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The Attorney General and Crime

Each year about this time, it becomes necessary to try to take out some of the political spin that the Department of Justice under Attorney General Mitchell has imparted to the FBI's annual crime report. This year, we regret to say, is no different from the last two. Mr. Mitchell and the department have demonstrated again their ability to find the golden lining in a dark cloud.

Take, for instance, the press release accompanying the FBI's report. Its first paragraph said, "Serious crime in the nation continued to increase in 1970, Attorney General John N. Mitchell announced today, but at a slower rate than in 1969. It marked the second year in a row that the crime statistics showed a tapering off of the sharp upward swing recorded during the mid 1960s." This claim is based on the undisputed fact that the *rate of increase in serious crime* was 11.3 per cent in 1970—a rate lower than the rate of increase in 1969, 1968, 1967, 1966, and 1964. But if you look at the figures in another way, the impression conveyed is quite different. It is equally fair to write that the *numerical increase in serious crime* in 1970 over 1969 was the second highest in the nation's history and that the increase in the last two years has been greater than the increases in 1965, 1966 and 1967 combined. That is based on the undisputed numbers reported by the FBI. The following table may make this clearer—it lists the so-called index crimes reported to the FBI for each calendar year, the increase in each year's total over the preceding year, and the rate of increase (the figure Mr. Mitchell likes to talk about):

	Index Crimes	Numerical Increase	Rate of Increase
1970	5,568,200	up 566,700	11.3%
1969	5,001,400	up 534,800	12.0%
1968	4,466,600	up 664,300	13.8%
1967	3,802,300	up 538,000	16.5%
1966	3,264,200	up 334,000	11.4%
1965	2,930,200	up 175,200	6.4%
1964	2,755,000	up 319,100	13.1%

The rate of increase figures do give the illusion of statistical progress against crime; when the number of crimes goes from three to four million, for example, the rate of increase is 33 per cent; when the number moves from four to five million, the rate of increase is only 25 per cent. That's what Mr. Mitchell would call "progress." But the numerical increase from one year to another in both instances is still one million crimes—and for the one million victims, there is not much comfort in the

thought that the *rate of increase* is decreasing. By our way of looking at it, even the fact of constant, continuing increase of, say, a half million in the number of crimes every year is difficult to translate into "progress," and an actual increase in the number of additional crimes each year, which is what happened between 1969 and 1970, can only be put down as retrogression if we are going to face the facts honestly.

There is a second example this year of how Mr. Mitchell lets rhetoric outrun facts. He told a meeting of law-enforcement officers Thursday that the monumental effort of local and state police in the last couple of years has resulted in fear "being swept from the streets of some—though not all—American cities." We suspect that the average person would believe, upon reading that statement, that American cities are safer today than they were when the Nixon administration took office. Yet in only two of the 25 largest cities—Pittsburgh and Baltimore—was there less serious crime, according to the FBI report, in 1970 than there was in 1968. In 16 of those cities, the serious crimes reported increased more than 20 per cent between those two years. If you measure only crimes of violence—murder, rape, robbery and assault—two of the 25 cities showed a decrease (Seattle and Milwaukee) and 16 showed an increase of more than 20 per cent. These figures lead to only two possible conclusions if Mr. Mitchell is right and fear is being swept from the streets: either the fear in 1968 was created by the words of the man whose campaign he managed, not by the facts, or people now have a false sense of security.

We have gone through this exercise in numbers not to paint the picture blacker than it is nor to discourage the law-enforcement personnel from trying harder but in an attempt to keep the record reasonably straight. There was a crime problem in 1968. There is a worse crime problem now. In some places, like the District of Columbia, the situation has improved within the last year. In others, it has deteriorated. (Remember how the administration talked about New York City a year ago when it showed a slight drop in crime? Nothing has been said about the 8 per cent increase this year.) One of those crimes of the sort that make up the FBI's annual survey was reported for every 45 citizens two years ago and one for every 36 citizens last year. We find it difficult to believe anyone thinks that is an improvement.

**“Beautiful!-I Love the Subtle Touches of Underlying Humor,
the Wistful Smile, the Feeling of Peace and Order Regained...”**

*CRIME 'N' ORDER
AND THE DANGER FOOT*

