

Connecting the Dots from Portland and Seattle to the U.S. Capitol

In the 1980s, when I was a correspondent working for Dan Rather on the CBS Evening News in New York, I noticed something that I thought was worthy of a story: Drivers in Manhattan were going through red lights with abandon. Nothing seemed to be happening to them; they weren't stopped, they weren't given traffic tickets. It was going on in plain sight, yet it was barely noticed by the authorities or by my fellow journalists.

I had just been transferred to New York from laid-back California, and I found this odd. I didn't think running red lights was something minor. I thought it was something dangerous.

The story I reported was about where it all might lead, about how if drivers could get away with supposedly "minor" things like running red lights, what were the implications for the greater society?

This comes to mind in light of what happened on Jan. 6 when a mob stormed the U.S. Capitol.

I get the impression that more than a few of these Americans, who see themselves not as criminals but as patriots, thought that they could get away with it because, during the summer of 2020 in places like Portland and Seattle, others who also saw themselves as fighting for a just cause, were rioting and torching buildings and were pretty much getting away with it.

Before we go too far, let me be clear: This categorically is not an argument in favor of "whataboutism." It's not an argument that endorses the idea that "If left-wingers could

riot without consequence last summer, why can't right-wingers storm the Capitol and also get away with it just a few months later?"

Rather, this is to say that nothing happens in a vacuum. People notice what happened before today. They notice how the media played down the riots last summer and described those as "mostly peaceful protests," even when an angry mob was burning down police stations or looting small businesses.

They noticed that, at the Democratic National Convention, not one speaker spoke out against that violence. Not one speaker condemned it. And they noticed that it took then-candidate Joe Biden a long time before he realized that he'd better condemn the violence or voters would condemn him for his silence.

So, connect the dots from Portland and Seattle and guess where they lead – could it be to the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6? Those delusional "patriots" in Washington may have thought, "If they could get away with the chaos they caused, why can't we get away with our chaos?" It wouldn't surprise me one bit if they did. There's something that goes deep into our human nature that leads even reasonable people – let alone those inclined to criminal behavior – to figure (excuse the cliché) what's good for the goose is good for the gander.

The rioters in Portland and Seattle justified their behavior on the grounds that they were fighting for what's right. The other side in Washington, D.C., thought the same thing.

Prosecutors last summer made a big mistake by going easy on most urban rioters. They showed by their actions that contempt for the law was acceptable if the cause was "just." It was a lesson learned by political opposites who thought their cause also was "just."

Let's go back to Manhattan in the 1980s. It was a long time ago, and I don't have access to my finished on-air story, but I do remember interviewing a cop on the street. He was a

philosophical type who told me that allowing for seemingly minor traffic offenses could eventually lead to the breakdown of society in general. A few scholars thought the same thing and called it the “broken window” theory: If you don’t repair a broken window after somebody throws a rock through it, that sends a message ... and more bad behavior will follow.

Andy Ngo, an independent journalist who covered the chaos in Portland, wrote an op-ed in the New York Post in which he said: “The deadly storming of the Capitol building is the logical outcome of norms set by the left in 2020. By winking at and apologizing for Antifa, liberal elites telegraphed that political grievances ought to be resolved through violence.

“Those showing righteous indignation now only months or weeks ago argued that the riots were ‘mostly peaceful’ and that vandalism and looting don’t count as violence.

“That’s the problem with political irresponsibility: Once the law grants quasi-authorization to hitherto-proscribed conduct, there’s no telling how events might spiral.”

The mayhem hasn’t yet stopped in Portland and a few other places. What the authorities do about it will be a clue as to what we can expect looking ahead in the United States.

People connect dots; they take notice. The authorities had better take notice, too, and stop looking the other way – or “there’s no telling how events might spiral.”