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THE CIVILIAN REVIEW BOARD

The municipal issue of the day is whether, as in Kansas City, Philadelphia, Rochester, and Washington, D.C., a civilian review board should exercise disciplinary authority over the police department. In New York it is particularly an issue because law and order are an issue, and the majority of New Yorkers are convinced that to impose further impediments on the police will further increase the rate of crime. It is a remarkable thing that notwithstanding the majority's opposition to a civilian review board, all the major candidates for the mayoralty campaign have come out in favor of such a board. Why? Because the majority who oppose it would nevertheless not elevate it into the crucial issue when deciding whom to vote for. But the aggrieved minority, principally the Negro voters, many of them would.

The point of a Civilian board is to interpose some authority between the regular victims of the alleged brutality of policemen, and the police authorities. It is widely felt among the colored population in New York and elsewhere that the police are regularly abusive and that it is hopeless to call the police to account for being so when it is a foregone conclusion that their superiors will consistently side with the police. Thus they seek their own representatives, to serve alongside the police members of the review board, to insure them justice.

The underlying question very seldom surfaces, namely, why should the police be brutal to the colored minority, assuming that they are? An unanswered question because it requires either discreet evasion, or the summoning of statistics which can sound invidious. The fact of the matter is that crimes in New York are committed by Negroes greatly in excess of the per capita average; so that there are, constantly, more frequent contacts, and more frequent points of friction, between Negroes and policemen, than between whites and policemen. It is perfectly understandable that a people should think of themselves as oppressed and discriminated against if they feel that the eyes of the law are constantly and discriminately upon them. Other racial minorities have reacted in the same way. Over a period of centuries, many innocent Jews were persecuted, and others fancied they were being persecuted, because of the reputation the race had developed for usurious commercial practices. In New York the great dilemma is that of the law-abiding Negroes, who are the overwhelming majority, who are torn between a desire themselves to see a crackdown on crime of which they are as frequently the victims as anybody, and on the other hand a racial pride which, blinding many of them to the lawless conduct of members of their own race, is quick to resent, and quick to exaggerate, the crime-hunting activities of policemen. That pride is regularly fanned by the demagogues of dissatisfaction, whose surly spirits feed on supposing that every effort to crack down on crime is a concealed assault on the Negro people.

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The dilemma requires considerable tact. Politicians tend to believe that tact requires submission to the line of least resistance, which in New York is to measure the velleity of the majority opposed to a civilian review board, against the martial demands for it by the minority, and come out for the latter.

The tactical advantages of such a policy are at the expense of the community's strategic objectives, which are first the restoration of order to the streets of New York, and second, a reconciliation between the races based on a mutual respect, and a mutual recognition of objective realities. If the white population of New York comes to believe not only a) that the majority of the crimes in New York are committed by black people, but also b) that it has become impossible for the police vigorously to prosecute crime because of the political problems involved, then the relations between the races will worsen, and we shall have to thank for that grievous day the politicians' expediency.

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