

Ed Flynn—A Profile in Law Enforcement Leadership

Voiceover

00:00

Welcome to *The Beat*—a podcast series from the COPS Office at the Department of Justice. Featuring interviews with experts from a varied field of disciplines, *The Beat* provides law enforcement with the latest developments and trending topics in community policing.

Jennifer Donelan

00:16

Welcome to another episode of *The Beat*. I'm your host, Jennifer Donelan. Today we are so pleased to have with us one of the most accomplished and insightful voices in American law enforcement. Our guest today is Ed Flynn.

Mr. Flynn began his career in 1971 at a small department in New Jersey. He then went on to serve 15 years with the Jersey City Police Department. He later became the chief in Braintree and Chelsea, Massachusetts, and from 1998 to 2002 he served as the chief in Arlington, Virginia. Our guest then returned to Massachusetts in 2003, when then Governor Mitt Romney appointed him Secretary of the Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety and Security. Then, after all of that, he returned to local policing as the chief in Springfield, Massachusetts, and following Springfield, he spent 10 years as the chief of the Milwaukee Police Department in Wisconsin.

Chief Flynn, that is a storied career, and we are so pleased to be able to spend some time with you so we can pick your brain. Welcome to *The Beat*.

Chief Ed Flynn

01:19

Well, thank you very much, Jen, and I appreciate this opportunity. I mean, the COPS Office is near and dear to my heart for a variety of reasons over the course of my career, but I was in the Rose Garden when President Clinton made the announcement about the development of the Office of the Community Oriented Policing Services, and was close friends with the first three or four directors. So it means a lot to me, and if I can give something back to the COPS Office, I'm more than happy to do it.

Donelan

01:43

We are honored. Thank you so much. That introduction I just read through, that covers a roughly 50-year career in law enforcement. And my math isn't so great, but 17 years in is when you really start that transition to police chief, and you're police chief in a number of different agencies, in different locales and regions in the country. And this conversation really is a profile of your life and your leadership. And I know a lot of people are looking forward to hearing from you and your thoughts, and any advice that you might have. What do you take away from your 47-year career in law enforcement?

Flynn

02:18

Well, it's interesting. I felt this very strong desire early on. When I graduated from college, it was a time of great tumult in America, and, you know, the war in Vietnam was winding down, there had been riots in major American cities, from coast to coast crime was at an all-time high. And there was this period of time where there was this New York City police officer, who was a graduate of Amherst, and was a police lieutenant, and—I would later, many years find out—a former partner of Frank Serpico. His name was David Durk, and he got a federal grant to go around the country to try to talk college graduates into going into local law enforcement of all things. I mean, for the working class it's certainly not something a highly educated, elite member of the future leadership of the country, who had just had a freshly minted college degree would consider. He made a very strong point, his pedigree being one of them, was just that there's nothing more important, if you will, the retail level of government, than effective policing.

That you had a greater—as a young, idealistic 21 or 22 year old—you had a greater chance of making a difference in someone's life in that position than any other, and that American law enforcement now, at this moment in national crisis, absolutely needed America's best and brightest to get us through this terrible time of racial division, urban riots, and terrible crime rates.

And I was attracted to the message, and I just remember thinking about it as I was finishing up school. In the summer between my junior and senior years, I picked up a copy of the *Challenge of Crime in a Free Society*, which had just been written three or four years earlier. A huge commission report about the status of American law enforcement and criminal justice.

And it just, first of all, exposed how problematic it was and how ineffective it was, and ineffective, but really focused in, the part that grabbed my attention was the amount of time and attention it paid to the police function. There is a quote that struck me very early on, and I have it in front of me, because I save books. I look at this thing, and here's what they're saying back in 1967. So this report is showing “that much of American crime, delinquency, and disorder is associated with a complex of social conditions: poverty, racial antagonism, family breakdown, the restlessness of young people. Over the last 20 years, these conditions have been aggravated by such profound social changes as the technological and civil rights revolutions and the rapid decay of inner cities into densely packed, turbulent slums and ghettos. It is in the cities that the conditions of life are the worst, that social tensions are the most acute, that riots occur, that crime rates are the highest, that the fear of crime and the demand for effective action against it are the strongest.”

And then it just fast forwards a few paragraphs to make this point that really struck me. “It is hard to overstate the intimacy of the contact between the police and the community. Police deal with people when they are the most threatening and the most vulnerable. When they are angry, when they are frightened, when they are desperate, when they are drunk, when they are violent, or when they are ashamed. Every police action can affect in some way someone's dignity or self-respect, or sense of privacy, or constitutional rights. As a matter of routine, police become privy to and make judgements about secrets that citizens guard jealously from their closest friends.”

And I'm like, how do you not engage at a time when we're being wracked by all these social problems, but there's an important issue, what would make anybody with a degree too good to do that? So I started to try to become a police officer.

And here's where the self-imposed limitations on police recruitment got in the way back then, and in some places still do today. I was in Philadelphia. Went to La Salle University. Good school. Christian Brothers. And so I decided to march myself downtown and take the Philadelphia police test. I was going to be in the crosshairs of social change. The guy asked for my driver's license. Well, it said New Jersey. I was from the Jersey shore.

Now, I just lived in Philadelphia for four years, but I went home every summer. He said, "You can't take the test." I said, "What do you mean I can't take the test? I have a college degree, I just... bah-bah-bah-bah-bah-bah." "No, you have to be a city resident for six months, and you're not a legal resident, so you can't take our test."

So, strike one trying to get into local law enforcement. I come back to New Jersey, and the town I'm from has 3,000 people in it by the Jersey shore. Wonderful place to live. Do you think anything I just read pertained to that idyllic location? No. I couldn't take a test anywhere in New Jersey. Every single department required prior residency.

Finally, Hillside, population 25,000, bordering Newark, for reasons I'll never understand, decided to require one year, 30 credits of college education to take their test. And they therefore dropped their prior residence requirement. And that's why I have a police career. I took the test, went up to Hillside, was busy enough but nowhere near as busy as I wanted to be, and two years later a state law was passed that said anybody in New Jersey could take a new police test anywhere in the state, and they no longer had to live there as a requirement of employment.

So like a shot, I went to Jersey City, and also moved there. While the guys and girls were moving out, I moved to the city. 15 years there, having just about every job in policing you could have, and topping out at the rank of inspector, which was like colonel, and it was from there that my leadership career began.

But, A, it was idealism driven by the government's intervention in setting the tone for how to think about policing and criminal justice got me intrigued, and I certainly wasn't the only one. And also, secondarily, the fact that finally somebody adjusted entry requirements so some little, small town could have a chance to start a police career. And some of those impediments in many places still exist.

Donelan

07:57

So, Chief, there's something that struck me. I'm doing the research leading up to talking to you, and our producer had spoken with you, and he provided me with a ton of information. And you tell me if you're okay talking about this, because I was sitting there looking at your picture, and I was sitting there looking at your background. I'm like, I know him. I know him.

And at the time I wasn't living where you were, I was in another area, so it wasn't that. I'm like, how do I know this guy? And then it was 2014. The interview with the media after a police oversight panel meeting—and just correct me if I'm getting my facts wrong anywhere here—there had been a police-involved shooting, the family is there. You fired the officer. The officers who were supporting were there. And so it's one of those meetings.

I think anybody who is listening, who has any experience in law enforcement knows exactly what that meeting was like. And during that meeting, a very urgent, critical case comes in, where a five-year-old African American girl had been shot while sitting on her dad's lap. And you were checking your phone as those alerts were coming in, as initial information coming from the scene. You get asked about that by a reporter after this meeting. And I forget what the reporter... Some said that you were being disrespectful. Is that the correct word?

Flynn

09:12

Disrespectful, yes. Because I kept checking my phone while the speakers were yelling, screaming at me.

Donelan

09:15

Yes.

Flynn

09:15

Yes.

Donelan

09:15

I've got to tell you, when I saw that, and I saw it in 2014, I remember thinking, oh my gosh, watch how he just literally kept his wits about him, gave such an intelligent response during what was obviously a very emotional moment. And I know where all that emotion was coming from. Here you are on the front lines, dealing with these issues, lives being lost, day in, day out, hour by hour, and it all seemed to come through. But I don't think that there's someone who could have done it as eloquently as you did.

But I know that that got you a lot of national attention, and personally my opinion is my opinion, I thought it was good attention. When you look back on that, and I'm mentioning this for our listeners, because they may be listening saying, "Oh my gosh, that's him," where does that stand for you, that moment, looking back on it, at the time?

Flynn

10:09

I learned a long time ago that it is very difficult to break through all of the noise, to make important points about public policy, about which people think they understand but they don't. And it's particularly difficult to break through the media narrative, for example, about crime. There's a narrative, these are the accepted conventional wisdom, and to try to get people to think about it in a nuanced way is almost impossible for a public official.

And so everything I said had been on my mind for years. I mean, we had the data to support everything I said. But sometimes the right moment has to present itself where you can drive home a larger point. At that time, I had a grandson who was five years old, so I'm picturing him on my lap, let alone this five-year-old little girl sitting on her grandpa's lap while bullets come through the living room window and blow her brains out literally, having seen the crime scene, all over grandpa and the living room rug. This is on my mind when I'm hearing these people screaming at me, and then I'm looking at the updates, and I know I've got to get up to that crime scene, if for no other reason than to just talk to the cops, and settle them down because their emotions are raw.

Donelan

11:21

Right.

Flynn

11:21

So I'm just setting myself up to get up there, and the questions gets asked, "A number of people thought you were rude because you were checking your phone, what do you say to that?" And so I said what I said, but you're right, I never, even though I was impassioned, never for a moment did my brain stop working.

Donelan

11:38

Oh, it did not. Proof positive that his brain did not stop working. Here's just a little bit of that, "It's the greatest racial disparity in the city of Milwaukee, is getting shot and killed. Hello. 80 percent of my homicide victims every year are African American. 80 percent of our aggravated assault victims are African American. 80 percent of our shooting victims who survive their shooting are African American. Now, they all know about the last three people that have been killed by the Milwaukee Police Department over the course of the last several years, there's not one of them who can name one of the last three homicide victims we've had in this city." The ability to say that on your feet, to pull that information and relay it, I've never seen anything like that.

Flynn

12:19

Well it was on my mind all the time, and I mean that not as a talking point, but as the fact that this is the fundamental challenge for American law enforcement in America's cities, is trying to disaggregate the racial components of crime from ongoing accusations of racism, and anti-racism, and, you know, all of that noise that's driving so much of the political process, and the police are frequently being used to advance people's narratives on the left and the right, okay? And neither one of them can approach the problem I had.

A couple of years later, it was Obama's last year in office, and so ABC asked me to come, undoubtedly because of the 2014 video, and they said, "We'd like you to ask the last question, yeah, because you've always talked about this issue, about the parallel conversation. That on the one hand, there's all these demands and fury about police reform and police misbehavior, and how it targets Black people, and on the other hand, there's all this complaint about the under-policing of African American communities where they're literally being slaughtered by extraordinarily high rates of violence, and the police aren't doing enough." And they said, "Nobody will grapple with that. Maybe if you say it here, somebody will at least hear it." And so that was the gist of my question to the President.

And so, what, he acknowledges the disparities, but he turned down my suggestion that maybe he was the only person with the credibility to draw America's attention to this, and maybe get us to talk about it in a way in which we are not talking past each other.

Donelan

13:52

That what I want to get into, especially with our listeners, because you have law enforcement leaders, you have members of law enforcement, you have community members, and one thing that just hit me hard was when you said, "There's no cavalry coming."

Flynn

14:06

Right.

Donelan

14:08

There's no cavalry coming, we have got to figure this out, we have got to talk about this, because in these communities, the police are it, and they can't live without them, and we've got to learn with them. But I will also say the division in this country, it's been racial, but we seem to be in a very unique time where we're more divided than we've ever been on everything. What makes you scream at the TV, or when you're reading an article? Or what's your guidance?

Flynn

14:34

The irony is none of this is new, Jen. It feels new because we have a 24-hour news cycle now—

Donelan

14:40

Right.

Flynn

14:41

—with 24/7 news coverage, and the attention span of gnats, alright? So everything is urgent—

Donelan

14:47

Right.

Flynn

14:47

—everything is a crisis, everything is right now. And now, because the police are the only members of the entire government who walk around all day with cameras on their chests, only the things that they do are going to be recorded, and therefore, we get to cherry pick the worst examples, and make that the standard of how to judge policing. I mean, the best newspapers, the most noble news professions from The Times, and The Post, and the networks, okay, they all want to set themselves up as essential to democracy, and they are, but on the other hand, they've got to make money, they've got to sell commercials, they are getting hurt by all these terrible pressures on the news industry, and that's leading to dreadful, shallow journalism. That's the part that's harder than the '60s and '70s. I mean—

Donelan

15:39

Right.

Flynn

15:39

I just read you that quote, the '60s and '70s, they thought America was coming apart at the seams. You know, Vietnam, riots, highest crime ever, poverty rates, believe me, you had to have a backup on every arrest in Jersey City in the early '70s. If you didn't, somebody was going to try to take your prisoner away, okay? I had a car once crushed by a cinder block thrown from a 10-story window from a housing project once. Fortunately, I wasn't in it, but somebody tossed it off the top of a damn housing project, and it landed on top of the car.

Donelan

16:07

Right.

Flynn

16:07

I mean, it was a violent, scary time, but we weren't faced with it 24/7, and every time force was used, somebody wasn't recording it. And I say, by the way, that lawful uses of force are just as ugly as unlawful uses of force. We are a coercive body, that's why the police exist, is because they can use coercion to bring compliance about. But we've gotten this situation now where it's almost a form of dreadful entertainment that can be used to jumpstart constituencies. And when that happens, and I've been in enough meetings in city councils and commissions where 25 people can jam a room and basically change the lines of elected bodies to do their will rather than what the general community needs or wants.

And after the meeting, some reporter will say, "Well, Chief, the community's demanding..." And every time, I would say, "Wait a minute, these folks that took the time to come to the meeting are demanding. Tell me any community that's a monolith of opinion, because my 911 calls don't indicate to me vast gaps in community trust or not wanting the police to intervene in their lives." Can you get that message out? Well I could once in 2014, but it's not a message that's routinely out there, because right now, we are still in the narrative of the dreadful, racist police, and the greatest threat to Black lives is bad policing. And, listen, bad policing is dreadful for all of us, it always had been. Policing started all the riots at the '60s, and '70s, but the fact of the matter is it is not the norm by any reasonable stretch of the imagination, and yet we've triggered consent decrees, lawsuits, what have you, and we've really demonized a profession that desperately needs the best and brightest of every social group, particularly African Americans, and if the only message they hear from their leaders is how terrible we are, is it any wonder we're having a hard time recruiting them?

Donelan

18:01

Right, so if you're sitting down with a young chief, if you're sitting down with a young officer, if you're standing in front of a group of officers or deputies, what's your counsel? Because all of these things are realities, and they're not changing. I'm not saying they won't change, but it is our current state of affairs. How do they navigate through it?

Flynn

18:22

I still believe that we are ultimately a value-led profession, okay? Police officers don't refrain from misusing force or engaging in biased practices because there's a rule against it. They refrain from it because of their value set, the values they bring to the organization, and the values the organization rewards, enunciates, and inculcates, and trains, okay? And that's doable. It's doable because young people that join the military, or join policing, or become firefighters, they're coming to you saying, "I want to do good things, I want to be the good guys." Now, we can screw that up as a society, and believe me, in policing, more than firefighting, there seems to be a whole world that wants to kick the idealism out of you as fast as humanly possible, goes back to those notations in the President's

Commission from '67. No one sees people as they are as the police do. Nobody intervenes in the kind of situations that the people you're intervening with would like to keep secret. Nobody sees the victim right after the bad person does something dreadful to them. We do.

Everybody else sees the perpetrator in a nice, structured environment where we can feel sorry for the perpetrator. But victims right now, they were in fashion for a while, but they're out of fashion. The only people speaking for the victims right now are local law enforcement. I mean, we got DAs around the country right now that aren't prosecuting cases because, "Well, we don't want to stigmatize people. If we put them in prison, they'll have a hard time getting a job." Well, maybe if you put them in jail for a while, they'll be incapacitated for a little while so they can't keep hurting people, and you can teach them how to get a job there.

But we have this odd disconnect that for all of the narrative about, "The police shouldn't be doing this, and the police shouldn't be doing that," we have to reimagine policing. Puts me in mind of the great deinstitutionalization movement of the 1970s and '80s when we were going to fix mental illness by closing all those dreadful mental health facilities where people were kept inside, and sometimes abused, and sometimes mistreated. So we're going to close them all, we were going to take that money, and we were going to invest it in community-based mental health. And guess what happened. Everybody took the savings and ran, and our mental health approach is now called, "you get to sleep under a bridge, and call the cops when you're hurt, okay?"

Now, that's the exact same thing that's going on with this reimagined policing. Policing exists as generalists, I'm not saying it's ideal, but you can read the literature from 1919, I have one of those books, you can read the literature from 1936, have one of those books, and what do they talk about? They talk about how society is putting so much pressure on the police to do everything, they're never going to get a handle on crime. This is written about 1919, and 1936, you know, what's his name, Raymond Fosdick, and August Vollmer are writing years apart, saying the police can hold the line, they can't fix it alone, they have to be connected to services, they have to be connected to schools, and to churches, and to social welfare, and there has to be other things that can help prevent crime besides us making arrests, okay?

We're saying this for 100 years, and now we're the bad guys because we're doing what society delegated to us rather than expend massive amount of money for 24/7 mental health, or 24/7 drug counseling, or 24/7 family counseling, or whatever else you think you need somebody available at any hour of the day, any day of the week, to intervene, and keep it from getting worse. And that's basically why the police were brought into existence. They did not delegate these tasks to themselves. So what would I say? I guess what you're say— I would say, I would say what David Durk was telling me 50 years ago: There's nowhere else in government you can have a direct impact on people's lives like you can in policing. You don't have to do it for 25 or 30 years, but if you spend four or five years in it, and go to a law school, you're going to be a different lawyer than you would have been if you hadn't done this.

You might decide to go run for election somewhere and get elected. You'll be a different public official if you got to see and do the kinds of things policing does. And you would get to be a better businessman if you knew what was going on in the communities that you would sell or try to market your products to.

So it's a unique set of a situation, but it's also value driven and it is, what can I say, a purpose-driven life like few others. And the challenge for police executives and for governmental units and for society, is to configure things in such a way... I mean, I used to say I wanted to make my police department worthy of the idealism that brought people to it, and that's the challenge. How do we not kick the crap out of the idealism of our young people by the cynical kind of environment that surrounds the provision of policing service right now? Because right now cops are earning their cynicism. I mean, they see what they see, they hear what they hear, and then they go out into those communities and literally the only people risking their lives to save Black lives are cops.

Donelan

23:17

Do you think we're at a point now where we're talking so much about it? I was thinking about this the other day, and I don't know if I'll be able to put these thoughts into words, but are we almost talking about it too much? Is it becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy? Are we creating a situation where there seemingly is no way out because we keep saying there's no way out?

Flynn

23:38

Well, yeah, again, I think we both agree, and everybody listening agrees that the people of good will, that are doing... You know, I'll use this as an expression, the Lord's work where it's needed the most, really don't have a lot of advocates out there. Because governing now and politics are forms of entertainment, in terms of the narratives that govern news coverage are virtually everything.

I mean, it means something to me. *The Washington Post* is losing money and laying people off because Trump isn't president anymore. Now they've lost revenue because readership is down and advertising is down. When there is this perverse incentive to guide media coverage in the country with the most powerful media on earth, we can't expect that coverage of our vocation to change.

The challenge really does lie, to some extent, on is there political leadership and will out there, the mayoral level? And I see this among more than a few mayors, and particularly African American mayors, because they have the standing to bloody well point at the problems and say, "We've got to do something, we've got to do it together."

But this challenge of taking on crime where it is, and reducing crime and reducing police misconduct, but having a standard by which to decide... I mean, much is made of the fact, *Washington Post* loves to be horrified by the fact, that despite all the articles they've written, roughly 1,000 people a year are killed by the police in the line of duty. And this is considered intrinsically horrifying that there's this many people killed by the police.

Now, it doesn't matter that their own research indicates something in the order of 90 percent of them were armed at the time of deadly force being used against them. Fact is, this is too many. In nowhere have I ever seen—and then this is the kind of thing I shout at the TV—what is the right number, or acceptable number I guess I should say, of people killed by the police every year in a country that has 330 million people, 350 million firearms in private hands, and 18 to 20,000 murders a year, and approximately 100,000 non-fatal shootings, what is the standard amount of police violence is acceptable in that environment? No one ever says, "Holy [beep]."

Donelan

25:53

Because they don't have the guts to say that.

Flynn

25:56

No. And I mean, yet the first thing that disappears is context. I think that's the challenge for us, is at the local level you can provide some context, and every once in a blue moon you'll work for an elected official that's willing to use that as part of their messaging, not just the police chief executive. But it is a very difficult time, and I don't think it's going to blow over, I'm just hoping as time goes by the pendulum politically swings enough to the middle where we start being able to talk about citizen violence, not just police violence.

Donelan

26:27

Because people are dying.

Flynn

26:29

Yeah.

Donelan

26:29

Do you have any thoughts on sort of crime trends or current state of crime right now? I know once you've recently remarked on how... Not to say this is a new phenomenon, but just the numbers seem to be new, and it's the sheer number of juveniles who are committing crimes and are the victims of crime.

Flynn

26:49

Yes, that's absolutely what I'm hearing. I'm hearing it at the major city chief's meetings that I still attend in my capacity with CNA and working part-time for BJA. I hear it in conversations outside of official settings. I hear it in conversations with some of the people I'm working with on various federal initiatives. Yeah, two things are going on right now.

Number one, apparently we've come to this bizarre conclusion as a society that because there are great disparities of who's in jail, the way to cure that is to not put people in jail for committing crimes. Now, don't get me wrong, I think since it's the most rarest and most valuable resource of the criminal justice system is incarceration, we should make darn sure that we fill it with people we're afraid of, not just people we're mad at. So looking at sentencing disparities for drug crimes and minor crimes and whatnot, I think is an essential first step of any rational crime control policy. But that's not what we're doing, okay? We're not holding people in jail when they've caught them red-handed shooting somebody. We're not holding anybody for anything. That's a slight hyperbole, but state after state has passed laws mandating that people be released after arrest, after the presumption of innocence.

That's having its own deleterious effect on major offenders being arrested numbers of times. I mean, my Lord, you know, we found in Milwaukee, and this is after Ferguson... Well, a lot of this stuff got started after Ferguson. It didn't start with George Floyd, it started with the Ferguson riots and the Michael Brown shooting. A lot of these DAs were cutting back on prosecutions, and we were locking people up four or five times for carjacking in one calendar year. Now, that's a violent crime by anybody's light, and back in the '80s when carjacking was brand new, they're making it a federal crime it was considered so horrifying. And now, you could do them five times in a year and not face the inside of a jail cell.

And about that same time, we started to see dramatic decreases in the ages of our offenders. And this is a real problem for us, because the juvenile court system across the country is a disaster. And it's a disaster for all the best intentions. Juvenile court laws were all written back in the 1930s, during the old school progressives, which were about good government. Anyway, the interest in the juvenile system was developed, quote, "To serve the best interests of the child," close quote. And the idea was to keep them from a life of crime by intervening in their lives early and effectively and getting them on the path to righteousness.

Well, that hasn't happened. But what has happened is the court systems of juveniles are grotesquely underfunded. They have virtually no bed space to hold anybody, and their services are in a dreadful state. They don't have funding for proper services. So being arrested as a juvenile is essentially a consequenceless crime. And then there's plenty of research out there by eminent psychologists and psychiatrists that say the juvenile brain is an extremely immature organ in an adult body. It doesn't make the kinds of decisions a fully formed adult would be. It's impulse, it doesn't learn lessons easily.

And what's happening is we're taking the most violent generation of juveniles we've had, and we're giving them exactly the wrong message about their behavior, that we are neither proving sanctions, nor providing services to change that behavior. And even when the federal government says, "Well, we'll come in with this program to prosecute the worst cases," well, there's no juvenile federal court system, so they can't help with juvenile crime.

And then the state systems are terrible. And if you try to talk to the juvenile people and say, “I empathize with you as police chief, but we’ve got to do something, maybe we could lobby together?” They get offended. They feel like you’re attacking their reason for being. But the juvenile system right now for behavior control is an unmitigated disaster, and is resulting in heavily armed young people doing enormous amounts of violence to each other, but also random and innocent citizens.

Donelan

30:25

It’s no longer [an] oddity to hear that a nine year old has been shot, or a 10 year old has been shot, or an 11 year old.

Flynn

30:31

Oh, good Lord, I mean, in one year I had an 18 month old murdered, a five year old murdered, an 11 year old murdered. And all of them were either drive-bys or shoot outs in parks. I mean, it’s... No, it overwhelms your sense of righteous indignation, and I would use the term outrage, except sadly outrage has become such an overused word that everybody everywhere is outraged and nothing changes.

Donelan

30:53

Consistent state of being. [Laughs]

Flynn

30:56

Yes, right. [Laughs] You’re either apathetic or outraged.

Donelan

30:57

Right. So you’ve just given me so much to think about. I know you’ve given everyone who’s listening so much to think about. Before I let you go, I do want to—

Flynn

31:06

No, I don’t want to just be the guy who’s whining here. I mean, there’s a lot of stuff here we can do and do do to set our agencies up to be more effective to motivate our people, to manage them in more effective ways. I mean, policing has changed more in the 50 years since the president’s commission than the entire rest of the criminal justice system put together, and it’s never enough, and it never should be enough for a democracy that authorizes a slight group of its people to use deadly force to enforce their will if necessary.

So the fact that groups will be almost perennially on some level dissatisfied with policing is not inherently a bad thing. I mean, if I drive around the suburbs, you get outside the metropolitan area, there’s signs on people’s lawns supporting their local police. When I go back to the Jersey shore, all

these little towns have signs in the lawns. Most of America, they're perfectly happy with their local police, right?

But it's in the places where it matters the most, where the challenges of poverty and violence and family breakdown and discrimination and historic racism, where that all comes together for these horrific crime rates, there is still no calvary, it's just us and the community.

And so the challenges are, what are the things you can control about your police department to try to set you up to be more effective serving those people whose vulnerability makes your job a vocation? Policing is a vocation in central cities, more so than anywhere else, I would say. And some of the central cities are small, but in those environments, that's where it's the most like a vocation. The challenge is to motivate people to keep doing that, and to control the things you can do to make you effective doing that. And the political narrative? Well, that hasn't changed in as far as I can see from the books that I've got here, close to 100 years.

Donelan

32:48

I would also challenge those who are outside looking in, that what you said now twice is absolutely true. There is no more valorous contribution you can make right now than being a police officer. I mean, those who are in there protecting their communities, serving their communities are doing so in a time that when they put that uniform on and at the least, you are often being looked at sideways, right? And at its worst, it's become a target for a violence, and it can be soul-breaking work. But for those who are there doing it, to say "hats off" is a complete understatement.

They're out there doing it and they're going to remain out there doing it. The fact that—and I don't think you've been whining—I think that you have 47 years in law enforcement and you're speaking you're truth. You're speaking from your experience and what you've seen. And I think that that sort of honesty is really what's needed, because we do have to start getting real about situations and we've got to get real about how to help people.

Flynn

33:47

Well, some of the challenge is, Jen, there's no single point. If the army is in trouble, well, they can talk to the chief of staff of the army or the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff and somebody of authority with data at their fingertips speaks for the profession, okay? Alright. There was an atrocity in Afghanistan, there was an inaccurate bombing in Iraq. Something dreadful. Okay. There was a fire on a ship, somebody on authority speaks for the entire institution. Well, we've got 18,000 police institutions in America, nobody's in a position to speak for it. And these 18,000 institutions have widely varying levels of professionalism, training, agency challenge, political environment, political oversight. And that's a problem for us.

Donelan

34:31

Right. You yourself with your career have worked in so many different types of environment. You can have said that authoritatively. [Laughs] But Springfield to Chelsea, to Braintree, then Milwaukee, Arlington. I mean it's all so—

Flynn

34:45

I've worked for commissions. I've worked for mayors. I've worked for a governor. I've worked for a board. Yeah. I've worked in a place like Arlington, which has made governing a squeaky clean high art. I worked for old-time Jersey City in which it was very much still a descendant of the old-time ethnic base. I mean when I went to Boston area, I didn't get the vapors. In Jersey City, we didn't elect our first Italian mayor until 1985. Boston didn't elect its first Italian mayor until 1996, you know, ethnic strife politics was still going on, let alone the racial stuff of that era.

So I worked in those environments. And then, I worked at different levels with different kind... I mean, when I went from a strong union state like Massachusetts to Virginia which was a right to work state at the time, I was like, I said to our captain one day, he says to me, "You know, Chief, the cops are worried you're going to change their duty hours and their shifts." I said, "What do you mean?"

He said, "Well, you're the chief. You can change their hours." I said, "Really? I can do that? You mean I'm the chief and they have to do what I say?" [Laughs] Because I had just come from an environment in which I spent more time on demands to bargain grievances, arbitrations. I mean they created an environment in Massachusetts, it was almost impossible to fire a bad cop, okay? So I worked at environments where the cure for terrible politics that created bad policing in the '20s, '30s, and '40s. The cure became so rigid that you couldn't get rid of bad cops in the '70s and '80s and '90s.

And that's, you know, some of the things we have to take responsibility as chiefs is speak to the impediments of accountability for our officers that we can control, and also create an environment to defend ethical, honorable policing that looks ugly, but is appropriate. We got to be able to have both conversations, you know? Having the cops' backs if they did the wrong thing might make you feel good, make you popular, but it's not good for the profession and ultimately not good for your police department. Because I said time and again, if I don't hold people accountable for misconduct, I cannot go to the wall for you when you are right and you need to be defended. I'll have no credibility, alright? It's got to be clear that if you screw up with bad intent in this department, you're gone. And if you try to do the right thing and it goes sideways and you're within policy and your intentions were honorable, I'm going to be there for you. But I can't do both at the same time and have any credibility.

Donelan

37:02

You're absolutely right, Chief. Any final thoughts? Anything we didn't talk about that you want to make sure that is said?

Flynn

37:09

If there's anything I want to say to my colleagues that are still in the business is, God bless you. I mean I got to a point... I mean, I've been chief 30 years, and I've been chief 10 years in Milwaukee, and I got to a point where I'd really gotten done about everything I could get done, and the political environment had changed, people that had gotten elected to offices had changed, the climate that said, "We need a reformed chief that can reach out to the community and have a dramatic impact on crime." That moment had passed, okay?

And the chief they had now, he had a dramatic improvement on crime, and dramatic improvement on uses of force and citizen complaints, but it was an era in which every police act of misconduct, even if the police agency responded appropriately was not enough and was symbolic of systemic failures wrought in biases. And I had taken that conversation with that particular constituency as far as I could take it. So it was just time to go anyway. I mean sooner or later, you do have to admit perhaps your historic moment has passed and now I'm happy to have the opportunity to engage with serving police chiefs, to try to buck them up, to give them positive feedback when I think they're doing the right thing and to be a sounding board when possible. Because I really think there are times where the chief's got nobody to talk to, to unload a little bit. And if they do it in front of their command staff, like sometimes it scares their command staff. If you take it all home, I'm not saying hold on a limb when you get home, but you also need a safe place just to be dad, husband, grandpa. Sometimes it's good if you can talk to somebody who's been there and done that who basically validates your feelings and supports what you're trying to do.

Donelan

38:39

It means more than anyone can describe when you can talk to someone who literally knows what you're talking about, and you know that they do. You're not crazy. [Laughs] I'm not crazy. This is—

Flynn

38:50

[Laughs] Sometimes, yeah, sometimes being driven crazy is the only rational response.

Donelan

38:55

There you go. Hey, listen, if anybody wants to get in touch with you, how would they reach you?

Flynn

39:01

I've got a pretty easy to remember email. I'm not super speedy on replying to it, but my email is edwardaflynn@hotmail.com, E-D-W-A-R-D-A-F-L-Y-N-N-at-hotmail-dot-com, and if you want to engage in a conversation or maybe have a phone call, if I can be helpful to those of you practitioners out there who found some value in this, or have some other questions, I'd only be happy to try to be useful.

Donelan

39:28

Chief, I cannot thank you enough for the time that you have spent with us, but above all your honesty, above all your honesty. Not everyone's going to agree with you and that's okay, and we have to get to a point, we have to get back to a point where we can agree to disagree and it not break us as a society. So thank you so, so much and we want to thank everyone for joining us here on *The Beat*.

Flynn

39:49

Alright. So long, Jennifer.

Voiceover: *The Beat* Exit

39:52

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Voiceover: Disclaimer

40:45

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