

Bazelon Sees 'Repressive Attitudes'

Criminologists Accused Of Ignoring Crime Cause

11/20/77
By Timothy S. Robinson
Washington Post Staff Writer

U.S. Circuit Chief Judge David L. Bazelon has accused the nation's criminologists of being more concerned with government funding and impressive statistics than they are with dealing with the causes of crime.

In a speech prepared for delivery this weekend before the American Society of Criminology in Atlanta, Bazelon said the Nixon administration's "war on crime" and the intense government spending during that war has left a legacy of repressive attitudes among many criminologists.

"It has left an entire discipline, and with it a profession, disastrously skewed and twisted, looking toward the shifting winds of politics rather than the guideposts of reason to provide its sense of direction," Bazelon said.

Bazelon's speech comes at a time when some liberal jurists and politicians have fallen silent during a public outcry about crime in the nation.

He said that instead of offering "placebos" such as new sentencing procedures and new criminal laws to soothe the public, criminologists should use their expertise to educate the public about the "nature of crime itself."

"In my opinion, there is only one genuine way to understand crime, and causation is its name," said Bazelon, generally known as one of the nation's most liberal judges. The 68-year-old judge has been on the U.S. Court of Appeals here since 1949, and since that time has written numerous leading liberal opinions on such criminal issues as insanity defenses, illegal searches, and illegal wiretapping.

"Crime is a human problem linked to savage deprivation," Bazelon told the criminologists. "Street crime comes out of wretched poverty, broken families, malnutrition, mental and physical illness, mental retardation, racial discrimination, lack of opportunity. Street crime springs from the anger and resentment of those who have been twisted by a culture of grinding oppression."

Saying the public does not want to confront this belief but instead wants to "raise a hue and cry for results," Bazelon accused the criminologists of falling too easily to "political expediency" and a "virtual obsession with numbers" to show they are getting results.

"Research thus ceases to be an instrument of human understanding, and becomes instead merely an engine for the creation of results about which no one cares, and which illuminate nothing," Bazelon said.

"The profession (of criminology) depends in large measure on the politicians who control the nation's purse strings," Bazelon added. "The public sets a hidden agenda for the profession."

He said the criminologists should adopt a massive plan of professional and national reform that would remove what he called the element of "repression" from their jobs.

"You have a choice: You can either face that fact responsibly as citizens, or you can become the faceless, technically proficient handmaidens of injustice," Bazelon said.