

ARY 15, 1973



*Post 1/15/73*

Louis Sirgo:

A

New Orleans

Policeman

'Working

Against

The

Odds'

Amid the confusion and uncertainty that continue to surround last week's sniper affair in New Orleans, there are at least a few irrevocable facts. One is that both Mark Essex, the sniper, and Louis Sirgo, who was Deputy Superintendent of Police, are dead. Evidence is now being brought forward that Essex, a young black man, had fairly recently become an embittered anti-white zealot. And evidence has also been recalled that Sirgo, one of several white victims of the shooting, had spoken out eloquently in the past on the dangers faced by police as a consequence of just such zealotry. Less well recalled are some other observations Sirgo made, which we reprint today. They come from a speech he delivered a couple of years ago, and reveal a specially keen understanding of the tragic impasse the nation has reached.

WE READ OF, or view on television, the daily news reports of crime, riots, campus disorder, drug abuse, pornography, educational and social inequalities, and then retire to the safety of our homes in the quiet suburbs. Quiet, yes, but only for the time being, quiet only because a thin blue line of police officers, working against the odds, is able to partially contain the violence and prevent complete criminal anarchy. But how long can this continue? Police forces were not designed for, nor are they capable of coping with the kind of situations which exist in most of our urban areas, and which conditions, incidentally, are becoming worse by the day. The police should have to deal with only a small segment of the population. The larger part of our people should voluntarily comply with the law. Non-aggression and obedience to the law should be obtained through social processes, through education, and opportunities for all Americans to fully enjoy the profits of our society.

I said earlier that we were too impersonal in our attitudes toward the problems of our fellow men. I'd like to give you an example of this couldn't-care-less attitude. I wonder how many of us have ever given serious thought to the conditions which exist in many of our prisons. Generally, little effort is ever made to rehabilitate an offender. We know because we have to deal with the recidivist, the anti-social deviant, who is convicted, sentenced to prison, and shortly after his release, returns to the same behavior which resulted in his incarceration. Why does he behave so? Is it to gain social recognition? If so, then while he is in prison and part of a captive audience, we should brainwash him — literally. Instead of utilizing this human being

for his physical ability by placing him in a sugar cane field, we should utilize the expertise of our motivational psychologists. The criminal could be converted through psychologically corrective education; he could be taught a new sense of values, to insure that upon release he would seek social recognition through the same means that it is sought by the majority of the citizens of our nation. But, no, we are satisfied with our vindictive system which has existed since the Tower of London and the Bastille. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

Evidence indicates that some revision in our penal system is needed. Of course, rehabilitation is not the complete answer, there will always be some among us who, because of mental abnormalities, cannot be salvaged or who may thrive in the socialistic atmosphere of the prison. For these, then, there should be provisions to remove them from society for as long as they live.

To get back to prison conditions, I'd like to ask you to think for a moment about what your reaction would be if you were told that you would be confined to the bedroom of your home, or the space of your private office for a period of six months. You would be provided with food and toilet facilities only. There would be no work, no recreation, no social life, no contact with members of the opposite sex, no air conditioning, but there would be the noise and stench of a prison to stimulate your senses.

We, who believe we are in a rat race, might enjoy the solitude for a few days, but beyond a few days, I wonder?

I say that our attitude goes beyond being impersonal. I say that we might want to call it neglect. Maybe we believe that we are ostriches and that if we hide the criminal in a parish prison or an Angola he will eventually disappear. Such an attitude means that as citizens we are not doing our jobs. As citizens of the United States, we are guilty of malfeasance in office. And, hiding our criminals in boxes of cages is not the only area where we have failed to properly administer the functions of our office as American citizens. We have allowed our central city areas to deteriorate into slum housing for members of our national community, who are at the bottom of our socio-economic totem pole. We make the daily journey to our small cubicles in office buildings where we earn our daily bread, and then like the mourning dove, who feeds at one location and flies to another to roost, we flee to the quiet of the suburbs to relax, or to play, and to sleep, leaving behind the problems of the city. After all, why should we worry—let the police handle their city, it isn't ours, we only work there.

I ask you, do something for yourself this afternoon on your way home.

Look closely at the area you are leaving for the police to handle, and think. When the situation becomes so bad that the police can no longer handle it, then our cubicles where we work will be controlled by the anarchists. Then what? For without the dollar to exchange for food, clothing, shelter, and transportation, we would move to the bottom of the totem pole. So, we can no longer hide our problems in prison cages, or federally subsidized low-rent housing developments, or in ghetto housing. I suggest that we begin to think about doing something about the responsibilities of the office which we hold, and if we don't then the problem, like a contagious malady, will destroy us. And, I can assure you that when the bubble does burst, there will be no parish lines or bridges across which we can flee to the security of our suburbs.

What I am saying is that we have to get our heads out of the sand, for after all, it is an unsafe position. An ostrich buries his brains, and that part of his



*The death of Mark Essex.*

anatomy which remains visible makes a very good target for a sniper. Yes, we who are part of the system are vulnerable to attack because part of our process has failed. We are all aware of the sound business practice which dictates that a successful enterprise is impossible in an area where no need exists. Regardless of how innovative an idea may be or how it may be promoted, the venture cannot prosper if there is no need.

For example, how successful would a

Black Panther breakfast program be in Metairie, or any of the other exclusive suburbs of New Orleans. What I am trying to say is that if there were no "desires," there would be no Panthers. We must face up to our responsibility, and in facing up to this responsibility, we must also be prepared to deal with the greatest sin of American society, and that is the status of the American Negro.

Mr. James Cunningham teaches Issues in Black Literature at Cornell Uni-

versity which is offered as a substitute for freshman English. The course is part of the new black studies program at the university. Cunningham, whose students are all Negroes, early in his opening remarks, admonishes his students:

Get the assumption out of your heads that because you are black you know what black experience is. From the books in this course we'll learn to sympathize with what it means to be black. Then we can deal with the issues of black struggle in a way that means something.

Ralph Ellison, an American author of Negro parentage, begins the prologue for his novel, "Invisible Man":

"I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me."

Mr. Ellison's invisible man is invisible because he has been assigned to a class of people which from time to time has been known by different names. A few of these are Negro, Africans, Afro-Americans, blacks and niggers. What would any of these names tell one about the individual to whom it may be applied; except, of course, that the term African gives some information as to the continent of birth of an individual's ancestors. Otherwise the labels mean nothing. The problem of invisibility shall exist until we learn that we cannot identify others by classifying them as lawyers, teachers, priests, cops or niggers.

You may be asking what has all this social rhetoric got to do with anarchy on my street. What I have been trying to do is like putting the cart before the horse. I have been trying to convey some of the background which I believe is partly responsible for the conditions which exist. And, before leaving this area, I'd like to give you the benefit of my 17 years' experience as a police officer. Poverty, and criminality are definitely related. Often times one may hear a remark that, "It can happen in the best of families." Usually the remark is made when a youngster from a family of means is arrested, possibly in a stolen car. This does happen, but most of the time it is an isolated incident. Generally speaking, youngsters from the upper strata of society do not become habitual criminals. It is the young men from our depressed areas who spend a major portion of their lives in jail. If we could but find a solution to our social problem, we would need fewer social firemen, which is a term a psychologist recently used to refer to policemen. He said that the police are kept busy putting out the fires which erupt in society.