

# Don't let the need for reform get hijacked

Don't let calls for police reforms be hijacked by impulsive talk to dismantle and defund police departments, and by irresponsible rhetoric from elected officials playing partisan politics.

BY ROBERT J. LONG

Yes, I know there are bad cops. As a former state police detective, I've arrested more than my fair share. The offenses ranged from the theft and sale of police promotional exams to drug trafficking, bank robbery, and even rape while on duty.

Yes, former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin's prolonged pressing of his knee to the neck of George Floyd, killing him, was both sickening and inhumane. Even hardened former cops like myself cringe whenever we see that heartbreaking video.

Yes, I too, along with the rest of the public, am fed up with reading and seeing video evidence of countless cases of police misconduct and violence against minorities and others alike. There's no denying it: The need and timing for police conduct reform and change is here. But don't let it be hijacked by impulsive talk to dismantle and defund police departments, and by irresponsible rhetoric from elected officials playing partisan politics.

Dismantling police departments is nothing more than a naive recipe for inviting anarchy to our streets. One has only to look at what recently occurred in the autonomous zone in Seattle, when the police were ordered to stand down. No laws and no rules — except one: no cops. Instead of calm, there have been reports of assaults, rapes, and shootings. One 19-year-old man who was shot Saturday died.

Although defunding police budgets like Boston's makes great headlines, the department is already underfunded. I know. I am a former chairman of the board of directors for the Boston Police Foundation, a nonprofit charitable organization that has raised millions of dollars in recent years in private monies to fund critical needs for the department not already covered in its annual operating budget, such as special equipment, advanced training, new technology, and suicide prevention.

Just two weeks ago, Mayor Marty Walsh said he's listening, and pledged to make Boston a national leader in battling racism. I applaud the mayor's genuine concern in taking on a difficult, longstanding, and sensitive subject. We should all get behind him in this praiseworthy cause.

Unfortunately, he doesn't seem to be starting off on the right foot. Contrary to what the mayor said about listening, he's clearly not, at least not at this moment. Last week, after Police Commissioner William Gross met with US Attorney General William Barr on the need for police conduct reform and how to address the issue of racism, the mayor bent over backward to let the world know he'd never meet with Barr under any circumstances. "Attorney General Barr and the Trump administration do not share Boston's values or my values," the mayor said in a statement. "His actions and general lack of respect for people and their rights are a danger to our city and the future of our country." How does that rhetoric and political bias help Boston lead the nation in the fight against racism? It doesn't. Especially when Barr, whether you like him or not, will play a pivotal role in effecting any police reform, as well as in the distribution of federal funds for implementing reform and addressing racism.

Gross has done an outstanding job as the city's police commissioner. As a Black man, he understands discrimination. As the city's top cop, he understands the complexities of being a cop today, trying to provide an ever-evolving plethora of police services on some dangerous city streets.

The commissioner also understands racism isn't a Republican issue or a Democratic issue. It's a social issue that policy makers, elected officials, and community groups all need to be willing to sit down and talk about in order to effect any real change. Otherwise we will continue to see additional outrageous police misconduct and acts of racism.

The commissioner gets that and was willing to take a few arrows in his back just to get his point of view across to Barr. It appears the mayor wasn't. I hope Walsh's posture changes. If not, it will leave a question: Who really should be leading Boston efforts against racism?

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