

## The Guardian Angels have a role

It may well be that the Guardian Angels aren't the best answer to the drug sales and attendant muggings that have crippled business on Restaurant Row. But if not the Angels, what?

That's the question the owners of the establishments on West 46th Street tried to come to terms with last week.

Drug dealing, prostitution and violent crime had destroyed commerce on that unique Theater District block. Business was down by 20 percent, and repeated complaints to the police had done little good. So the restaurateurs called in the Angels, which distressed the police almost as much as it did the muggers and dope dealers — to say nothing of the civil libertarians.

The bad guys don't want the Angels around for obvious reasons. They're as bad for the crime business as a street full of criminals is for the restaurant business.

Nor does NYPD want the Angels around — it believes they're ill-trained and potential troublemakers. The cops still remember when Curtis Sliwa's troops took it upon themselves to patrol the subways at night, and tried to enter the system without paying the fare.

And there's another factor — asking in the Guardian Angels is another way of saying the NYPD isn't doing its job. It's rather like the city needing Donald Trump to repair the Wollman Rink.

The civil libertarians don't want the Angels around because of the possibility they'll hassle innocent people. (Or guilty people, for that matter. The NYCLU

isn't big on that sort of distinction.)

At the moment, particularly in the aftermath of Saturday night's stabbing, Restaurant Row is pretty safe — reporters are watching cops watch the Angels watch the criminals. But the larger issues remain. Are the Guardian Angels an undesirable development? Should other neighborhood groups and businessmen turn to Sliwa and his Angels?

Police Commissioner Ben Ward says the city has been overwhelmed by drugs, a problem "beyond the capacity of any local police force to deal with."

That's almost certainly true. And it suggests that groups like the Guardian Angels could play a productive role in New York life — if they limit themselves to calling 911 when they see a problem, and otherwise simply to making their presence felt by patrolling areas in force. A bit of police-provided training wouldn't be a bad idea, either.

There's no question that ordinary citizens have come to feel comforted by the sight of the boys and girls in Red Berets. And there's no question criminals are less than thrilled to spot groups of Guardian Angels coming their way.

But the Red Beret is no license to do anything but summon help. The civil liberties folks have a point when they voice concern about bands of civilians chasing people they don't like off the streets.

Cops can't do that — nor should Angels. But certain basic facts are beyond dispute. When the Angels show up, the bad guys leave. And ordinary folks feel a little bit safer. All of which is quite okay.

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