

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-19WASHINGTON POST
18 May 1985*Richard Cohen*

Who's to Blame?

On an evening Philadelphia will not soon forget, a police helicopter swooped down over a house on Osage Avenue and, in one of the great bone-head maneuvers of modern times, dropped a bomb. In short order, 11 persons were dead, and a swath of Philadelphia had been burned to the ground. As is customary in these matters, the mayor, W. Wilson Goode, said he would take responsibility, but said nothing about accepting the blame. That presumably belonged to someone else.

As if to underscore the difference between responsibility and blame, Goode almost instantly said that if he had to do the whole thing over, he would do nothing differently. No one had done anything wrong. The bomb idea was a wonderful one. The police had performed faultlessly and so had the fire department. He made it sound as if **the fire had been an act of God.**

Allowance should be made for the pressure on Goode at the time—and, probably, for fatigue as well. But the evidence lay smoldering all around him that something had gone terribly wrong. The plan was lousy. The proof of that was its failure. City officials did not anticipate a fire and its consequences: Could the fire department fight it? Would firefighters be fired upon? Would they be scared no matter what? Some of the best minds in Philadelphia were out to lunch that day. They simply were not thinking at all.

Whatever you may make of Goode, it ought to be remembered that he is following a tradition: in the land of rugged individualism, American public officials almost never accept blame. Instead, they assert the obvious—that they accept responsibility. But that goes without saying. Goode is the mayor, and the mayor—it says right in the city charter—is responsible.

Blame is a different matter. The city charter is silent on that.

In fact, one way of avoiding blame is to accept responsibility. If you do this, everyone is supposed to think you are a stand-up guy. This is yet another of John F. Kennedy's legacies. After the Bay of Pigs fiasco—an invasion planned and even conceived by others but authorized by him—Kennedy stepped forward and accepted responsibility.

For this he was roundly lauded—although it soon became apparent that Kennedy's willingness to accept responsibility did not preclude others from blaming the CIA and the Pentagon. To this day, the CIA is widely thought to be the culprit—especially culpable for leading the young and naive president astray. As a result, Kennedy himself is seen as another victim of the Bay of Pigs—certainly its most famous one.

Ronald Reagan, who admires Kennedy's style if not his politics, perfected Kennedy's mea-not-so-culpa routine when terrorists blew up the Marine barracks in Beirut. Grandly, he took responsibility for all the technical lapses that made the bombing possible, but not for having the Marines in Beirut in the first place. Like Goode, he made an avoidable tragedy seem unavoidable—as if blame has to do with intentions and not performance: If you mean to do the right thing, then, well, you cannot be blamed.

The trouble with assuming responsibility and not blame is that it shields the inept from the consequences of their action. It has the air of a white-wash—as if once the top guy says he's responsible, it would be unsporting to persist in asking how, say, 53 homes were burned to the ground. The word functions as a shield that protects everyone, including culpable subordi-

nates. What is presented as an act of humility is, in reality, one of arrogance—an assertion of executive prerogative.

In the case of the Beirut bombing, the president threw a protective blanket over the Marine command by declaring that he would take responsibility. That was supposed to end matters. To a large extent, it did.

If Goode signs off on an order to bomb a house, he is more than responsible for what happened. He is to blame. But so are his subordinates, the ones who came to him with the clever idea, the ones he relies on for advice. For the mayor to cloak them protectively by asserting his responsibility holds no one accountable and does nothing to protect the public from the consequences of future incompetence. It leaves us knowing who's responsible. Now we want to know—who's to blame?