Who’s To Blame?

Finger pointing lets you avoid action

There’s an old Kris Kristofferson song called, “Who’s to Bless and Who’s to Blame?” that asks the question, “If both sides are wrong, who’s really at fault?”

Unfortunately, when a tragedy occurs our leaders seem to spend more time trying to fix or deflect blame than they do trying to fix problems. The result of all this finger pointing is that little actually gets done to prevent future occurrences. A good example of this is playing out in San Francisco.

The Incident
On July 1, a young woman was shot dead on San Francisco’s Embarcadero. The killer was a Mexican national who had entered the country illegally and been deported five times and had a record of felony convictions, mainly on drug charges. He was scheduled for his sixth deportation but was extradited to San Francisco on a 20-year old warrant for a minor drug charge. When the District Attorney declined to prosecute him, he was released under the City’s sanctuary city law.

Who’s To Blame?
It seems there’s more than enough blame to go around here:

- Immigration and Customs Enforcement is being blamed for not deporting the felon and instead extraditing him to San Francisco. However, ICE maintains that this was done at the request of the San Francisco Sheriff’s Department and had asked to be notified if SFSD intended to release him.
- The San Francisco Sheriff is being blamed for releasing the felon without notifying ICE. However, the Sheriff has an established policy that prevents any cooperation with Federal immigration authorities which he says complies with the City’s sanctuary law.
- The Mayor, who signed the sanctuary law, is being blamed for non-action in response to the tragedy but he says the fault lies with the Sheriff’s misreading of the law and failure to notify ICE.
- The San Francisco Police Department is being blamed for not immediately assigning a detective to investigate the theft of a U.S. Bureau of Land Management ranger’s handgun five days previously that was used to commit the murder. The SFPD Chief says investigating officers did a thorough job but did not uncover any investigative leads.
What’s Really Going on Here?

Part of the problem with such an emotionally charged tragedy is that everyone seems to be using it to further their own ends and rational discussion seems to be off the table.

Politics is always a driving factor in issues of this sort. In this case, the Mayor and the Sheriff both face reelection in November. While the Mayor is running unopposed, the Sheriff’s chances of reelection are slight. The Mayor and the Sheriff are so estranged that they have not spoken in three years and the Mayor could well be using this tragedy to further diminish the Sheriff’s chances of reelection while distancing himself from any connection to the incident.

The politics extend to within the Sheriff’s Department as well. The Deputy Sheriffs Association, the local union, has endorsed the Sheriff’s election opponent and has filed a grievance against the policy at center of this incident. It’s also been speculated that the extradition request may have been made as a way of further embarrassing the Sheriff.

And let’s not forget the many presidential candidates who are using this incident to gain media attention.

There have also been calls for more gun control. This is a bit specious since San Francisco already has some of the strictest gun control laws in the US and the weapon in this case was stolen from a Federal law enforcement officer on official duty at the time. (Why it was locked in the officer’s car has not been explained.)

A reasonable topic for debate would seem to be the City’s sanctuary law, which limits cooperation with Federal immigration authorities. However, this is a political hot button in liberal San Francisco and few want to take it on. The Supervisor who authored the current law has already gone on record as opposing any attempts to amend it.

What’s the Problem?

So given all these factors, who’s really to blame? Here’s the point: Who cares? In reality, the blame game is irrelevant. No one is going to jail over this; no one will be held truly accountable. It’s a lot of smoke and mirrors. What is relevant is what’s not being done:

- No one has made an official apology to the family of the dead woman.
- No one has sought an official opinion from the City Attorney on the Sheriff’s policy to determine if it is consistent with the law.
- No one has accepted responsibility for assessing the incident and identifying the root causes.
- No one has demonstrated the moral courage to take on any needed changes to the sanctuary law.

In a rational world, one would have expected City officials to address this incident by presenting a solid front to the public with a single message, “We will do everything to prevent things like this happening in the future.” The starting point would be determining if this was caused by a flawed departmental policy or represents a systemic failure that requires a broad response. Until the causes are agreed upon, it is premature to rule out the need for legislative change.

The point here is that playing the blame game of deflecting responsibility serves no one and, in fact, makes civic leaders look timid and unwilling to accept responsibility. Identifying the causes of an incident so as to fix problems is not the same as finding someone to blame. True leaders accept the responsibility for the actions of subordinates, even when the leader may not be directly responsible. Fixing the problem is always more important than fixing the blame.