

Mr. Saxbe and Crime Control

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BEFORE A GROUP of police chiefs in Chicago the other day, Attorney General William Saxbe unburdened himself of some thoughts on the subject of crime, its causes and its potential consequences. On the whole, it was a more balanced and thoughtful presentation than you might have supposed from the passages of the speech that gained the greatest national attention. Mr. Saxbe said that crime was increasing at a frightening rate and that some dark—but unnamed—forces within our society might one day use the fact of increasing crime to push for the creation of a national police force, a force Mr. Saxbe warned would jeopardize our liberty.

Unfortunately, the Attorney General's theorizing on the possible need for a national police force made the biggest splash. This, together with his dire view of the crime statistics, was almost all the nation learned about his speech, and perhaps for understandable reasons; the notion of a national police force does tend to concentrate the mind. But a careful reading of his full text reveals much more that is useful as a measure of what the nation's chief law enforcement official really has on his mind. Indeed, the implications for national policy in what Mr. Saxbe said are far too important to ignore, especially in a new administration.

Mr. Saxbe spoke of a reported increase in serious crime of 5 per cent for this year over last year. He was speaking of such offenses as murder, rape and assault with a deadly weapon, and he said such an increase in these crimes was alarming to him. Now we all know that the manner in which local police forces tabulate those figures is far from uniformly accurate. Moreover, we have seen in the past how crime statistics can be manipulated, depending on the political exigencies of the moment. The Nixon administration, for example, would have had us believe the problem was under control many months ago—at the time of the last election.

So, even though the statistics are disturbing, they are probably less interesting, in terms of coming to grips with the crime problem, than some of the things Mr. Saxbe had to say about the causes of crime. He began and ended by confessing to a certain mystification with which we can all commiserate. He did, however, draw a direct connection between serious crime among young people and unemployment among the same age group, especially those in the central cities. He pointed out that three of every four persons arrested for serious crimes were under 25 years of age. Using the data of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Mr. Saxbe told the police chiefs that unemployment among minority youths was "awesomely high" and that in some age groups in the inner city it was 33 per cent. It is important to note that if BLS says one in every three young blacks is out of a job, the figure is probably closer to half of the young black population. The reason is that BLS bases its figures for unemployment on those "actively seeking" work, and after a certain period large numbers of unemployed persons of all ages who have not acquired jobs are somewhat arbitrarily held to be no longer "actively" seeking work and therefore technically no longer unemployed.

"One lesson," Mr. Saxbe said, "is that we are not going to solve the crime problem among the young—especially in the cities—until they are brought into society's mainstream." And he added:

To do that, a basic step is to impart real education and employment skills and couple it with actual jobs. This is not only needed to help control crime. It is also the decent, the humanitarian, thing to do. This approach alone will not solve all crime problems related to poverty and discrimination. But unless we succeed in this, other efforts have little potential for lasting success.

Mr. Saxbe's observations on crime's relationship to unemployment are important because the Ford administration is in the midst of an internal debate about public works employment and its impact on the economy. Crime control would hardly be reason in itself to take such a step. And there are economic reasons for seriously considering it irrespective of its connection with crime control. But it logically follows that those with something to do have less reason to commit crimes and that those with a sense of a stake in their society are less likely to act in defiance of its rules.

Mr. Saxbe went on to take note of increasing white collar crime and crime among government officials at the state and local level, to say nothing of the federal level. He asked what sort of example the successful of the society were setting for the young: "The young learn from us and what they see and what they must be learning are sources of growing dismay."

He was constrained as well to mention the outpouring of violence on television and in films: "... the average 8-year-old has seen more violence on television than the average soldier encounters during a hitch in the army." He castigated the television industry for wrapping itself in the First Amendment when called to account for its practices, and he criticized parents for permitting their children to be exposed to "the unending deluge of such garbage."

From the Attorney General's viewpoint, then, crime is a problem with many causes and few solutions. He described a pattern of national frustration about crime, and it was in this context that he expressed his fears that if "we go on as we are, there is every possibility that crime will inundate us. The nation would then be faced with the prospect of falling apart or devising a national police in one final effort to restore domestic order. We should never doubt for a moment that there are men and forces at work in this country eagerly awaiting an opportunity to devise such a program as a first step toward total control over our lives."

Mr. Saxbe distinctly warned against that notion: "Any nation can stop crime if it is willing to have an internal army of occupation," he said, "but there has never been a government which stopped crime by oppression that eventually did not live to regret it." He argued instead that those "that have survived and flourished have done so by developing an inner strength in their people and in their institutions."

It goes almost without saying that most persons would

agree. We certainly do. And we also think Mr. Saxbe's speech, in its entirety, should be given serious attention by those within the Ford administration who will be dealing with such matters as public works employment, the control of handguns and the problem of television and motion picture violence. The control of crime has to be looked at in a larger context. President Ford has expressed himself as having the goal of trying to make us more of a nation of one people. We think that the manner in which he goes about that task may well assist in shedding light on the problem of what we do about rising crime.