

Miranda v. Arizona / Excerpts from the Dissenting Opinion—Answer Key

The following are excerpts from Justice Harlan’s dissenting opinion:

I believe the decision of the Court represents poor constitutional law and entails harmful consequences for the country at large. How serious these consequences may prove to be only time can tell. But the basic flaws in the Court’s justification seem to me readily apparent now once all sides of the problem are considered The new rules are not designed to guard against police brutality or other unmistakably banned forms of coercion. Those who use third-degree tactics and deny them in court are equally able and destined to lie as skillfully about warnings and waivers. Rather, the thrust of the new rules is to negate all pressures, to reinforce the nervous or ignorant suspect, and ultimately to discourage any confession at all. The aim in short is toward “voluntariness” in a utopian sense, or to view it from a different angle, voluntariness with a vengeance.

Without at all subscribing to the generally black picture of police conduct painted by the Court, I think it must be frankly recognized at the outset that police questioning allowable under due process precedents may inherently entail some pressure on the suspect and may seek advantage in his ignorance or weaknesses.

The Court’s new rules aim to offset . . . minor pressures and disadvantages intrinsic to any kind of police interrogation. The rules do not serve due process interests in preventing blatant coercion since . . . they do nothing to contain the policeman who is prepared to lie from the start. The rules work for reliability in confessions almost only in the . . . sense that they can prevent some from being given at all. In short, the benefit of this new regime is simply to lessen or wipe out the inherent compulsion and inequalities to which the Court devotes some nine pages of description.

What the Court largely ignores is that its rules impair, if they will not eventually serve wholly to frustrate, an instrument of law enforcement that has long and quite reasonably been thought worth the price paid for it. There can be little doubt that the Court’s new code would markedly decrease the number of confessions. To warn the suspect that he may remain silent and remind him that his confession may be used in court are minor obstructions. To require also an express waiver by the suspect and an end to questioning whenever he demurs must heavily handicap questioning. And to suggest or provide counsel for the suspect simply invites the end of the interrogation.

How much harm this decision will inflict on law enforcement cannot fairly be predicted with accuracy. . . . We do know that some crimes cannot be solved without confessions, that ample expert testimony attests to their importance in crime control, and that the Court is taking a real

risk with society's welfare in imposing its new regime on the country. The social costs of crime are too great to call the new rules anything but a hazardous experimentation.

Though at first denying his guilt, within a short time Miranda gave a detailed oral confession and then wrote out in his own hand and signed a brief statement admitting and describing the crime. All this was accomplished in two hours or less without any force, threats or promises and . . . without any effective warnings at all.

Miranda's oral and written confessions are now held inadmissible under the Court's new rules. One is entitled to feel astonished that the Constitution can be read to produce this result. These confessions were obtained during brief, daytime questioning conducted by two officers and unmarked by any of the traditional indicia of coercion. They assured a conviction for a brutal and unsettling crime, for which the police had and quite possibly could obtain little evidence other than the victim's identifications, evidence which is frequently unreliable. There was, in sum, a legitimate purpose, no perceptible unfairness, and certainly little risk of injustice in the interrogation. Yet the resulting confessions, and the responsible course of police practice they represent, are to be sacrificed to the Court's own finespun conception of fairness which I seriously doubt is shared by many thinking citizens in this country.

Nothing in the letter or the spirit of the Constitution or in the precedents squares with the heavy-handed and one-sided action that is so precipitously taken by the Court in the name of fulfilling its constitutional responsibilities. The foray which the Court makes today brings to mind the wise and farsighted words of Mr. Justice Jackson in *Douglas v. Jeannette*: "This Court is forever adding new stories to the temples of constitutional law, and the temples have a way of collapsing when one story too many is added."

Questions to Consider

1. Why does Justice Harlan say the Miranda warnings are not designed to guard against "police brutality or other unmistakably banned forms of coercion"?

Justice Harlan says that the police can easily lie about these more blatant or brutal forms of coercion just as they can lie about whether warnings about rights were given to suspects.

2. According to Justice Harlan, how will the Court's new rules impair "an instrument of law enforcement that has long and quite reasonably been thought worth the price paid for it"?

Justice Harlan is concerned that the new rules will effectively end interrogations and confessions. He says that many crimes are solved through confessions and that the pressure put on suspects through interrogation is a price that has been worth paying to ensure the expedient solution to unsettling crimes. He sees a threat to society's welfare in the decision.

3. Why does Justice Harlan say the Court's new rules are "hazardous experimentation"?

Justice Harlan calls the new rules experimentation because no one is sure of the effect that the Court's decision will have on the ability of law enforcement agencies to do their jobs. It is unclear, according to Justice Harlan, what the benefits are of such a decision, but the risks are readily apparent.

4. This case involves the balancing of individual rights against the desire of society to fight crime. How do Justice Harlan and Chief Justice Warren disagree in how they believe these rights and values should be balanced?

Chief Justice Warren believes that the rights should be balanced in favor of the defendant to ensure that justice is done and that those who are wrongly accused do not get punished. Justice Harlan believes that the rights should be balanced in favor of society, for the maintenance of order and the effectiveness of police.