

Katzenbach Hits Court Procedures

'Assembly Line'
Justice Here Laid
To Indifference

2/13/66
By Leonard Downie Jr.
Washington Post Staff Writer

The public's "indifference and ignorance" concerning conditions in local courts here and elsewhere "often makes assembly line justice virtually inevitable," Attorney General Nicholas deB. Katzenbach said yesterday.

Commenting on conditions in Washington's Court of General Sessions as described in a series of articles that ended yesterday in The Washington Post, Katzenbach said: "The problem is systematic and the blame is public."

The articles showed that the court is so overloaded with cases that the defendants must be rushed through a judicial process that, in more than 90 per cent of the cases, substitutes a system of legal barter for court trials on the merits of the cases.

Some defendants are able to choose more lenient judges to sentence them if they plead guilty. Others, mystified by the court's confusion and often virtually unaided by their court-appointed lawyers, are deprived of a meaningful day in court.

'Redesigning—Not Tinkering'

Katzenbach indicated that it may be necessary for aroused citizens here and elsewhere to completely redesign the local courts in order to solve the major problems facing them.

"Tinkering will not do the job," he said.

"The work of the President's Crime Commission indicates that the problems reported in this newspaper about Washington's criminal court system

See COURT, A5, Col. 1

Index, Page A2

Second class postage paid at Washington, D. C. Printed at 1515 L St., N. W., Washington, D. C. 20005.

here are being tested for accuracy

COURT—From Page A1

Katzenbach Blasts Court Process Here

are shared across the country," Katzenbach said.

"More reporting like the Post's is needed in every city," he added, "in order to impel the redesign of the systems by which we administer justice.

"For it is the public's indifference and ignorance that has forced judges, lawyers and police to work with a system that is inadequate and that often makes assembly line justice virtually inevitable."

James Vorenberg, director of the National Crime Commission, made comments similar to Katzenbach's Friday, saying that the national Crime Commission's work thus far had shown that "radical thinking" will be needed to cope with the problem of the courts in Washington and other big cities.

Merely enlarging the number of judges in the courts, Vorenberg said, would ignore the fact that "the problems have gotten away from them."

Task Force Study

A Justice Department task force recently finished a study of the Court of General Sessions here that is currently being assembled in report form for Katzenbach and, presumably, the Crime Commission.

General Sessions officials have acknowledged that the report is critical of the court and has aroused the ire of some of its judges.

It is also known that a thorough study of the Court of General Sessions and a far-reaching exploration of how its problems might be solved will form a large part of the

D.C. Crime Commission's examination of Washington's law enforcement problems.

The Commission's staff is known to consider the Court and its handling of so broad a range of criminal cases here one of the keys to the city's crime problem and its possible future control.

Needs 'Dignity'

"The court is badly in need of dignity," one confidential Crime Commission staff report stated and added, in much the same context as Katzenbach's comments yesterday, that "it will not obtain this until its conditions, its problems and its importance are known."

Already the D.C. Crime Commission has suggested two projects now being sponsored with funds obtained by the United Planning Organization that are aimed at the solution of some of the court's problems.

One of them, the staffing of major criminal courtrooms in General Sessions with UPO-paid court reporters is designed, according to the Crime Commission-UPO proposal for it, "to enforce higher standards of professionalism upon judges, prosecutors and defense counsel alike."

The other, when fully staffed, will experiment with new ways to screen convicted defendants for possible probation and to supervise those granted probationary freedom.

But all signs point to more far-reaching recommendations for the court in the Crime Commission's final report which is due later this year.