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LIFE BOOK REVIEW

Law and order for whom?

CRIME IN AMERICA
by RAMSEY CLARK
(Simon & Schuster) \$6.95

Being out of office can radicalize a man. Ramsey Clark was the Attorney General who tried to send Dr. Benjamin Spock to prison for advocating noncooperation with an unjust Selective Service System. Now a kind of "Establishment revolutionary" himself, Clark has produced a book that could stir people of conscience to demolish the courts, the prisons and the police networks and to replace them with a system that is decent.

Clark's barren scene:

- Criminal justice exists only in theory. Civil justice exists only for the 10% who can afford lawyers.
- White-collar crooks get away with more booty than all the street bandits, prostitutes, pushers and kindred bad types put together. But the U.S. system of justice, having been contrived by the upper crust, takes care of its own: in some federal judicial districts there has never been a tax-fraud conviction.
- Two thirds of all arrests are made



The author as Attorney General

where most of the disease, hunger and mental retardation occur. Organized crime would go broke if it were not for the poverty-bred habits of slum dwellers. These are the people behind the FBI's quarterly statistics, which are often misleading. The murder rate may be up compared to 1960, but it is down compared to 1933. The use of opium derivatives may be up since 1965, but it is way down from 1900. Statistics are too dangerous for J. Edgar Hoover to play with.

- Courts and police have little impact on criminals. The odds are four to one that a crime will not result in an arrest, 50 to one it will not result in a conviction, and 200 to one it

will not result in a jail term.

- Society sees no reason to make losers comfortable. Up to 1965, many units of the only all-female federal prison had no toilets; the inmates used jars.

- FBI wiretaps and bugs mostly produce a Peter Sellers comedy sound track—"days of silence, water running, family quarrels, sneezing, housewives' gossip, lovers' meetings and snoring," which should convince the listeners that they would be better off learning an honorable trade like digging ditches—or investigating crime.

Clark has re-created the world of Kafka and of *Ronnie Brown*. Last year *Brown* was held in Rikers Island prison without being indicted by a grand jury and without getting to see a lawyer. On the 19th day, tired of dodging the omnipresent homosexual rapists and tired of keeping his wits together with the hope that (as he had written his mother) he would "get out and work and do something good," he looped a belt around his neck and hanged himself from a light fixture.

To this tragedy, repeated by hundreds of prisoners each year, Clark adds this fine constitutional postscript: "*Ronnie Brown*, dead at age 17, is still presumed innocent."

Through the book's two plots—one dealing with the powerlessness of the people, the other with a government which has mucked up its system of

justice for so long that reform seems almost impossible—runs a theme of incredible stupidity. When mosquitoes are a problem, it is standard practice to get rid of stagnant water and to cover windows with screens. Nobody calls that coddling mosquitoes. But when somebody proposes spending money to clean up slums, and to screen society from crime by building humane jails and by hiring many more honest, well-trained cops, the outcry against coddling criminals always kills the budget.

Twenty-seven government volumes have been printed in recent years on crime and violence; only distilled would they have the impact of this book for passion, reason and sometimes naïveté. Since drunk drivers kill 25,000 people every year and only 250 people died in all riots of the '60s, none being killed by looters, Clark asks, "Why not shoot drunken drivers?" Great logic. As for the naïveté, he thinks Congress—the same Congress that regularly butchers every low-income housing bill—might actually build 20,000,000 units to replace the slums. "Guided by reason," Clark predicts, "America will soar on wings of humane concern." Coming in the last paragraph of this book's awful indictment, that's almost funny.

by Robert Sherrill

*Mr. Sherrill, a Washington reporter, recently published *Military Justice*.*