



Are Advocates For Reforming Police Practices Anti-Police?

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Tim Lynch, writing on the Cato Institute's "At Liberty" site, notes, "If you are an advocate for school choice, you must risk being called 'anti-teacher' by the political left. But did you know there is a similar phenomenon on the right side of the political spectrum? If you are an advocate for reforming police practices, you must risk being called 'anti-police.'"

Here are his thoughts when he was at the National Convention of the Federalist Society:

I was invited to speak on a panel titled, "Ferguson, Baltimore, and Criminal Justice Reform." By way of background, I have spoken at Federalist Society events many times and the Fed Soc folks have always been professional and courteous. The panels typically consist of speakers with a variety of viewpoints. Last week, when it was my turn to speak, my goal was to highlight many reforms that I thought were worthwhile and to explain why. Among the topics were civil asset forfeiture reform, municipal court reform, getting an accurate annual tally of persons who die in police custody, and a tally of persons shot by the police.

Robert Woodson, President of the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, was the final speaker on our panel. He was mad. He immediately complained about what we had "heard so far." That was a weird complaint. Four panelists had just delivered their presentations. Two defended the police against what they said were unfair criticisms. And two offered ideas for police and criminal justice reform. Woodson seemed upset that all of the of the preceding talks were not to his liking.

Instead of simply offering his own thoughts on Ferguson and Baltimore, Woodson made it clear that something was amiss with the panel itself. His main point was that crime levels in black city neighborhoods are at atrocious levels—"we are experiencing a 9/11 every few months," he said. Few would disagree that that's a very serious problem. Yet, the tenor of Woodson's remarks were not to say something like, "In my opinion, the most pressing issue today is black-on-black violence." He seemed angry the other panelists were not focused on that. Again, that's just odd. Ferguson and Baltimore raise many issues, but they're primarily about police power

and whether it has been abusive to minority persons—especially young men. In that regard, Woodson could have denounced any of the other panel discussions going on at the conference (e.g. “Why are you academic types talking about administrative law and separation powers? I wonder what the folks in poor neighborhoods would think about that—when they’re experiencing a 9/11 every few months!! This panel’s priorities are messed up!”).

Woodson is not alone. Many on the right do not want to talk about reforming police departments and addressing the problem of police misconduct. So they change the subject: ‘Why talk about that? The bigger problem is black-on-black violence!’ Another common response, as noted above, is to denounce any discussion of police misconduct as “anti-police.” Woodson repeatedly says that my remarks “vilified” police. Not true. And I’m glad C-Span was there to record what I said. Watch my [12 minute talk](#) and decide for yourself.

Whether you agree or disagree with my arguments, it is worrisome that many on the right cannot (or will not) distinguish between constructive criticism of police and vilification. I say that because the Federalist audience cheered Woodson’s fiery rhetoric. The entire panel discussion can be viewed [here](#).

For related Cato work, go [here](#) and [here](#).