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INVESTIGATION

L.A. deputies arrested by FBI

Authorities charge them with beating county jail inmates and other crimes; Sheriff Lee Baca calls it a sad day for L.A. County department

By Christina Villacorte
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In a stunning collision of law enforcement agencies, the Federal Bureau of Investigation arrested several Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department deputies Monday and charged them with a host of crimes, including beating inmates and their visitors, making unlawful arrests and conspiracy to obstruct a federal investigation.

Sheriff Lee Baca vowed to cooperate in the ongoing probe but stressed that the alleged misconduct of a few deputies should not taint the rest of the department.

"While the indictments were not unexpected, it is nevertheless a sad day for this department," he said during a press conference at LASD headquarters in Monterey Park, his command staff standing behind him.

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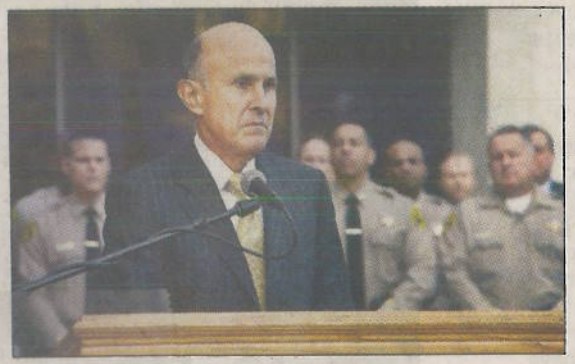

Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca takes questions from the media after the FBI released results of a federal probe Monday.
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THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Deputies

FROM PAGE 1

"I respect the criminal justice system," Baca added. "No one is above the law."

U.S. Attorney Andre Birotte Jr. said 18 current or former deputies were named in four grand jury indictments and one criminal complaint.

Almost all were arrested at Sheriff's Department facilities, and arraigned within hours.

"It's always disappointing to see allegations of misconduct leveled against our law enforcement officers, the vast majority of whom serve us honorably and bravely each and every day," Birotte said during a press conference.

"Law enforcement officers are entrusted with great power and great responsibility," he added. "When those entrusted with the civil rights of residents instead disregards and violates those rights, they must be held accountable."

FBI Assistant Director for Los Angeles Bill Lewis said federal agents and sheriff's deputies should still be able to work side by side on task forces against terrorism, gangs, crimes against children, and other criminal activities.

ANDY HOLZMAN — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Bill Lewis, assistant director of the FBI's Los Angeles Office, looks on as U.S. Attorney Andre Birotte Jr. announces that members of the L.A. County Sheriff's Department are being charged with federal crimes.

"The FBI values the partnership we have with the Sheriff's Department," Lewis said, adding the public should continue to "respect the badge worn by sheriff's deputies."

In the first indictment, two deputies are accused of assaulting inmates at the Twin Towers Correctional Facility downtown, then making trainees lie about it in reports. Birotte said the abuse included choking, kicking and pepper spraying inmates.

The second indictment named a sergeant and four deputies who allegedly violated the civil rights of five visitors to Men's Central Jail, also downtown.

One beating allegedly left a visitor permanently disabled. Other purported victims were an Austrian consul general, who was detained and handcuffed after trying to check on an Austrian inmate.

The third indictment implicated two lieutenants and seven sergeants who, ironically, belonged to LASD's Internal Criminal Investigations Bureau and Operation Safe Jails.

Birotte accused them of taking "extraordinary steps to impede a federal investigation into misconduct within the county jails system" when they tried to hide an informant from the FBI.

"They altered records to make it appear he'd been released, but only rebooked him into custody under different name, then moved him to an isolated corner of the detention system," he said.

Birotte said deputies also asked a judge to compel the FBI to identify the federal agents involved in the investigation, and allegedly threatened a federal agent outside her home.

The FBI had put an informant inside Men's Central Jail after Robert Olmstead, a former Sheriff's Department commander, complained that Baca and Undersheriff Paul Tanaka were doing nothing about rampant deputy misconduct.

"It would be no surprise to me at all if there was a direct link between Baca and Tanaka and these arrested deputies regarding their actions of obstructing justice and their attempts to prevent the FBI from further investigating corruption inside the department," Olmstead said in a statement.

Both Olmstead and Tanaka are running for sheriff next year, trying to unseat Baca, who has been in office since 1998.

The fourth indictment accused a deputy of illegally modifying an assault weapon, while the criminal complaint accused three deputies, all brothers, of mortgage fraud that cost banks $340,000.

The accused deputies would be relieved of duty, without pay, pending the investigation, the sheriff said.

Baca declined to talk about the FBI's decision to investigate the department, including planting an informant in the jail, without first notifying him.

Baca denied Birotte's assertion, however, that misconduct had become "institutionalized."

"The Sheriff's Department is a strong public safety organization with the lowest crime rate in 40 years," he said.

"The Sheriff's Department is one of the most effective public safety agencies, and the most trusted in what it does," Baca added. "We're not going to let this particular set of circumstances discredit the 19,000 other people in the department who do outstanding work."

L.A. COUNTY

WED 12-11-13 Daily Breeze

Union leader defends deputies

By Christina Villacorte and Kelly Goff
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The union boss for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department on Tuesday stepped to the defense of deputies arrested in misconduct at county jails, accusing the FBI of waging a "vendetta" against some of them and adding that some of their behavior was authorized by higher-ups in the department.

The FBI has filed charges against 18 deputies alleging various types of misconduct, including abusing inmates and visitors and trying to intimidate a federal agent.

L.A. Professional Peace Officers President Brian Moriguchi criticized the way the FBI arrested sheriff's Lts. Gregory Thompson and Stephen Leavins, the highest-ranking officers accused of trying to obstruct a federal investigation into alleged corruption and civil rights violations at Men's Central Jail.

"The FBI sent SWAT teams out to their homes at 6 in the morning,"

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Deputies

FROM PAGE 3

Moriguchi said. "Thompson's wife was brought outside in her pajamas and handcuffed in the freezing cold, which is completely unacceptable when these individuals were no risk to the federal agents and would have surrendered any time the FBI asked them to."

"It makes me suspect the FBI was sending some sort of message that 'if you want to treat us badly, then we want to treat you badly'," Moriguchi added. "We do not object to any investigation — we just ask that fair treatment be given, and that this is not some vendetta of the FBI."

FBI spokeswoman Laura Eimiller denied the allegation that the FBI was particularly heavy-handed against the lieutenants.

"I checked and no SWAT teams were used at these arrest locations," she said, adding, "Any tactical decisions are made for safety of officers and defendants, and not based on any other suggested motivation."

The federal grand jury indictment claimed Thompson and Leavins were part of a conspiracy to hide a jailhouse informant from the FBI.

Members of that group allegedly tried to hide an FBI informant from the FBI by falsifying records to make it appear he'd been released, when he was actually being held in a different location under a fake name. They also allegedly went to the home of an FBI agent in an attempt to intimidate her into divulging details about the investigation.

Moriguchi believes they were merely following orders.

"I don't know whether their actions were appropriate or not, but I can say that ... the alleged conduct of the two lieutenants would not have been done of their own volition," Moriguchi said. "There had to have been somebody higher up who either authorized that type of conduct, or actually instructed or ordered them to do that."

Sheriff Lee Baca's spokesman Steve Whitmore declined to respond to the union allegations.

"I'm not going to comment on an individual's speculation," he said. "The federal investigation is still ongoing, and Sheriff's Department is cooperating fully."

Meanwhile, more information is emerging about another of the deputies arrested Monday.

"At least one of the people indicted is among the worst deputies we know of — Fernando Luviano," said Peter Eliasberg, legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California, which has served as a court-appointed jail monitor for almost 30 years.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Bill Lewis, Assistant Director in Charge of the FBI's Los Angeles Division.

"We've heard (Luviano's) name come up in connection with beating, intimidating, harassment of inmates," Eliasberg added. "It amazed me that he continued to be employed by the department."

A few years ago, the county and the department paid $475,000 to settle a lawsuit filed by an inmate who accused settled Luviano and other deputies of excessive force.

Michael Holguin said the deputies beat him with their fists and flashlights, putting him in the hospital for three days with staples in his head, bruises, lacerations, stitches in his face and a broken leg.

"It feels good," said Holguin of the indictments. "Just because they wear a badge doesn't mean they're above the law."

Gabriel Carrillo accused Luviano and other deputies of beating him when he visited his brother at Men's Central Jail in 2011. His lawyer, Ron Kaye, said Luviano's indictment gave his client "a sense of vindication."

Meanwhile, Inspector General Max Huntsman, appointed earlier this month to provide oversight of the Sheriff's Department, said he would strive for reforms once the criminal cases are finished.

"As that concludes and resolves itself, then we'll be able to step in and take care of the larger issues, because criminal prosecutions never really address the fundamental issues or policy matters, they just address whether or not a particular individual goes to jail."

"I'm happy for the spotlight being shed on things and I'll let that process move forward, but at the same time, we're going to be ready to step in and try to come up with solutions to avoid these issues coming up in the future."

Los Angeles Times

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18 ARRESTS IN JAIL PROBE

Prosecutors find 'wide scope of illegal conduct' in Sheriff's Dept.

By Robert Faturechi and Jack Leonard

Federal authorities announced charges Monday against 18 current and former Los Angeles County sheriff's deputies accused of beating jail inmates and visitors, trying to intimidate an FBI agent and other crimes following an investigation of corruption inside the nation's largest jail system.

Prosecutors said they found a "wide scope of illegal conduct" by deputies and their supervisors that went beyond mistreating inmates to actively attempting to hinder an FBI investigation into jail misconduct.

The actions of federal authorities marked the largest mass arrest of sheriff's officials in more than two decades and represents another blow to a department that recently has been accused of racially biased policing, hiring officers with tainted backgrounds and cronyism.

"These incidents did not take place in a vacuum — in fact, they demonstrated behavior that had become institutionalized," U.S. Atty. Andre Birotte Jr. said in a statement. "Some members of the Sheriff's Department considered themselves to be above the law."

The indictments allege two assaults on inmates and three on people who visited the jail. They also include claims that deputies wrote false reports to justify using force and conducted illegal arrests and searches of jail visitors.

A sergeant who supervised deputies in the visiting area of Men's Central Jail was accused of encouraging violence and reprimanding employees "for not using force on visitors ... if the visitors had supposedly 'disrespected'" jail deputies, according to an indictment.

In one case, prosecutors say, an Austrian consul official trying to visit an Austrian inmate was arrested and handcuffed even though she had committed no crime and would have been immune from prosecution, the indictment said.

Sheriff Lee Baca said at a Monterey Park news conference that he respected the findings of federal authorities but was saddened by them. "Please know that I respect the criminal justice system and no one is above the law," Baca said.

Still, he defended his agency, saying "99.9% of our employees are on the right track.... There is no institu-

[See Arrests, A12]

[Arrests, from ...]

tional problem within the Sheriff's Department when it comes to correcting itself."

Baca's remarks came as his deputies were being arraigned at the federal courthouse in downtown L.A. Sixteen appeared in court, with at least some handcuffed and chained at the waist. Some pleaded not guilty. Others are expected to enter their pleas at a later date. All were released on bond, a U.S. attorney's office spokesman said. The two who did not appear are expected to surrender in the future, he said.

In all, 13 deputies, three sergeants and two lieutenants were charged. Among the allegations are conspiracy to obstruct justice, making false statements and civil rights violations. Federal authorities said the investigation is ongoing.

Monday's charges mark the biggest corruption scandal the Sheriff's Department has faced since the late 1980s, when federal authorities accused deputies in an elite drug team of conspiring to steal from drug traffickers and money launderers. That investigation led to the convictions of more than two dozen deputies.

The latest indictments include allegations, first made public by The Times, against a deputy responsible for training new recruits in the jail.

Deputy Bryan Brunsting was the supervisor for a sheriff's rookie who graduated at the top of his recruit class but resigned after a few weeks on the job. The rookie said Brunsting forced him and others to beat up a mentally ill inmate and then cover up their actions, according to interviews and law enforcement records.

CHRISTINA HOUSE For The Times

L.A. COUNTY SHERIFF Lee Baca addresses the media at a news conference in Monterey Park after the announcement of the arrests.

Sheriff's officials determined that no misconduct had occurred. After The Times' report, however, the rookie deputy was contacted by FBI agents.

Federal prosecutors accused Brunsting of assaulting inmates on two occasions and using deputies he trained to write false reports to cover up the abuse.

The indictment did not identify the rookie deputy by name, but the date and circumstances of one incident detailed in the indictment match those reported in The Times. According to the indictment, Brunsting told a training deputy that they needed to teach a lesson to an inmate who had been disrespectful to another jailer. Brunsting, the trainee and a third deputy, Jason Branum, struck, kicked and pepper-sprayed the man, the indictment said.

Brunsting and the others then allegedly covered up the incident, "discussing how to keep their stories straight and coordinating the writing of reports" so they could subject the inmate to be falsely prosecuted for assault, prosecutors allege.

Brunsting's attorney said he wasn't prepared to address the allegations.

Hector Villagra, executive director of the ACLU of Southern California, dismissed any suggestion that excessive force was the fault of a few bad apples.

"The federal indictments today ... suggest the entire tree may be rotten," he said.

Seven of the sheriff's officials indicted Monday were accused of trying to hamper the federal investigation into alleged misconduct.

The Sheriff's Department learned about the FBI probe in August 2011 when deputies discovered that a corrupt jailer had smuggled a phone to an inmate, not realizing the inmate was working as an informant for the FBI.

After the discovery, sheriff's officials moved the inmate — identified only as "AB" in the indictment — and changed his name. They then altered the department's internal inmate database to falsely say he had been released, prosecutors allege. Deputies continued to isolate the inmate even after federal authorities had told sheriff's officials that a judge had ordered the inmate's appearance before a grand jury, the indictment states.

The indictment accused Lt. Gregory Thompson of instructing a sheriff's employee not to allow "outside" law enforcement to meet with the inmate and sent an email to employees saying that the FBI would need approval before interviewing any inmate. Indicted along with Thompson were Deputies Gerard Smith, Mickey Manzo and James Sexton.

According to a sheriff's memo earlier reported by The Times, the handling of the inmate informant was internally dubbed "Operation Pandora's Box."

Stephen Leavins, a lieutenant in the unit that handles allegations of criminal misconduct against sheriff's employees, was accused of directing two sergeants to confront an FBI agent working on the investigation outside her home. The sergeants — Scott Craig and Maricella Long — falsely told the agent that a warrant was being prepared for her arrest, prosecutors said in court records.

Another indictment alleges that Sgt. Eric Gonzalez encouraged deputies he supervised at the visiting area of Men's Central Jail to use excessive force. Three visitors were taken to a deputy break room, which could not be seen by the public, and beaten by sheriff's officials, the indictment said. One visitor's arm was fractured.

The indictment names Deputies Sussie Ayala, Pantamitr Zunggeemoge and Noel Womack as preparing false and misleading reports to show that the use of force

Although prosecutors did not identify alleged victims by name, one incident matches the Feb. 26, 2011, date on which Gabriel Carrillo was arrested while attempting to visit his brother in the jail. Carrillo accused deputies of beating him while he was handcuffed. He was initially charged with battery against the deputies after the incident, but prosecutors later dropped the case. Also charged in that incident was Deputy Fernando Luviano.

"I feel like now people are starting to believe the cops aren't always telling the truth," Carrillo said Monday. "Don't just take their word because they have a badge. Look at the facts."

Two of the cases announced by federal investigators Monday appeared to have no connection to misconduct in the jails. In one, Deputy Richard Piquette was charged with illegally building and possessing an assault rifle. In another case, three deputies, all brothers, were charged with conspiracy to make false statements to two banks in connection with a mortgage fraud scheme. Billy, Benny and Johnny Khounthavong allegedly avoided more than $340,000 of unpaid mortgage debt.

Monday morning massacre

The arrest of 18 sheriff's deputies suggests that problems at the department run deep.

ANY LINGERING DOUBT about whether there are deep-seated problems of abuse at Los Angeles County jails should be put to rest by Monday's arrests following the unsealing of formal charges against 18 current or former sheriff's deputies. Any inclination to pass off more than two years of news reports and official probes detailing inmate beatings as simply the result of a few rogue deputies should be shelved.

Some of the allegations are familiar, involving inmates suffering unwarranted abuse and beatings. One of the challenges in coming to grips with civil rights violations perpetrated against convicted criminals is that the victims receive little sympathy from most of the voters and taxpayers who put the sheriff in office and who pay his department's bills; after all, the thinking goes, criminals deserve punishment.

They do not, however, deserve to be beaten. A civilized society is entitled to punish lawbreakers, but officials with badges, guns and the authority to ensure safety and order are not vested with the right to abuse those they guard. Nor are all inmates criminals; many are in jail awaiting trial, presumed innocent until the jury verdict.

Monday's charges went beyond the beating of inmates. Even visitors to the jails, uncharged and unsuspected of any crime, were abused in the county jails, according to the indictments. It is stunning that the Austrian consul, visiting an Austrian national who had been accused of a crime, was allegedly unlawfully arrested and searched in the jail. So, allegedly, was his wife.

The U.S. attorney in Los Angeles, Andre Birotte Jr., made it clear that investigations are continuing. And he made it clear as well that he did not see the arrests as resulting merely from a few cases of excessive force or improper arrest. The problem, he asserted, is "institutionalized."

That word is a reminder of the problems at the Los Angeles Police Department that led to a consent decree and federal court oversight: a police culture that countenanced civil rights abuses and engendered an us-against-the-world attitude. It was a culture that had to be broken before the department could be put back together.

Individual sheriff's deputies, just like others accused of crimes, must be presumed innocent until proven otherwise, but the indictments unsealed Monday cap an extended period of reports about misconduct in the Sheriff's Department.

There may be more indictments. The question in the meantime for the people of L.A. County is whether the various fixes, like the recent appointment of an inspector general and Sheriff Lee Baca's promises that reforms are underway, are enough.

Scandal fallout for Baca unclear

The sheriff's hopes for reelection could come down to how much voters really care about jail inmates.

By Seema Mehta

Only hours after FBI agents swept up 18 deputies and supervisors in a jail abuse and corruption case, Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca was being lauded at a $1,500-a-head downtown campaign fundraiser co-hosted by a former governor and a former L.A. city attorney.

The contrasting images Monday — Baca somberly telling a crowded news conference it was a "sad day" for the agency he's led for 15 years and later celebrating his chances of winning a fifth term — captured both the increased vulnerability and time-tested resiliency of the county's top lawman at the threshold of another run for office.

Baca, 71, has faced a drumbeat of investigations and a blue-ribbon commission report attacking his management of the nation's largest sheriff's department. But analysts say the sheriff's political baggage grew heavier with Monday's charges against current and former members of his department for allegedly abusing jail inmates and obstructing justice. The U.S. attorney pointedly declared that the problems had become "institutionalized" at the agency.

"There is no coronation in his future," said veteran Democratic political consultant Darry Sragow.

Baca may well recover.

[See Sheriff, A19]

[Sheriff, from A1]

He remains in effect the police chief in dozens of communities his department patrols and can point to sharp drops in serious crime. And, as Monday's fundraiser demonstrated, he's still a draw in the political establishment. In the end, campaign strategists say, the election may hinge on how much voters care about alleged mistreatment of jail inmates.

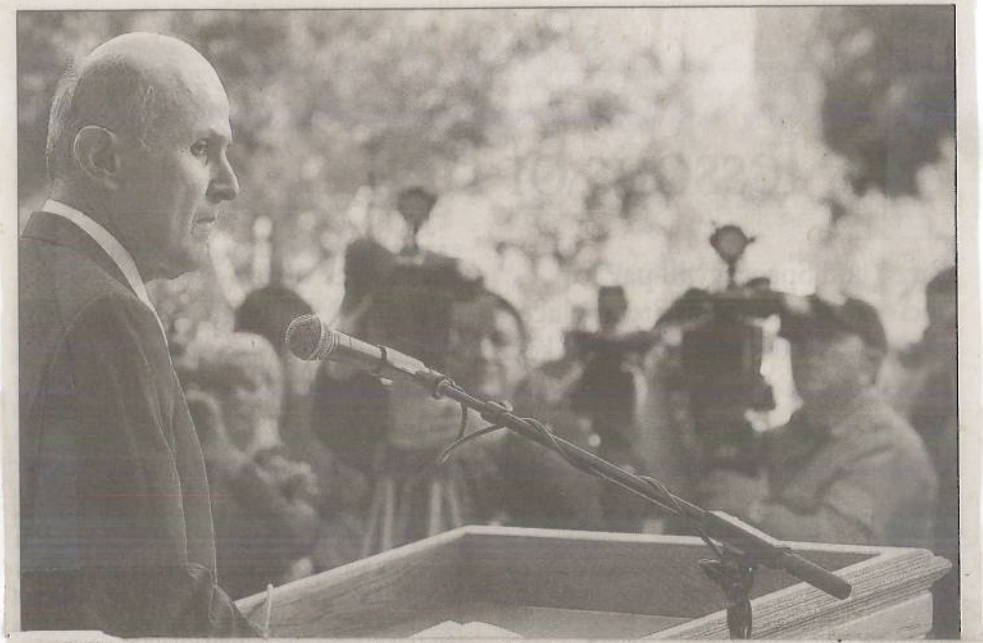
A dramatic change

Nonetheless, the risk confronting Baca this political season is a dramatic change for one of Southern California's most enduring elected leaders. He won office fortuitously in 1998 when his rival, incumbent Sheriff Sherman Block, died days before the election.

In the next three elections, he easily won in primaries against fields of lesser-known candidates, avoiding head-to-head runoff elections. By 2010, no one bothered to challenge him.

This election was going to be different, even before the news broke that federal charges were filed against 13 current and former deputies, three sergeants and two lieutenants. Among the allegations were the beating of prisoners and visitors, filing false reports to cover up misconduct and attempting to block FBI access to a jail informant.

Baca already was coping not just with the FBI probe but criticism of his leadership from members of the county Board of Supervisors and a special commission on jail violence. The Times also reported that the department had hired dozens of officers in 2010 despite background investigations that found significant misconduct.



But another campaign reality could limit the damage for Baca, said Sragow, the political consultant. Polls show that many voters, he said, place a low priority on the treatment of jail inmates.

Advantage Baca

Indeed, unseating a well-established incumbent in a county of 10 million residents is an immense challenge, experts note. Baca has strong name recognition and a reported $240,000 in 2014 campaign cash available as of June 30, the most recent report available. Tanaka and Olmsted haven't had to file financial disclosure reports yet.

Baca's war chest has grown since June, including what appeared to be thousands raised Monday evening alone. Former Gov. Gray Davis, former L.A. City Atty. Carmen Trutanich and high-profile defense attorney Mark Geragos co-hosted the event at Geragos' Engine Co. No 28 restaurant in the financial district.

Baca entered the restaurant through a rear alley, away from news cameras. Davis didn't attend because of a previous commitment but remains committed to Baca's reelection and plans to host another fundraiser for him next year, a spokesman said.

Trutanich and Geragos acknowledged the difficulties facing Baca but praised his handling of the scandal.

"The buck does stop with him.... He's the one who I think has taken control of it," Geragos said. "I don't see him running away from any of these things, I don't see him making excuses."

Community ties

Baca also has nurtured ties with diverse communities across the county, work that could pay dividends in a tight race.

"Sweet" Alice Harris, a Watts-based community organizer and supporter of Baca, said she believed subordinates kept many of the issues in the jails from reaching Baca's ears. "The majority of stuff that happens never gets to the top because you don't tell on family," she said.

Baca's support of job training programs for young people and openness to input from community organizations are likely to be remembered, she said.

"We need that good man," she said. Critics are "so worried about the sheriff, but ain't nobody worried about these young men with no jobs."

Political analysts expect the sheriff's campaign to be defined by two questions: how Baca reacts to the scandal going forward and how effectively his opponents can capitalize on it to boost their appeal to voters.

"This type of thing can hurt — I don't see how it can't," said Allan Hoffenblum, a former GOP strategist and publisher of the nonpartisan California Target Book. "The question is: Will one of his opponents be able to credibly position themselves to do something about it?"

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Times staff writers Steve Lopez, Abby Sewell and Robert Faturechi contributed to this report.

Shared woes

The only political consolation for Baca as he gears up for the June election may be that two of his rivals — former Undersheriff Paul Tanaka and former Sheriff's Cmdr. Bob Olmsted — also could be put on the defensive by the continuing criminal probe of alleged misconduct in the department.

Baca forced out Tanaka earlier this year amid criticism over the jail abuse scandal. And the special county commission tasked with examining inmate abuse in the jails found that Tanaka helped foster a culture of abuse through his management style, as well as through remarks he made to rank-and-file deputies. Though he was not directly responsible for overseeing the jails, the commission concluded he did influence their operation.

Tanaka says he was focused on reducing crime and the department's budget and wasn't in the jail system chain of command during the period of alleged problems.

Olmsted oversaw the sheriff's most troubled lockups at one time, and Baca has asserted that he should have done more to correct problems.

But Olmsted insists he was a "whistle-blower," commissioning internal audits of deputies' use of force, trying to alert top brass to abuse and eventually taking his concerns to the media and FBI.

Tanaka has declined to comment. However, Olmsted has pounded Baca and Tanaka since Monday, garnering the most media attention of his campaign.

"Today's arrests underscore the high level of corruption that has plagued the Sheriff's Department under the failed leadership of Sheriff Lee Baca and former Undersheriff Paul Tanaka," he said in a statement immediately after the arrests were announced.

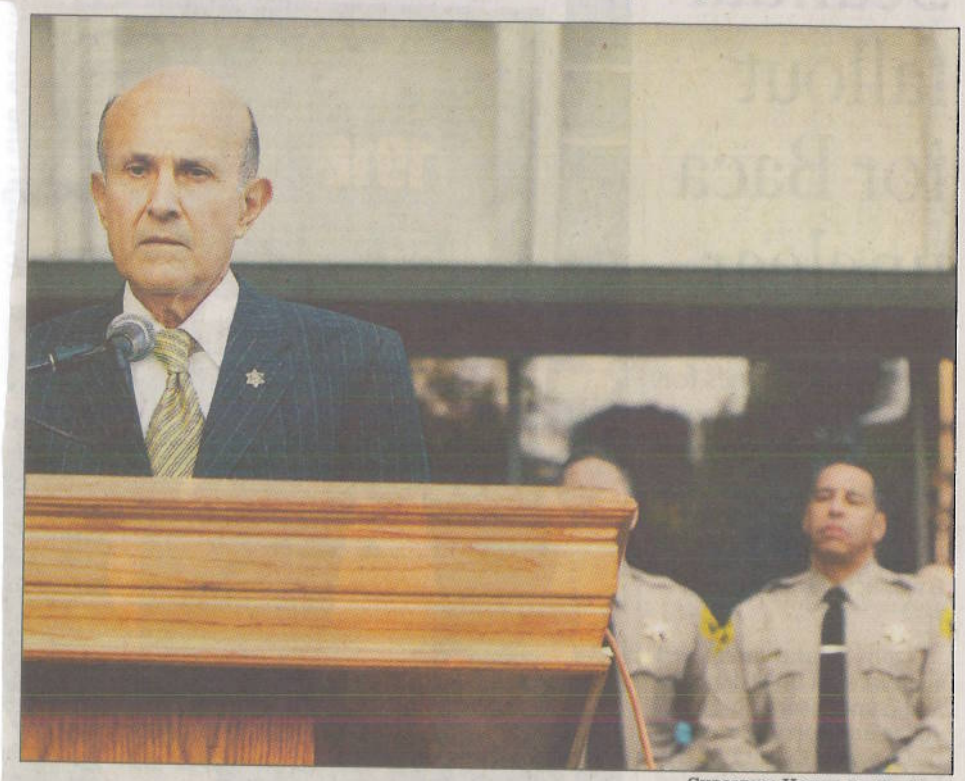
"This correlates directly to the race, and that's the reason I'm in it — because it's your duty to report all this stuff and have this out in the open," he added in an interview.

Like Rampart?

John Shallman, Olmsted's political advisor, is drawing parallels to another county election in the wake of a law enforcement abuse scandal. In 2000, underdog Steve Cooley handily defeated incumbent Dist. Atty. Gil Garcetti after the LAPD's Rampart corruption case. Cooley, a Shallman client, hammered Garcetti for not doing enough to investigate cops and prevent the alleged abuse of suspects in the police division west of downtown.

In Baca's parallel universe

Sheriff's $1,500-a-plate fundraiser comes just hours after the indictment of 18 subordinates, the latest in a string of debacles



CHRISTINA HOUSE For The Times

L.A. COUNTY Sheriff Lee Baca is running for a fifth term. Despite the dismal track record of his scandal-plagued department, Baca can't be fired, except by voters, and he probably will be tough to defeat in 2014.

STEVE LOPEZ

When I got to the fundraiser Monday night for L.A. County Sheriff Lee Baca, I was told the press was not welcome.

Why not? I wondered.

You'd think Baca would want the world to know that, despite one debacle after another in his department — including the indictment of 18 current and former staffers earlier Monday for alleged beatings of inmates and other crimes — he still had supporters who were willing to be seen in public.

The cost of Monday night's love-in, by the way, was $1,500 a ticket.

"Help Re-Elect Our Friend," the invitation said.

It listed former Gov. Gray Davis, celebrity attorney Mark Geragos and former City Atty. Carmen Trutanich as hosts.

OK, so that's not exactly an A-list of backers. Two of them were unceremoniously voted out of office and the other one simultaneously defended Michael Jackson against molestation charges and Scott Peterson against murder charges.

Still, I was looking forward to asking them how they figure that Baca deserves a fifth term at the helm of what might be the most mismanaged, scandal-plagued public department in all of California.

"Don't harass these people," Baca spokesman Steve Whitmore warned me and TV reporter Dave Bryan outside Engine Company No. 28, a downtown L.A. restaurant owned by Geragos.

Harass them? I just wanted to hear their logic because, who knows? Maybe I'm missing something.

Whitmore said Davis would not be attending, but it wasn't clear why not. Did his car break down? Did he have a headache? Did he come to his senses? Maybe Baca had come to his senses and decided that after a day like the one he'd had, he should be in hiding rather than asking for money.

For a while, it looked like nobody would be attending. A waiter told me 25 to 30 people had been expected, but the number was scaled back to about 15.

But, for all his problems, Baca is going to be hard to beat in 2014.

Why?

Because he's already raised a few hundred thousand dollars and has made a ton of connections after being in office so many years.

Because the opponent with the most name recognition, Paul Tanaka, was Baca's right-hand man for many years and bears some responsibility for the department's problems.

Because Baca will run on a decline in crime rates.

And because a lot of voters can't get too riled about guards roughing up inmates.

When Linda Dolson and Trish Steele arrived at the fundraiser and I asked why, Dolson had a simple answer: "Because he's a big supporter of our charity," she said, referring to Safe Passages, which assists victims of domestic violence and their children.

"Baca is a very meek, humble, wonderful man," Steele said.

And yes, that's very much a part of who Baca is. He's culturally curious, sensitive and community-minded.

But that doesn't mean he's competent to manage a 7-Eleven, let alone a department with 18,000 employees and roughly as many inmates.

When Trutanich arrived, I mentioned that it seemed odd to turn out for a candidate whose department was having one of the most humiliating days in its long history.

"There's no allegations against the sheriff," Trutanich said.

Huh?

Baca runs an agency in which the U.S. attorney's office says it has found a "wide scope of illegal conduct," including the beating of inmates and visitors by Baca's employees and obstruction of justice by the department.

And that doesn't even cover the many examples of inexplicable bungling. Just last week, for instance, Baca seemed caught by surprise when a Times investigation revealed his department had hired dozens of knucklehead deputies accused of misconduct and other transgressions while working for other agencies.

"He is, I think, one of the most impressive law enforcement types we've had in L.A. County in a long time," said Geragos upon his arrival at the fundraiser, adding that Baca is "a stand-up guy who takes responsibility."

Yeah, when he's forced to by lawsuits, the media or federal investigators.

And either he didn't know about all the festering problems on his watch, which makes him an incompetent manager, or he knew and didn't do anything about it until he was pressured, which would be worse.

Geragos argued that the bank manager can't always know what the bank tellers are doing.

Excuse me, counselor, but if the tellers are beating up the customers and the bank keeps getting sued, he knows. He also gets fired.

Baca can't be fired, though, except by voters. And one of his former commanders, Bob Olmsted, is hoping he can make that happen.

"How much more of this stuff do we need to take? There's no accountability and no transparency," said the retired Olmsted. The candidate claims that three years ago, when he worked in the jails, his warnings about problems there were ignored by Baca.

"Deputies were breaking bones purposely in order to get a tattoo" that gave them membership in a guard subculture of thugs, Olmsted said.

How could this go on for years?

Because the understood rule among ranking staff was: "You don't want to bring bad news to the sheriff," Olmsted suggested.

Olmsted has a long way to go before proving that he's a viable candidate, but he says he's running out of a sense of "duty to oust both Baca and Tanaka. These two guys are peas in a pod, and shame on them for creating this culture of corruption."

Baca, who seems to reside in a parallel universe at times, said on Monday that "there's not an institutional problem within the Sheriff's Department when it comes to correcting itself."

And he said that "99.9% of our employees are on the right track."

Well, certainly most of the employees do a tough job with professionalism and integrity. And it's for their sake that Baca should bow out of next year's election.

As long as he's in charge, they're all working under a cloud.

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