

William Raspberry

New Thoughts on Crime Control

Washington

THE MEN WHO DRAFTED the Constitution of the United States never supposed that the civil liberties safeguards they included would make it easier to control crime or incarcerate criminals. Rather, they thought the safeguards were so important to individual liberty that they should be adopted even at the risk that some crime would go unpunished.

But that was a long time ago. Their present-day successors in the National Government (or some of them, at any rate) see crime as such a scourge on society that they would put its prevention and punishment ahead of the constitution.



Having made the discovery that crime control is a good deal easier without constitutional inhibitions, why have they been so gingerly in putting the discovery to use? Here are a few modest suggestions which might help them:

The Omnibus Crime Bill for the District of Columbia contains a provision for Preventive Detention which stops absurdly short of real effectiveness.

Preventive Detention is based on the notion that it is possible to determine in advance which persons charged with one offense will commit subsequent offenses between arrest and trial on the first charge.

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THE TROUBLE WITH preventive detention is that it attempts to lock the barn door only after one horse is already gone. Instead of waiting for the first arrest before they make their predictions, why don't the judges spend a few hours on the street each day, pointing out the citizens they suppose will break the law if they remain free?

For example, any shifty-eyed young Negro wearing apple-green or lavender trousers would be a good bet to do **something** wrong if left to his own devices. You can't imagine how many crimes would be prevented if you could lock such a kid up before the police catch him doing anything illegal.

The proposal for pre-crime detention should not be limited to wearers of green or lavender trousers, of course. Some people just look like dope peddlers, numbers writers or purse snatchers. Crime can be prevented by locking up these guys right now.

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PREVENTIVE DETENTION, however, is not the only half-measure in the crime bill. Take no-knock searches and seizures. Instead of wasting time suspecting that something illegal is going on at such-and-such an address and that a certain John Doe is doing it, why not let the police simply break into any home at any time, who knows how much crime and contraband they might turn up. The only people who could possibly object to such spotchecks would be the criminal element, and they are the ones we're after.

Wiretapping holds possibilities far beyond those envisioned by the Justice Department. For telephones are used not only to plan crimes but to talk about crimes already committed.

Obviously some crime would remain even if my proposals were enacted. But no one can doubt that the streets would be an awful lot safer.

Unless, of course, you happen to like green pants.

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