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Politics of Crime in Election Year

THE FBI'S ANNUAL report on crime, which shows it increasing to an all-time high in the United States, raises an interesting political question. Will the Democrats now turn the tables on the Republicans, and campaign next year on the law-and-order issue, as Mr. Nixon did in 1968?

The answer appears to be no. Not because the Democrats are above demagoguery themselves, but simply because there is a widespread conviction in the party that the voters can't be kidded into thinking that the suppression of crime—fundamentally a local problem—depends on who wins the next national election.

It may be a valid and important issue in many city and county elections, and even in some state elections, but, as Mr. Nixon has shown, even a crusading law-and-order President has little immediate impact on the general run of crime, most of which is beyond federal jurisdiction. All of the recent mass prison killings, for instance, have been in state institutions.

In the 1968 presidential campaign, Mr. Nixon sought to put the blame on Lyndon Johnson for the national in-

crease in crime during his years in office, yet since Mr. Nixon himself became the Chief Executive major crimes have soared from 4,466,600 in 1968 to 5,568,200 in 1970, a jump of 1,101,600, or more than the increases of 1965-66-67 combined. Attorney General John Mitchell has been rewriting the FBI press releases in an effort to put a better face on the statistics, but the fact remains that the incidence of crime still goes up and up.

MR. NIXON IS no more responsible for this than Mr. Johnson was in his time. The incumbent has, in his way, tried to advance law enforcement, just as LBJ did in his way. After all, some of the key actions taken by the Nixon administration were recommended by the superb survey made by Johnson's national crime commission.

The point for all of next year's presidential candidates to keep in mind is that while the Chief Executive has limited direct authority over law enforcement in the United States, he—and possibly he alone—is in a position to give the kind of national leadership necessary to start rolling crime back.

This calls for much more than a simple, hard-boiled, law-and-order line. There is going to have to be a vast and costly effort to clean up the breeding grounds of crime, along with a coordinated reform of the courts, the parole operation and, above all, our medieval, explosive prison system.

Since this will require the joint efforts of both major parties, nothing could be worse than to go on trying to make crime a phony partisan issue. Some Democrats may try to exploit the new FBI crime figures next year, but the leadership, fortunately, appears to believe there are better and more authentic issues to exploit.

The question mark is Attorney General Mitchell. As Mr. Nixon's 1968 campaign manager he exploited the crime issue to the hilt. Soon he will leave the Justice Department to run the President's bid for re-election, and all of his recent statements indicate he is still high on the law-and-order pitch.

HE TOLD a recent conference of law-enforcement officials that under Mr. Nixon the nation had "suddenly found it had leadership in

the war on crime." As a result of the President's "Monumental effort," he said, "fear is being swept from the streets of American cities." This must have been startling news to most of the attending police chiefs, but they listened politely, if skeptically.

Apparently the Attorney General has been reading the new edition of "The Real Majority," the Scammon-Wattenberg book which last year predicted that the American public was moving to the right in its concern over what the authors called the "Social Issue," meaning preoccupation with crime, violence, disruption, law-and-order and so on.

These political analysts now predict that the Social Issue "will be more potent in 1972 than 1970," and they warn that the Democrats will "suffer" if they dismiss it. They also argue that it can't be turned against the Republicans even if they are in power. Essentially, they say, "It is still a pro-Republican issue and is likely to remain as such." Maybe so, but it is hard to believe that Mitchell can convince the public that Lyndon Johnson is still to blame for the present increase in crime.

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