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PUBLIC MORALE AGAINST THE PUBLIC PEACE

BY BURT GRIFFIN*

Mr. Griffin maintains that riots have now run their historical course and are being replaced by small battles against the police, strategically planned by militant groups which express the ghetto's grief in the attitudes and practices of law enforcement agencies. He describes several incidents demonstrating official insensitivity to the problems of black people and predicts that militant groups will multiply unless appropriate action is taken by city officials.

IN listening to the discussions that have preceded me, I find myself agreeing with my black brothers and disagreeing with both the tone and the substance of the remarks made by my white brothers.

Much of the background for what I want to say has already been laid. I think we are past the stage of worrying about riots and mass arrests. The people who have rioted in our cities are largely worn out. They have had their fling, they are a little older, the communities are by and large burnt down, and there's not much more that can be accomplished by riots. Yet, the hostility is still there because of the white community's unwillingness to understand ghetto problems and its consequent inaction. It is understandable that the angry people in the black community have moved from self-destruction toward things that perhaps make a little bit more sense to them. Attempts to ambush policemen are indicative of a new tactic of militants who are aggrieved by the attitudes and practices of law enforcement agencies. We saw it happen in Cleveland recently; we saw it happen when a police officer was ambushed in New York; we saw it happen in Oakland; there was an attempt to assassinate the police chief of Newark; it's begun in Gary, and I dare say that this pattern will be repeated and accelerated.

In Cleveland, my home town, the reaction to the events that have taken place is a great deal different from what might be expected. Three snipers were killed, three policemen were killed, and the alleged leader of the sniping action, a man named Ahmed, was arrested and charged with first-degree murder. The Law Director of the City of Cleveland and the Director of the Legal Aid Society told me that there are now at least five groups that are prepared to take the same kind of action which made Ahmed and his followers seem to be patriots, not criminals, in the eyes of some in the black community. I venture to say that, if those five groups

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are destroyed in the same fashion as Ahmed's group, five times that number will spring up.

We have a very serious problem, and we must speak frankly about it. The heart of the problem of violence does not lie in the intricacies of credit and housing, which all poor people face. I think that the heart of the problem is an insensitivity on the part of some in the so-called establishment, and some people who maintain our government, maliciously demonstrated to ghetto residents by some of the officers on the police forces of our cities. Until we come to grips with the malice of the police, we cannot begin to solve this problem of violence.

Let me tell you how that "official" malice manifests itself after the gun battle between Ahmed's band and the police. Indications are that the gun battle was an ambush. Within two hours of the outburst, two Negroes were killed 40 blocks away. When the Law Director of the city of Cleveland — who is a black man — and the Director of the Cleveland Legal Aid Society — who is also black — heard of the guerilla warfare, they immediately left their offices to contact members of the Circle of Afro-American Unity, a black coalition. While they were meeting at the coalition headquarters, 60 blocks from the location of the guerilla action, a Cleveland police captain and two other officers came to the door and fired shots at the people who were meeting there. Everybody hit the floor. The Law Director managed to make his way to the door and confronted the captain, who didn't believe that he was the Law Director of the city of Cleveland. When the captain was finally convinced, he jumped into his police car and fled the scene.

In the hours immediately after those events, the Cleveland police radio was filled with racial obscenities and attacks upon the mayor and other public officials of the city of Cleveland. This, to me, is strong indication that a general feeling of bigotry and hostility exists in the Cleveland Police Department and probably in most other American police departments. This attitude, which is shown every day in the ghetto by police viciousness and abuse, is present in other institutions, including our courts. I want to know when we are going to do something about it. When are we going to stop talking about law and order as if it were a one-sided thing to be imposed upon the community by the guns of the police department?

If the bar associations and lawyers want to bring an end to the escalation of this conflict, we cannot simply equip our police with more and more sophisticated weaponry to be used in the guerilla warfare of the ghettos. It is absolutely necessary that we focus on one of the most serious sources of this problem, the

widespread prevalence in our police departments of personnel who rely on violence alone to maintain order in the community. If it is demoralizing to a police department to withdraw trigger-itchy officers from an impacted area, as Judge Brennan from Detroit has indicated, then I say to hell with the morale of the police department. We simply need a different type of police department which will no longer terrorize the ghetto.

We must focus upon that issue. What can we do? There are a number of things. We should have more sophisticated screening processes for police personnel. For example, psychological tests should be administered to prospective employees of the police departments to determine their attitudes and biases. We must make certain that those men who cannot deal effectively with minority groups have little or no contact with minority peoples in the ghettos. If we don't remove such policemen completely from the police departments, then we should put them in positions where they are unable to use violence in their work. This cannot be done by lawsuits, and it cannot be done by legislative action. It involves administrative decisions of the mayors and other public officials of our cities. These public officials will respond to public pressure, and I suggest that pressure should be brought upon them by the Bar. The bar associations should focus specifically on this problem without fear and without compromise. Irrelevancies, such as issues of police morale, should be eliminated from discussion. Lawyers must talk sense to the public officials of our cities and alert them of the probable outcome of the conflict unless immediate action is taken concerning the police malice.

The Federal Government can also aid in solution of the problem. I feel that no funds should be provided to police departments under the Safe Streets Act¹ for the purchase of additional weapons until they have demonstrated, as a precondition of receiving that money, that they have implemented an effective system for weeding out irresponsible and unthinking policemen from their departments — until they can demonstrate that their men will not misuse those weapons. Of course, provision should also be made for continued screening of the police departments to ensure continued vigilance in this regard.

What has been said here today by all of the speakers is certainly Exhibit A of a most compelling case as to what is really happening in our communities. I hope that we can go back to our own homes and remember that this is a problem which requires immediate action on our part.

¹ Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968, 82 Stat. 197.