

SEP 22 1971

SFChronicle

53

The Fearless Spectator

Charles McCabe

The Uncrime Wave

CRIME in this country, for the past four decades, has been as pervasive as one man in this country has said it is, and that man is J. Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI. He's got the best statistics on the subject. The use to which he has put these stats has often made people's teeth grind in anger.

No one questions the essential veracity of the Uniform Crime Reports, which his department compiles. Index crime, which these reports reflect, are willful homicide, forcible rape, aggravated assault, robbery, burglary, car theft, and larceny over \$50. Hard crime. The real stuff.



The FBI director has always had a vested interest in a high and rising crime rate. The higher the crime rate, the easier it is to wheedle or bully more money for his department from the Congress. Or so the argument of his critics goes.

As far as it goes, this year the argument went. Mr. J. Edgar Hoover is no longer the ultimate arbiter of what index crime really shows. This sensitive, and politically important role has been taken over by Mr. Hoover's superior, Attorney General John N. Mitchell.

★ ★ ★

MR. MITCHELL works for Mr. Nixon. Until last year, Mr. Hoover had never worked for anyone other than himself and his department, as a series of irritated attorneys general and presidents can testify.

Because Mr. Mitchell to a large part determines the President's domestic political strategy, he is deep-

ly committed to the major premise on which Mr. Nixon was elected in 1968. This being that the Democrats had made the streets of our cities unsafe, that hard crime was rampant, and that a change of administration would change all that. Thus, it is to Mr. Mitchell's interest to minimize the growth and effect of crime under the Republican administration. It is to the interest of Mr. Hoover, as always, to make crime look as baleful as possible.

★ ★ ★

WHICH OF THESE views was to prevail was made clear to certain reporters covering the Justice Department in Washington on June 22, 1970. When the FBI figures on index crime were released that day they were accompanied by an explanation written by Mr. Hoover. This had been done since the FBI started releasing crime figures in 1933. Since the reports themselves are almost impossible to grasp readily, reporters traditionally rely on Mr. Hoover's interpretation of them, and their stories reflect this interpretation. Mr. Hoover's June 22, 1970 press memo read:

"For release Monday p.m. June 22, 1970 — According to figures made available through the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports and released by Attorney General John N. Mitchell, serious crime in the U.S. continued its upward trend, recording a 13 per cent rise nationally for the first three months in 1970 when compared to the same period in 1969."

This statement never hit the nation's press wires, because it was never okayed by Mr. Mitchell. Unheard of. The statement was rewritten in Mitchell's office. It came out like this:

"For release Monday p.m., June 22, 1970 — Attorney General John N. Mitchell announced today that the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports show that the rate of increase of violent crimes in the first three months of 1970 slowed by 7 per cent in the major cities of the nation — and by 3 per cent in the nation as a whole."

★ ★ ★

BOTH INTERPRETATIONS could properly be drawn from the index crime reports of the FBI. Neither can conceal the fact, revealed in the reports, that reported crime is increasing under the Republicans at about the same rate as it increased under the Democrats. Mr. Hoover's interpretation would have cost votes. Mr. Mitchell's, putatively, grabbed onto some.

If crime is up, and Mr. Hoover is right, the FBI gets more money to fight crime. If violent crime has slowed down, as Mr. Mitchell would have it, Congress will be lulled about FBI funds. And we have some kind of a mess. But you knew that, of course.