goode, "and then you say, 'Well, how am I going to implement this promise I made?'"

DO NOT COPY