

1959

Law Enforcement and Public Opinion

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Recommended Citation

Joseph Donald Craven, Law Enforcement and Public Opinion, 49 J. Crim. L. Criminology & Police Sci. 377 (1958-1959)

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POLICE SCIENCE

LAW ENFORCEMENT AND PUBLIC OPINION

JOSEPH DONALD CRAVEN

Joseph Donald Craven is Attorney General of the State of Delaware. His office in Delaware has cognizance over both civil and criminal matters, and it is from his experience in criminal prosecutions especially that he writes at this time. Mr. Craven has served as Chairman for the Eastern Regional Conference of Attorneys General for 1956-57 and as Chairman of the American delegation to the Second Inter-American Conference of Public Law Administrators held in Havana, Cuba, in November 1957. This paper is drawn from material used in a speech at a recent Attorney General's conference in Chicago, Illinois.—EDITOR.

After nearly four years in office, the writer is convinced that the greatest problem of law enforcement lies in the attitude of the American people. The Attorney General of one of our larger states recently pointed out that in one city of his state law enforcement officials estimated there are as many as forty thousand gambling (numbers) bets a day. Another law enforcement official stated that in his state veterans organizations interrogated candidates who aspired to the office of the Attorney General to determine whether or not they would enforce the anti-gambling laws if they were elected. The price of their support was the promise of the candidates that they would not do their sworn duty! This is an appalling situation—a tragic commentary on the state of our public morals.

The problem of juvenile delinquency is of increasing concern. We discuss these juveniles as though they were a race apart—strangers in our midst. Are they not our flesh and blood, raised in our homes, educated in our schools, part and parcel of our very lives? If our children are going to Hell, we have shown them the way.

We need laws that our police can enforce and that our courts will uphold. But laws alone are not the answer. We cannot arrest and imprison even a small percentage of those who are casually and contemptuously violating the laws which, as citizens, they are obligated to obey. The crime rate of the United States is increasing four times as fast as our population growth. We are heading down the road which other great nations have followed to destruction.

In recent months, we have been disturbed and frightened by the scientific progress of Russia—a

country that we had considered, until recently, to be backward—even primitive. Yet, the writer is much more concerned about the lack of respect for law and the low state of public morals in this country than he is about the scientific progress of the Russians. Great nations are far more likely to be destroyed because of corruption from within than threats from without. The strength of this nation is, in the last analysis, in the character of our people. It is important that we make renewed efforts to regain the scientific supremacy that we seem to have temporarily lost. But it is of even greater importance that we instill in our young people the importance of honesty and integrity and loyalty to the ideals on which this country was founded.

Those of us who have had the experience and responsibility of enforcing our criminal laws know that it is no problem to convict the drunkard who has been picked out of the gutter, the highway robber, the rapist, or the murderer. But when we attempt to get convictions of professional gamblers and drunken drivers, we are far less successful.

We have tried more drunken drivers and professional gamblers in Delaware during the writer's administration than in any other similar period in the history of Delaware. But our success has not been commensurate with the number of cases tried. The reason is obvious. It is almost impossible to pick a jury in which some member of that jury has not placed a bet with a professional gambler or driven a car while under the influence of intoxicating liquor. "But for the grace of God," says he, "I might be the defendant."

It is not our prerogative, as public prosecutors,

to pick and choose the laws that we have sworn to enforce; nor should we be deterred by any consideration as to how our actions are likely to affect our political futures. We have no guarantee—and should not expect—to remain in office forever. We have been privileged to serve in an important public office, and should, like Cincinnatus of old, be prepared to return to the plow when our work is done.

We realize that, despite its frustrations, public office is not without its attractions. Nevertheless,

we cannot sacrifice principle for expediency. If, having done our duty honestly and conscientiously, we are defeated and retired to private life, we shall, in defeat, have retained our self-respect and the respect of those whose opinions we value.

Ours is the privilege and the duty of being crusaders, in the best sense of the word, for honest law enforcement and for decency in public life. These objectives are worth fighting for. Unless we succeed, we may be seeing the beginning of the end of the American Dream.