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Photograph courtesy of the Weston, Wi Metro Police Department

The Rule of Law vs Chaos

The Situation

The riots in Ferguson, MO, Baltimore, MD, and other American cities have ripped the scabs off deeply painful wounds, festering for decades. The root causes are difficult to understand and correct and society has looked around for a scapegoat, someone easy to blame. Many well-meaning people, upset by the reports of police brutality, decided law enforcement is the "root of all evil." They have joined the chorus condemning all departments. The focus has been harsh, and all across America, our blue guardians have become a target for protestor's at all civic and governmental levels.

Since most of us live in more stable circumstances, it is useful to address the issue differently, and understand the frustration and causes precipitating negative actions.

Systems' thinking teaches that diagnosis and analysis must allow the trained mind to seek out the root cause and fix it. With the problem removed, the system will function effectively. If corrective action fails to fix the problem, then the diagnosis was incomplete or incorrect.

Based on this logic, America's problems are easy to solve by eliminating law enforcement altogether. Obviously, this would be silly and self-destructive. Chaos would rule and no one would be safe at home, or anywhere else for that matter. We saw the results of restrained police actions in Baltimore. Mobs destroyed property, burned cars, and injured police with thrown missiles.

The point is obvious; the actions of law-enforcement may worsen specific situations, but they are not the root cause, and broad condemnation is ignorance of the facts. The analysis must go deeper.

The Experiment

The next question: Why are the protestors so combative? All protests have common cause at their core: the people responsible are not listening to or taking actions that are consistent with the public's interests. There is a breakdown of trust.

Some years ago, a business group conducted a supervisory training session. All the participants were professional businesspersons. One of the exercises demonstrated how people react in a group environment based on the way they are treated. The participants sat at round tables with seating for eight. Each participant counted out a number from one through eight. The session leader sent the ones, threes, and eights out of the room. In their absence, the remaining participants received the following instructions.

"When the ones return, they are always correct regardless of what they say. Agree with them in every case. Listen to the number threes but regardless of what they say, disagree with them. They are wrong. Treat the number eights as non-persons. Move your chairs close together and keep them out of the group. Do not acknowledge their presence or listen to their input."

The number ones, some completely wrong but exonerated and supported by the group, soon relaxed, becoming open and vocal. Many propped up their feet; all demonstrated secure positive body language.

The number threes, many of them correct but considered wrong, were increasingly vocal and agitated, raised their voices, and passionately pleaded their cause. Some finally gave up in frustration.

Rejoining the groups, the number eights found no room at the table. When attempting to join the dialog, they were treated as non-persons. By the end of the session, some eights stood on chairs, screaming angrily at their groups.

Consequences

All were aware it was a training exercise, but the experiment had consequences for everyone. The reactions were different for each group. In those where the number one was a leader only the eights remained angry. Where the ones had been wrong, the groups brought them quickly back to reality. Most of the groups reassured the threes and eights when they were correct, and that their opinions were important.

Frustration

Participation and involvement are keys to human interaction. While disagreements occur, anger is a temporary or non-violent reaction, but legitimate and civil dialog prevails. Exclusion, rejection, or frustration can dam up powerful emotions, potentially surging beneath the surface and boiling over. Ignoring the needs of individuals or groups may eventually result in violence. The civil rights movement is an example of failure to listen to grievances and take action to improve the various circumstances. The current situation is an echo of the unfulfilled implicit promises and frustration growing out of that era. Many of these are society's number eights.

Dealing with frustrations can take one of three basic paths.

1. Take out the frustration on ourselves with drugs or other self-destructive activities.

2. Lash out at those around you. This happens when the pressures build, and people lose hope. Violence, presumed to be a path to change the future and create opportunities, leads to a direct explosion of pent-up anger against real or perceived antagonists. This outlet leads to burning down or looting neighborhood businesses, destroying their own jobs and means of acquiring necessities.

3. Converted into a positive purpose, personal or social, if the situation has enough opportunities available.

Many inner-city residents lack opportunities. While everyone knows that social issues are barriers to personal advancement, crime rates are high, and the residents lack the political power to get real attention. Where other demographics make political parties compete, often by providing opportunities. These communities are loyal to one political party and forfeit the competition for their votes. The government buys loyalties through aid programs, strengthening the dependence and removing incentives to take advantage of the opportunities that do exist.

True Root Causes

Following are some of the conditions that set up protests.

1. The people lack trust in the system and the persons in power.
2. Where others have established the lines and parameters, but one side does not agree with the rules.
3. When rhetoric fails to match reality or pass the test of reasonableness.
4. When one side acts in a condescending way to others, labels them obstructionists, or some other stereotypical title, then refuses either dialog or compromise.
5. When people from all sides lie or will say anything to achieve their goal.
6. Promises are broken, and opportunities to change lives fail to materialize.
7. People suffer a loss of hope, and lack of solutions for current situations.
8. There is not a positive outlet for accumulated anger and frustration.

The root cause is long-term social conditions and resource deprivation, created by issues of governance, demographic social norms, and lack of opportunities.

Every generation since the great depression has enjoyed a higher standard of living than the previous one, a now broken continuum. Manufacturing and production jobs once provided opportunities. Those companies and the associated jobs are gone. The situation none-the-less presents untapped opportunities. There are 6-8 million high-tech jobs available in the United States. Many do not require a college degree, but science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education are prerequisites.

We have money for everything else, like governmental officials jetting all over the world, IRS parties, and the Secret service's orgies, all without accountability. At the same time, the police bust and jail a person buying illegal cigarettes on the street corner. This type of injustice sets a pattern; there are two sets of rules, one for the well connected, and another for the rest of us.

If we can find money to perpetuate and reward this bad behavior, why cannot we as a society find the money for complementary job training programs and address the real problems for social discord - the lack of opportunities and resources? The greater problem is for youth to break the dependency on government and take personal responsibility for their futures.

To this point, we wrote the book, "Freedom and Opportunity," and included the following on the cover page.

"American citizens must wrap our arms around the desperate young people trapped in joblessness, the inner-city, and the newly arrived, providing positive futures for every American citizen. It is in our hands."

We then define the components of an opportunity driven society.

The problem is that we cannot help those who will not help themselves. The root cause is now apparent, and it is the dependence on government and inadequate academic attainment. In addition to demographic and social conditions, failure to develop and implement appropriate solutions allows the problem to fester. While blaming politicians for failing to address these problems, we voted them into office. The societal root problem is public apathy and dependence. Pogo was right. "We have met the enemy, and they are us."

Law Enforcement

Law enforcement is the guardian between social chaos and order. Teamed with emergency services, they protect our health and homes from crime, fires, and disasters. Both perform tasks that we cannot do for ourselves. For professionals in those fields, sometimes this means losing their lives or health.

Since the year two thousand, 2,483 police officers lost their lives on active duty. During this same period, 1,901 firefighters died. Remember, in chaotic situations, emergency services must shut down until the rule of law secures the area. These 4,384 people gave their lives to protect us. Where is the public outrage?

Do you think the world, with ISIS, the Middle East in flames, and our cities burning that society is safer today? Do you believe the police should stay home and allow the situation to revert to the old West, with people fending for themselves?

The purpose of the police is to enforce the laws passed by the various governmental entities. It is not their job to determine which laws to enforce, be the crime selling illegal cigarettes on the street or homicide. Legislators need to repeal laws where the social consequences of enforcement are greater than the cost of the action on society. Our nanny state has created a plethora of restrictions, all requiring law enforcement. The use of violence and blaming the very people we hire to enforce our laws is not the pathway to positive change.

There will be mistakes, some real, others perceived, but the police must protect themselves if they are going to take care of us. When police break the law, they are criminals, but determine guilt through the justice system, not the media or for political purposes.
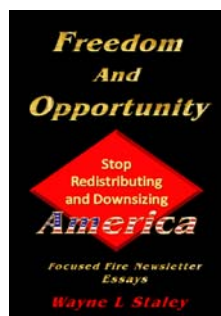
Here are a few questions to consider. What would have happened on Sept. 11, 2001, without emergency services? The emergency response to terrorist attacks claimed 694 police and firefighters. Did not the New York Police Department establish a new standard for the entire country for preventing more terrorist attacks?

If someone kidnapped your child, would you call the police? What if there was no one to call? If someone came at you with a gun, would you yell for a protester or police officer? If involved in an accident, whom do you want at the scene? Why, given the social negativity towards the police, would they want to show up, and when they do, to enforce the law? Because they are professional, citizens, neighbors, and they care.

It is fair that every public entity requires an overview. Some police departments probably need change or transformation, but broadly applying that requirement to every police department in the country is absurd. If we are serious about law enforcement, put the Department of Justice under a microscope. They failed to investigate Fast and Furious, the IRS targeting program and numerous other politically sensitive issues. The Wall Street traders who caused the 2008 recession were never charged. This high-level abdication of responsibility is a genesis for frustration. When the press and politicians focus anger on the police, they hope we will forget who really caused the problem. We need to get real, because law enforcement is one group we all need on duty every day, every hour.

Putting law enforcement under the political gun may slow down the speed of response, and in emergencies, speed is life. It may be your life or the life of a loved one. The people comprising our law enforcement and emergency services deserve our respect, support, and prayers. To be there for us, we need to stand with them.

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A percentage of all net book sales are donated to worthy causes.