

Tactical Deterrence

by Larry Arnold

I recently heard a self-defense speaker advocate the “gray man” approach. He suggested we should be the person who blends in, doesn’t get noticed, therefore doesn’t become a target.

A member of the audience asked about the “tactical deterrence” approach. He thought dressing in multi-pocket cargo pants and buttoned-flap-pocket military-style shirts would convince bad guys we aren’t prey. This is the same argument often made for open carry, that it will deter criminal attack.

In class, they agreed to disagree. But let us look a bit deeper.

Criminal Encounter

There is merit in the deterrence approach. If we dress tactically or open carry, it may discourage the mid-range criminal, the “gimme yer wallet n watch and I’ll go,” type. And it certainly seems to be the situation we’re most likely to encounter.

That’s presuming, of course, that we aren’t depending only on deterrence. Thinking, “The way I look will warn off criminals; so I don’t need to actually *be* tactical,” won’t cut it. It doesn’t matter how many pockets we have; if our head is buried in our cell phone, we’re prey.

Regardless of whether we’re “gray” or “tactical,” open or concealed carry, we still have to do the work: study self-defense, practice skills, and maintain situational awareness.

But that’s only the mid-range criminal looking for easy prey. What about other categories of threats?

Extreme Threat

There are more serious life-threatening situations. On rare occasions like a mass murder, we encounter the fanatic or unhinged, intent on killing as many people as he can before going out in a blaze of glory. If we get caught in a “mostly peaceful demonstration,” we’ll come to the attention of protestors who aren’t peaceful.

In either case, dressing tactically will move us way up on their “to-do” list. While mass killers are very rare, and demonstrations are in most cases avoidable, the stakes are much higher. They are more likely to end up threatening our life than our possessions. Training and reaction time are irrelevant if the first shot catches us from behind, or we face many rioters.

Routine Confrontation

Then there’s the other end of the scale, when we encounter someone who isn’t a criminal, but who is ready to start a fight because he’s already angry, intoxicated, or “off his meds.”

Most of the time when we get into a fender-bender, the other driver is a good guy, even a pillar of the community. We can both stay calm, negotiate, exchange insurance, and go on with life.

But what if today we run into someone who just had one too many at the bar, before he has to go home and tell his family he’s been fired from his job? He’s on his last nerve and we just wrecked his car.

It may take our best non-violent conflict resolution techniques to negotiate a win-win solution, and appearing non-threatening is part of that. But it’s worth it. A peaceful resolution is a lot better than having to use deadly force, putting our life on hold through months of investigation, then facing a grieving family in court.

On the other hand, if the stressed-out driver’s first impression of us is “exiting our vehicle ready for action,” and he’s at full-cock, the situation is already escalated and it’s going to be difficult to keep it on a verbal level.

Summary

So “tactical” can have some advantages in mid-level situations, but the “gray” option seems crucial in both extreme environments and routine encounters.

I think I’ll be the concealed carry, white-haired old guy who isn’t a threat to anyone. I’ll strive for a peaceful resolution, until there’s no other option but to suddenly take care of business.

But if you still want to open carry, we can agree to disagree.