Playing God: 5 to 4 (The Supreme Court and the Police)

Fred E. Inbau
"PLAYING GOD": 5 TO 4

(THE SUPREME COURT AND THE POLICE)∗

FRED E. INBAU

Over the past several years, whenever the Supreme Court of the United States rendered a decision that imposed a new restriction upon the police, many persons were heard to say: "If only the police, prosecuting attorneys, the organized bar, the state courts, or the legislatures had taken the initiative and done something about the situation there would have been no need for the Court to step in." To some of us this always seemed to be a naïve [sic] explanation of the motivation of a majority of the Justices.

Recent developments have established, to my satisfaction, the fact that the Court’s majority has been determined all along to do its own policing of the police regardless of what any other group or any other branch of government might do by way of attempting to solve the law enforcement problems about which the Court has been so concerned. The Court’s one man majority was going to continue to "play God". And "play God" it did in its June, 1966 decision in Miranda v. Arizona (384 U.S. 436).

For the past several years an American Law Institute committee, composed of lawyers, law teachers, and judges, with divergent viewpoints upon the subject, has devoted a tremendous amount of time and effort toward the formulation of a proposed tentative legislative code prescribing interrogation procedures for the police to follow. These endeavors of the American Law Institute began a year before the Court’s 5 to 4 decision of June, 1964 in Escobedo v. Illinois (378 U.S. 478), and the tentative draft of the Committee’s proposed code had been printed and disseminated at least three months before the Miranda decision.

As the Institute’s committee was working on its project, so was a comparably composed American Bar Association Commit-

tee on Minimum Standards of Criminal Justice. One of its sub-
committees had been assigned to deal specifically with the po-
lice interrogation problem and to make recommendations, and
it was working closely with the Institute’s committee toward that
end. Its existence and activities were also known to the Court
long before the Miranda decision.

The President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and the
Administration of Criminal Justice was also deeply engaged in a
study of many aspects of criminal investigation that inevitably
would have produced facts and figures helpful to a full consid-
eration of the interrogation-confession problem. And other
studies were under way, such as those by the District of Colum-
bia Crime Commission and the Georgetown Law Center. Also,
the Ford Foundation had recently awarded a grant of
$1,000,000, in part, for a study of arrests and confessions in New
York.

Here, then, was action—in truly democratic fashion—seek-
ing to find a proximate solution to some very difficult problems.

All of these efforts would have resulted in a full airing of the
interrogation-confession problem, based upon practical as well
as legal considerations. But a one-man majority of the Court in
Miranda “pulled the rug” from underneath all of these studies
and research groups, and effectively foreclosed a final evalua-
tion of their ultimate findings and recommendations. It did so
by branding as unconstitutional a substantial segment of the
very practices and procedures that were under consideration by
these various groups. As Justice Harlan said in his dissenting
opinion in Miranda, “the legislative reforms” that may have
emanated from such group efforts “would have had the vast ad-
vantage of empirical data and comprehensive study” and “they
would allow experimentation and use of solutions not open to
the courts”. Also, in Justice Harlan’s opinion, “they would re-
store the initiative in criminal law reform to those forums where
it truly belongs”.

With its Miranda limitations upon the validity of a suspect’s
waiver of the Court’s newly conceived “rights” about which he
must be informed, there will be many instances where police in-
vestigators are deprived of an essential means for the solution of
a substantial percentage of the serious crimes that now plague
this country. Only by a deliberate evasion of the Miranda rules
might the police prevent this consequence; and this they should
not do! Legally, as well as morally, the police have no alterna-
tive but full and good faith compliance. Whatever deleterious effects their compliance may bring with respect to the safety and security of law abiding citizens do not constitute a responsibility with which they should concern themselves. To use the words of one of the Supreme Court Justices in another context, "There are others who must shoulder much of that responsibility".

Considering the complexity of the interrogation-confession problem, a summary 5 to 4 nullification of much of the aforementioned group efforts directed toward the preparation of legislative guidelines is awesomely inconsistent with fundamental democratic concepts.

It's more like "Playing God: 5 to 4".