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Metro Matters

Last Week, Profiling Was Wrong

JUST a week ago, it seemed so simple, so universally accepted, that it had become the received wisdom. Racial profiling was wrong. The mayor of New York said the city never engaged in it; the men running to succeed him denounced it.

But that was then and this is now, after the terrorist assault on Tuesday that changed and confused everything. It doesn't seem simple anymore, the question of racial profiling. Is it O.K. now — even necessary — to stereotype in a city that has become a prime target of terrorists?

That question is not theoretical. At checkpoints set up at bridges into Manhattan this week, some drivers said that officers seemed to single out drivers who appeared to be Arabs or Muslims. (The officers said no, they stopped cars at random.)

Thursday night at Kennedy International Airport, witnesses said that officers looking for people connected to the terrorist attacks were selective about whom they searched. "Anyone with dark skin or who spoke with an accent was taken aside and searched," one passenger said. "And then they went to any male with too much facial hair."

That sure sounds like profiling — directed at Muslims or Arabs rather than at blacks and Latinos, the more likely targets of profiling in New York, but profiling nonetheless.

That passenger's quotation, from an article that appeared in The New York Times yesterday, caught the attention of Zaheer Ali, a graduate student at Columbia University. "Given the recent debate on racial profiling, I wonder what folks think of this?" he asked in a message to an e-mail discussion group yesterday.

"Is it O.K. since it's designed to protect us? Is this the same rationale used by police when practicing it in our community?"

Mr. Ali, who describes himself as black, Asian and Muslim, said subsequently over the phone that he had decided it was not O.K. "I've faced both kinds of profiling driving while black and flying while Muslim," said the 28-year-old student. "If we get to the point where we begin curbing our civil liberties and the rights of certain people, I think the terrorists have won."

The thought is generous. It sounds like what the best of New York wants to be. But is it naïve? We asked the candidates for mayor, all critics of racial profiling. Each suspended campaigning after Tuesday's attacks, but most agreed to talk about the issue yesterday, perhaps recognizing that it is central to the city's identity. Two declined comment: Alan G. Hevesi, who discussed other problems New Yorkers are facing but said he'd rather not talk about security. And Michael R. Bloomberg, who would not come to the telephone even to say he had no comment, leaving that to a spokesman.

AMONG the four other main candidates in the Democratic and Republican primaries, only Fernando Ferrer sounded as he might have before Tuesday's destruction of the twin towers. "There needs to be reasonable cause in all cases," he said, explaining when he thinks it is acceptable to stop and search people. "We've got to be very careful as Americans not to toss our values out the window, especially at moments like this. That doesn't mean we let our guard down on terrorism. But the point here is who we are as people."

Mark Green said: "During the equivalent of a state of emergency, I'm not prepared to second-guess antiterrorist security measures. Racial profiling is wrong, no matter whom it is imposed against. You need reasonable grounds. But El Al might, rationally, not interview an 80-year-old grandma for as long as they interview a young, stockier person before the plane takes off."

He added, "We can't let terrorists turn us into them."

Peter F. Vallone, who is not campaigning but manages to stand next to Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani at briefings (which gets him on camera), questioned definitions. "It isn't racial profiling, it's identification," he said of recent actions by the authorities. "They have a list of dozens of known terrorists with descriptions. That's what they are looking for."

But where is the line? If the authorities are looking for a dark-complexioned man, do officers stop every man with a dark complexion? In New York City?

Herman Badillo, Mr. Bloomberg's rival for the Republican nomination, said: "In times of war, too far is never too far. The first thing is to protect the population, and you cannot worry about people being concerned about being racially profiled."

But does a free society then become, as Mr. Green cautioned, like the totalitarian countries that produce twisted people who murder thousands of innocents?

No, this is not a simple matter. Not simple at all.

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