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## The Photoshop™ cop

Ken Kokotek mocked his superiors on the Internet. Now he's paying for it.

by **Alex Pickett** August 27, 2008



RENEGADE COP? Recently retired St. Petersburg police officer Ken Kokotek, aka "Picasso," with a Mayor Baker doll he made himself. Credit: Alex Pickett

On May 5, around 6 p.m., St. Petersburg police officer Ken Kokotek walked into SPPD headquarters carrying a bundle of homemade invitation cards. The cards announced his retirement party, something he had been looking forward to after 25 years with the police force. He stayed only 20 minutes, just enough time to stuff about 65 invitations into the second-floor mailboxes of fellow police officers.

But these weren't ordinary Hallmark party invitations. The card's front showed the famously bumbling silent film characters the Keystone Cops, onto which Kokotek had superimposed the faces of Mayor Rick Baker, Police Chief Chuck Harmon, Assistant Chief Luke Williams, Major Melanie Bevan and other SPPD supervisors.

Inside, after the invite and map to his home, Kokotek revealed a secret he had hidden for six years: He was "Picasso," the screen name he had used to post doctored images lampooning SPPD's command staff on the police message board website, [LEOaffairs.com](http://LEOaffairs.com).

For the top brass at the SPPD, the party was over for Picasso. After learning of the invitations, they immediately began an Internal Affairs investigation that concluded late last month. According to IA files, if Kokotek had not retired, he would have been fired for posting "denigrating" and "discriminatory" images of his co-workers. And now, the SPPD is seeking to take away his law enforcement certification, which would prevent him from ever being hired again as a Florida police officer.

The decision has worried some police officers on and off the Internet. Don't officers have the right to criticize their superiors? Or did Kokotek's attacks — which targeted both white and black

administrators – aggravate racial tensions in a department where morale is already notoriously low?

"If what I was doing is directly affecting morale or that I cause the morale problem, I'd see that," says Kokotek. "I didn't tarnish the reputation St. Pete had. St. Pete did that itself."

**An Illinois native**, Ken Kokotek moved to Tampa Bay in 1980, seeking a change from a failed marriage and lack of job prospects up north. Upon arriving, the Vietnam veteran worked at a Safety Harbor lumberyard during the day and tended bar at night. In 1982, he decided to join the [St. Petersburg Police Department](#).

"When I first came here, I heard St. Pete PD was the place to go," Kokotek recalls.

He completed the police academy and started out as a patrol officer for the city's Southside. Back then, he says, the SPPD was respected throughout Florida.

"The sergeants, when I started, were seasoned veterans," he says. "If they said something, you respected it."

But Kokotek's honeymoon with the department would not last. He's part of the old guard of police officers who have worked through a turbulent 20 years: the racial strife throughout the '90s; sudden police chief firings and subsequent reorganizations of the department; [rapidly rising attrition](#) that's forced officers to work longer hours; and a plummeting morale. SPPD has long lagged behind other area law enforcement agencies in pay and officer-friendly policies, says Kokotek and other police officers interviewed by CL.

During the first two decades years of his career, Kokotek kept criticism to himself. He received several honorable distinctions, awards and positive performance evaluations. In 1986, he was promoted to the vehicular homicide unit, where he stayed for 13 years before returning to patrol. And except for a few reprimands – including one for placing an altered mugshot of his former fiancée's new boyfriend on her car – Kokotek won praise from his superiors.

"Officer Kokotek is an experienced officer who maintains a calm, professional manner when dealing with both the public and his peers," read his most recent evaluation. "He is courteous and respectful toward people."

But starting in 2002, Kokotek took his criticisms public on the police message board, [LEOaffairs.com](http://LEOaffairs.com). Afraid of reprisals, he wrote under the screen name "Picasso."

"My idea was let's put some faces and names on [these decisions] and what [the police administration] is doing in the background," he says.

Already proficient at Photoshop, Kokotek scoured the Internet for clip art and photos of police personnel. Then he blended the images together, usually in an unflattering and politically charged fashion.

In response to the city's decision to pay for a police presence at the Midtown Sweetbay grocery store, Kokotek took a police badge insignia and added the words "Sweetbay Po-Po" and "Paper or Plastic."

After the tent city slashings last year, ordered by Major Melanie Bevan, Kokotek altered a photo of the policewoman to give her scissor-hands. In another image, her head is put on the body of a dominatrix.

For nearly six years, Kokotek poked fun at the city's power brokers, photoshopping Mayor Baker's head onto a ballerina and Ronald McDonald. Chief Harmon, who was Kokotek's roommate for a brief time when they were in the police academy, is shown as grossly obese. Other caricatures flirt with racial stereotypes. In one picture, Assistant Chief Luke Williams, widely thought to be the next police chief, is portrayed as a pimp. In another, Assistant Chief Cedric Gordon appears to be buttering a piece of cornbread. Both Williams and Gordon are black.

Deputy Mayor Goliath Davis, who is also African-American, is the butt of numerous visual jokes. In one instance, the photo manipulation shows Harmon with his face planted firmly in Davis' posterior as Mayor Baker looks on, reflecting Kokotek's view that the chief is a pawn of the mayor's office.

"I was trying to bring attention to the problems going on [in the department]," Kokotek says. "I would see these decisions and this would be my response to it. Either you get mad or you laugh at it and do a little satire."

Over the years, Picasso gained a following on the website. Fans sent him tips on how to animate images and make ["JibJab"-type video clips](#).

"That was great when I learned how to animate," Kokotek laughs. "[Harmon's] eyes could shift and his ears puff out. Those are things people noticed about him."

Unsurprisingly, not everyone was a fan.

**On the afternoon** of May 8, Kokotek appeared before a Chain of Command Board consisting of Chief Harmon, Assistant Chief Williams, Major Bevan and other supervisors. Internal affairs investigator Jane

Story placed one of the retirement party invitations in front of Kokotek.

"Are you identifying yourself as Picasso?" she asked.

"Yes, I am," he replied.

For the next 30 minutes, she grilled Kokotek over dozens of images found on [LEOaffairs.com](http://LEOaffairs.com) and his personal website, the SPPD Insider. She questioned if he knew that the pictures were discriminatory. He responded they were "parody" and "satire."

"I don't write well," he told her. "I do draw. I do work with photos and do arts things. That was my way of expressing myself."

He continued, "I thought I had a First Amendment right to speak out on a site where I stayed anonymous."

That day, the board made no decision. Kokotek's retirement party went on as planned. He says a diverse group of officers came.

Two months later, on July 24, the Chain of Command Board met again and determined Kokotek was in violation of three SPPD regulations and two city rules, including a provision that prohibits employees from "creating or posting ... cartoons, drawings or caricatures which denigrate or make light of any individual or group based on race, gender, sexual orientation" or other protected classes.

The board concluded that if Kokotek were not already retired, he would have been terminated. As part of the decision, his file will be given to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement recommending his law enforcement certification be revoked.

"I can't have police officers in the department doing things like that that show an aversion to any group or sexual orientation or race or anything," explains Chief Harmon (he says he was not personally offended by the images of him). "I think there was a lot of undertone in all of [the pictures]."

As far as Kokotek's rights: "If he were a private citizen, I'd protect his right all day long," Harmon responds. "But he wasn't. He was a city employee and they are held to a different standard."

Mayor Rick Baker and Deputy Mayor Goliath Davis did not return a call for comment. Assistant Chief Luke Williams and Major Melanie Bevan did not respond to an inquiry placed through the SPPD police spokesperson.

**Since retiring, Kokotek** has spent a lot of time in his son-in-law's Italian restaurant, helping with carpentry. He hasn't posted on [LEOaffairs.com](http://LEOaffairs.com) since he left the police force. He's not sure if he will. But he maintains his pictures have no racist or sexist undertones.

"I don't believe I'm a racist cop at all," he says. "I was trying to use satire to lampoon issues on the St. Pete Police Department. If I'm putting up a picture of someone acting like a witch, she's probably acting like a witch." (That's a reference to an image of Major Bevan as the *Wizard of Oz* villain.)

A couple of fellow retired SPPD officers agree.

"I don't think I'd paint Ken as discriminatory," says retired Sgt. Gary Robbins, who is white and attended the police academy with Kokotek. "Even in the academy, Kokotek was drawing pictures of all of us. This isn't something new."

Adds Tony Rolon, a retired Hispanic officer: "We used to joke a lot [at the department]. These were psychological ways for us to deal with high-stress situations. We laughed at ourselves. That's what kept our sanity."

LEOaffairs co-founder Jim Preston, a former Tampa Police Department Internal Affairs investigator, says police officers need an outlet to express their criticisms without fear of reprisals.

"If we don't have people like Picasso or other people who are chastising the department and making people accountable for their [decisions], there will never be any changes and staff will be able to run amok," he says.

Michael Krohn, executive director of the Police Benevolent Association and Kokotek's attorney, doubts his certification will be revoked. An officer must have been untruthful or committed a crime for such an extreme action, he says.

"[Kokotek] didn't do any of these," Krohn says. "He just used his First Amendment rights."

Personally, Kokotek says he doesn't care if the FDLE revokes his certification; he doesn't want to go back into law enforcement anyway. But he is worried that this action could set a precedent for the officers still at SPPD.

"To me, it's a warning to everyone else out there: Don't criticize or we'll do the same thing to you as Kokotek," he says. "You'll never work as a police officer again."

Sensing he's become too serious, Kokotek reaches under his seat and pulls out a foot-tall doll of Mayor Baker. He's made one of Harmon, too, which he plans to auction on eBay.

"Picasso might be dead, but Rembrandt might not be," he laughs. "Or Salvador Dalí. That'd fit with this city."

Read how LEOaffairs.com grew from a Tampa-based experiment to become an international phenomenon.

This article appears in [Aug 27 - Sep 2, 2008](#).