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To : Richard J. Stone, General Counsel
Office of the Special Advisor

From: Mary S. Burdick, Counsel; Margaret Levy, Counsel

Re : Interview with Gloria Romero, Member, Hispanic
Advisory Committee to the Police Commission

On July 6, 1992 at 2:00 p.m. at California State University at Los Angeles, Margaret Levy and I interviewed Gloria Romero. The following is a summary of our recollections of this meeting, including our questions and comments, together with our mental impressions, conclusions and opinions, based upon the meeting.

1. Background Information

Gloria Romero is a professor in the Department of Psychology, California State University at Los Angeles. She has been a member of the Hispanic Advisory Council to the Police Commission for about two years. The Council advises the Commission on policy issues when requested to do so by the Commission; sometimes the Council asks to be placed on the agenda to discuss a matter of its own choosing. Members of the Advisory Council, including Romero, do not attend most Commission meetings.

2. Anticipation of Verdict

Romero does not know what the LAPD or Police Commission anticipated in advance of the verdicts of the officers charged with beating Rodney King.

Romero herself was "shocked" by the verdicts.

3. Intelligence

Romero has no information about LAPD advance intelligence concerning possible reactions to the verdicts.

4. Planning

Romero has no information on LAPD planning for reactions to the verdicts.

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5. Oversight of LAPD

Romero believes that oversight of LAPD by the Police Commission would be improved if the Commission were expanded to include more members. This would allow for the inclusion of real community representatives, not just established professionals who are members of minority groups, but removed from daily life in minority communities. In the alternative, she suggested the establishment of a civilian review board (see section 13 below.)

These suggestions should be put in context. Romero did not suggest that a larger Commission would better supervise disaster planning. Instead she was concerned about oversight of LAPD's general handling of issues involving minority communities, particularly the attitude of LAPD officers toward Latinos including especially immigrants.

If a body more representative of the ethnic and cultural diversity of the City oversaw complaints of LAPD behavior toward members of minority communities, LAPD behavior might change and the perception in the minority community about LAPD and the Commission might improve.

6. Effect of Pre-Verdict Political Climate and Pre-Verdict Comments

Romero did not suggest that the political climate before the verdicts was responsible for the disturbances. She described the causes as "rage, disgust, cynicism and alienation" among poor African-Americans and Latinos.

7. LAPD Management

Romero was concerned primarily with two failings of LAPD management -- to train officers about Special Order Number 40 (addressing LAPD/INS relations) and to hire adequate bilingual officers.

Romero paraphrased Special Order #40. It provides that LAPD shall not collaborate with INS in the enforcement of immigration laws, except that officers may turn an immigrant over to INS only if he or she is suspected of committing a crime. Immigrants may not be turned over to INS simply because they lack documentation.

Romero has attended Police Commission meetings at which the Order was discussed. She said it was obvious that the Deputy Chief testifying at the meetings did not know the terms of the order.

LAPD ignorance of the Order, combined with the shortage of Spanish-speaking officers, combined to cause serious, lasting damage to LAPD-Latino relations during the disturbances. When the rioting began, LAPD joined forces with INS on the streets.

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After the disturbances LAPD explained the presence of INS officers saying LAPD needed them as translators for the police, since LAPD does not have enough Spanish-speaking officers to question Spanish-speaking suspects or witnesses. Romero described this rationale as "bullshit." She believes INS was brought in because LAPD perceives Latinos as "illegals," LAPD wanted to intimidate Latinos, and LAPD handed over immigrants for deportation who had not committed any crime, in violation of Special Order #40.

8. LAPD Relationship with the Police Commission

See 5. above.

9. Adequacy of Police Response

Romero says she and the Latino community feel very strongly that the LAPD response was woefully inadequate. They perceive that LAPD "let it burn" and thumbed their noses at minority neighborhoods. By contrast, for example, the Sheriff's office acted quickly and decisively in East Los Angeles, in predominantly Latino neighborhoods, and violence did not spread there.

Romero freely admitted, however, to a great unease because it is possible that if the police had come down harder on the rioters, arson and looting may have been curtailed, but more people would have been killed or seriously wounded in confrontations between the police and civilians.

She says that whether the LAPD response was adequate or appropriate from a tactical perspective is not so important. What really matters now is that African-Americans and Latinos perceive that their communities were allowed to burn because of their race.

10. Reasons for the Inadequacy of Police Response

See 9. above.

Romero believes that LAPD sees Latinos as "illegals" and so the police were unconcerned with protecting them.

She also believes that LAPD views preparedness for unrest solely as an issue of having enough equipment and officers and properly deploying them. Until LAPD appreciates the rage and social dissatisfaction that makes violence inevitable, and takes a hand in addressing the social and political problems, LAPD cannot adequately respond.

11. Nature of the Violence

When we asked about the nature of the violence, Romero looked at the question in a special light. She defines "violence" to include unemployment, homelessness, and hunger, visited on minority

communities by a government that has abandoned them. From her perspective, this social "violence," as well as police brutality and insensitivity, have been escalating for years. She is surprised that minorities have responded passively for so long, "hitting inward" (drugs, gangs) instead of striking out (rioting).

She was not surprised, therefore, by the nature of the response to the acquittals.

Romero spoke persuasively about the socio-economic conditions which set off the violence. She described a trip to South Central before the verdicts. Looking at the the blight, decay and feeling the poverty, she said she herself felt rage. South Central and some areas of East LA, Pomona and Pico-Union are so frightening, bleak and helpless that people "not only have reason, but perhaps the right," to do anything to direct attention to their plight. She did not suggest that the rioting was done intentionally to draw attention, but perhaps unconsciously.

Romero also spoke about issues of class and race. Race is a powerful factor in LA that defines class. Rioting was a raw expression of class consciousness, played out as race. African-Americans and Hispanics, who are "have nots," attacked Koreans and their businesses because Koreans are perceived as "haves." Class and economic problems were "veiled" as race during the riots.

Romero also discussed the psychology of the mob. She did not perceive the rioting as immoral opportunism. Instead it was simple "collective behavior" and not surprising. People will do things in a group they would never do alone; they feel anonymous and protected in a group. People felt, and rightly so, that there was no law, and responded accordingly. The rioting was not immoral, it was evidence -- evidence that the system is inherently unfair and the law was not in control. Romero, a well-spoken and educated professor, said that she felt such rage by the verdicts that if she were 10 years younger and had been in a group, she probably would have rioted too.

Romero laid some of the blame for the civil disturbances and the underlying racial tensions on the media and on some elected Latino politicians.

Some portrayals of the streets on television were racist, and fueled the fire. For example, Romero recalled one live report in which the camera showed three black men walking down the street and a police car cruising by. The reporter described the scene as three "suspects" even though the police did not question the men and there was no reason to believe they were suspected of anything. The reporter, in an effort to cause drama, equated black men with criminals.

Romero was very critical of some elected Latino politicians

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who treated the beating of Rodney King and the resulting civil disturbances as a black issue. These people distanced themselves, failed or refused to recognize the underlying class issues, and failed to exercise leadership. In fact some even fueled the fire and contributed to the racism by suggesting, as did Chief Gates, that "illegals" were responsible for the civil disorder, without any evidence.

12. Lessons Learned

Romero believes the City should have learned that violence can and will occur until underlying social conditions are improved.

The City should also have learned that improved LAPD planning and training and increased police resources will not be enough if minority communities have a realistic distrust and cynicism about LAPD.

13. Recommendations for Improvement

See 12 above.

Attention and money need to be spent on programs for urban youth. Even the college students Romero teaches (who predominantly come from lower-class minority communities) are extremely alienated and distrustful.

Community-based policing can help. She perceives, and believes minority communities perceive, the new Chief to be a sensitive, decent person with integrity who understands diversity and can speak to the people in a way that will reach them. She cannot recall ever hearing a police officer speak of the "oppressed people" until she heard the new Chief. While community-based policing, directed by the new Chief, can make a difference, it is not the answer. A reversal of the decline in social and economic programs for low-income minority communities offers the only real solution.

LAPD officers have to be taught that it is their duty to protect and serve immigrants as well as citizens. They must be instructed about Special Order 40 (see 7. above) so that they do not misperceive their role as enforcers of federal immigration law.

LAPD officers need to be trained about civil liberties. They need to learn that violating the rights of individuals in minority communities breeds contempt for law, it does not help in law enforcement. In particular, they should be restrained from using individual incidents as an excuse to search homes in entire neighborhoods, a practice which seriously undermines respect for the police in Latino neighborhoods.

LAPD should stop "gang tracking." It is "guilt by

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association" and poorly administered. LAPD's spying and identifying undermine respect for the police in Latino neighborhoods.

Romero suggested that the Police Commission should be expanded. With only five members it is too small to accommodate diversity and representation by real community members. Therefore it cannot even fulfill its symbolic role of civilian oversight in a way that is credible to minorities.

Romero also suggested that an Independent Civilian Review Board should be established to review charges of LAPD violence. The Commission cannot fulfill this function because it is not really representative of the community in which police violence occurs -- primarily African-American neighborhoods.

The LAPD training curriculum needs to be reviewed. Romero believes that officers are now taught that they may shoot out of "fear" and may shoot fleeing suspects. LAPD officers should be trained that their obligation to preserve life is more important than their obligation to preserve order.

LAPD needs to root out homophobia, racism and sexism. Until it does so, the police will be held in contempt.

14. Use of Interviewee At Public Hearing

If the Special Advisor's office is prepared to have the public sessions address issues that are broader than police mobilization and response to violence, I believe Romero would be an articulate spokesperson for a strongly held view that social conditions and respect for residents in minority communities must improve before the potential for violence is defused. If the public sessions are open enough to allow for the airing of that view, the sessions themselves could increase the credibility of the Police Commission in minority communities by evidencing the Commission's willingness to listen.

15. Additional Interviewees Suggested; Documents Suggested

Romero suggested a review of Special Order 40. She also recommended a report issued by the ACLU describing violation of Latino's civil rights in the aftermath of the civil disturbances.

Romero agreed to send us a study she is completing which compares Cal. State LA students' perceptions of LAPD last year, immediately before the verdicts, and now. In short, the African-American students are and were the most angry and alienated, followed by Latinos. Anglos and Asians rated about the same.

SUMMARY ABSTRACT

Interview with Gloria Romero

Gloria Romero is a professor of psychology at Cal. State L.A. and has been on the Hispanic Advisory Council to the Police Commission for approximately two years.

Highlights of Interview:

In Romero's view, hunger, homelessness, unemployment and urban decay are themselves a form of violence visited on minority communities by the government, which has abandoned the poor and especially minority youth. Police brutality against African-Americans and Latinos is also government violence. It is inevitable that the residents in these communities responded to violence with violence, and their rage is understandable.

Romero believes the most important issue is not improvements in police deployment, increases in resources, and improved planning. Conditions in South Central and parts of Pomona, Pico-Union and East L.A. are so horrible that violence cannot be prevented until the socio-economic devastation of these areas is reversed. African-Americans and Latinos are alienated and enraged. This must be addressed.

LAPD must learn and accept that it is its duty to protect and serve immigrants as well as citizens. If LAPD continues to act in concert with INS, Latinos cannot expect and will not expect fair treatment from the police. The police must stop viewing Latinos as "illegals."