

On Police Interrogation

The American Civil Liberties Union is complaining that instructions given to police in text books are a threat to civil rights. They question whether police interrogation of suspects by a police officer concerning his rights is adequate if the officer is then given opportunity to "persuade" the suspect not to exercise his rights.

Apparently the ACLU is afraid that a criminal might be led to tell the truth. It appears that their objections extend to all kinds of psychological and moral persuasions. The crux of the argument, according to the ACLU, is that if police "persuade" a suspect to confess even without physical coercion, the confession is not voluntary. Poppycock!

Is the art of persuasion inherently repugnant? Obviously not. If a guilty person decides after listening to a policeman's logic and persuasion—his salesmanship — that he should make a clean breast of the incident, must we disregard the confession because the officer helped the suspect make up his mind? Does psychological persuasion, per se, render a confession involuntary? Certainly not! True, if the officer lies, if he promises things he cannot deliver, or if he uses force or threats, the confession would be extorted and should be thrown out. The very books the ACLU is criticizing say so unequivocally and clearly, and forcefully warn the police against such tactics.

Some suspects who are questioned by the police turn out to be innocent. It is regrettable that they were detained or otherwise inconvenienced by the police. But we must realize that the police are acting in the public interest. When the police employ "civilized"

tactics—and the vast majority do—an innocent citizen should have no hesitancy in answering their questions fully and honestly. Indeed he has an obligation as a citizen to cooperate with his police.

As a citizen, I want the police to have reasonable latitude when questioning suspects. The solution to the crime problem is not to be found by denying society the right to protect itself. Society's agents, the police, must be given reasonable freedom to require suspects to explain suspicious circumstances. Criminals seldom go voluntarily to the police station to turn themselves in. On the contrary, most of them will take every unfair advantage they can get—and you might be the next victim.

Implied in the ACLU position is the belief that a confession is not in the best interest of the guilty party. The logic of this is vague for is not confession good for the soul? Why, then, should not a police officer try to "persuade" one whom he has good reason to suspect that he should confess?

It must be admitted that the police make mistakes. Who doesn't? However, we should credit them with sincerity in their quest for the truth. They do not interrogate people without reason. The job is too tough and dangerous for that. When a person is stopped by the police, frank and ready answers usually make short work of the incident. But let us not in our concern for one's rights rob the police—in effect, society itself — of the right to "persuade" the guilty to take the first step toward rehabilitation—confession.

NELSON A. WATSON,
Project Supervisor, Research and
Development, International Association of Chiefs of Police,
Washington.