



Ethics and the Police Power of the State

Governments should exist to provide security and ensure justice for their citizens. These services necessitate high ethical standards because the lives and freedoms of the people are at stake. A basic assumption in democratic societies is that the police should serve and protect the people and the rule of law. We rightfully become upset when there are abuses of police power or similar injustices.

In the last few years groups on the left of the political spectrum have spearheaded radical calls to defund or even abolish police forces. The main critique has revolved around perceived racism in police actions. The video of the killing of [George Floyd](#) in 2020 by a white police officer in Minnesota set off protests around the United States and led to calls to reform or get rid of local police.

More recently, claims of abuse of government police power have grown among conservatives. A local case in Philadelphia, and several others elsewhere, have focused concerns on pro-life citizens who are arrested for minor infractions. This has coincided with a lack of police action as pregnancy help centers or Catholic churches are increasingly victims of vandalism or violence.

In the case of [Mark Houck](#), pro-life advocates across the nation were shocked that a heavily armed force of up to twenty Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents carried out a raid on his home and took him into custody in full view of his terrified wife and seven young children. The federal arrest warrant was issued and carried out after a minor assault charge on an abortion center escort. The charge had been previously dismissed in Philadelphia.

As facts emerge from the altercation, it appears clear that it did not merit prosecution. A male abortion escort used insulting and abusive language when speaking to Mark Houck's twelve-year-old son. That a father would interpose himself in such a case and have a heated exchange is quite understandable. The indictment claims that the escort needed medical attention afterwards, but according to the Houck family, that consisted of a [Band Aid](#) for a finger. Many have come forward as character witnesses on behalf of Mark saying that he is a peaceful person who has prayed the rosary and sidewalk counselled at abortion centers for decades.

The federal Department of Justice (DOJ) elevated this small incident to a federal case under the FACE or Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act, even though it happened at some distance from the clinic door. This is disturbing. Lawmakers in Washington, DC, [wrote](#) to the FBI. "Overzealous prosecutions under the FACE Act weaponize the power of federal law enforcement against American citizens in what should firmly be state and local matters. Further, these abuses of federal power against pro-life Americans based solely on their beliefs undermine the American people's trust in the FBI." There is also concern that the nearly 100 documented [pro-abortion attacks](#) on churches, pregnancy centers, etc., since May 2022 have led to no DOJ prosecutions.

It is not healthy when large segments of the public develop a deep-seated distrust in the impartiality of local and national policing or in their ability to receive just treatment from public institutions. Whether it is the fear of many African Americans that they are subject to racially motivated stops or excessive violence on the part of some police officers, or the perception among pro-life citizens that this presidential administration is unfairly targeting them, a crisis of faith in key institutions follows. Being able to trust that those with official police power will act ethically is a key component for our system of government to function.

Our country was founded on a promise in the Declaration of Independence. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” It is seen as the government’s responsibility to safeguard these rights in the United States. Our public institutions and officers are ethically bound to fulfill basic requirements of justice such as not depriving people of life or liberty without due process of law.

The need for ethics, morally good actions, on the part of officials with police power is quite self-evident. What is much more difficult to see is a solution to the problem of distrust once abusive acts have disillusioned many. Ideological divisions and partisan attacks feed the crisis of credibility in our institutions. I think only a slow process of obtaining justice for those who were victimized and the conscientious effort to have a better functioning system going forward will rebuild trust. Also, use of the coercive power of the state is often necessary when what is legal goes against the natural law. It is a blessing to have public interest law firms like the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, Alliance Defending Freedom, Thomas More Society, and others that help to effectively defend our fundamental rights in our legal system.

I believe that the need for ethical integrity in our public officials and officers is of growing importance as our government institutions face heightened mistrust among the populace. Great vigilance on the part of citizens as to who they elect is more necessary than ever. When ethical abuses happen, they must be protested and acknowledged, and legal means used to set them right. Restraint, however, is also a virtue here. A backlash of violent protest only enflames and increases problems rather than resolving them. Faith in our public institutions must be safeguarded and patiently rebuilt over time.