



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

POLICE

Who's to blame for the chaos?

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Who is to blame for the chaos that erupted in the early morning hours near the Rose Kennedy Greenway, as the Boston Police used their muscle and might in an attempt to control and manage a raucous crowd of protestors?

Were the protesters wrong in literally overstepping the ground rules by trespassing into newly renovated space? Or were the cops wrong in overstepping their authority by using force and the power of arrest in the name of peace-keeping? In such situations, neither side is typically blameless.

I have no doubt in the sincerity of Boston Police leadership in their expressed respect for the rights of speech and assembly. And in such cases, the police should be the ones to bend over backwards when confronted with a clash of will. Of course, bending over backwards is hardly the same as giving free rein to protestors to do whatever they wish and wherever they wish to do it.

As we've seen time and time again, on the other hand, there are some protesters who will test the limits, almost welcoming an aggressive police response to attract attention. Peaceful demonstrations, complete with slogans and signs, tend not to be especially newsworthy. But add in a few dozen arrests with cops dragging citizens into police wagons, it becomes a page one story, complete with streaming video taken by news cameramen and cell phones owners. Only then does the whole world start watching.

At the end of the day--or night, both the police and protestors may have focused on what was right instead of what was smart.

Notwithstanding the BPD message to Occupy Boston about the do's and don'ts of demonstrating, it is hard to justify police actions against the few who went too far. Were protestors really a threat to public safety and public order? Or was it more about their refusal to obey and respect the authority of the badge?

At the same time, it is hard to justify the mob atmosphere that encouraged a few toward civil disobedience. Were some people more interested in just being a part of something exciting than concerned about the political agenda underlying the Occupy movement?

In the hours and days ahead, we will likely learn much more about what really happened last night and who was at fault. Until we know more, I would think that both sides could have done a better job of avoiding trouble.