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Richard Nixon

Richard Nixon, Rick Perlstein

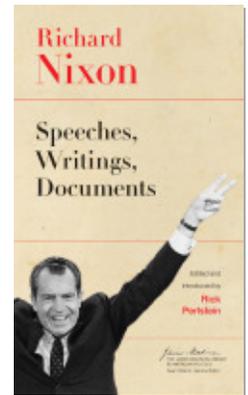
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“What Has Happened to America?” (*Reader’s Digest*, October 1967)

Beginning in the mid-1960s, after a long period of liberal and Democratic control of all three branches of government, signs of disorder saturated American society. Crime rates were skyrocketing; young people were turning their back on traditional norms, protesting the Vietnam War, and contesting the moral legitimacy of their elders; and, most dramatically, each new summer seemed to augur yet more dramatic riots in the nation’s black ghettos. In the summer of 1967, twenty-six died in riots in Newark, New Jersey, and forty-two in Detroit. Richard Nixon, always a stickler for order, made a bid for the support of Americans who feared society was coming apart at the seams a key part of his political appeal going into the 1968 presidential election. This article in the nation’s most widely read monthly, Reader’s Digest—whose publisher was a strong Nixon backer and friend—added a characteristically Nixonian touch: he seemed to put more of the blame on the indulgence of know-it-all sophisticates than on the people actually committing the crimes.

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Just three years ago this nation seemed to be completing its greatest decade of racial progress and entering one of the most hopeful periods in American history. Twenty million Negroes were at last being admitted to full membership in the society, and this social miracle was being performed with a minimum of friction and without loss of our freedom or tranquility.

With this star of racial peace and progress before us, how did it happen that last summer saw the United States blazing in an inferno of urban anarchy?

In more than 20 cities police and mayors were unable to cope with armed insurrection. Central cities were abandoned to snipers, looters and arsonists. Only the state militia or federal soldiers could regain the city and restore peace. . . .

Why is it that in a few short years a nation which enjoys the freedom and material abundance of America has become among the most lawless and violent in the history of free peoples?

There has been a tendency in this country to charge off the violence and the rioting of the past summer solely to the deep racial division between Negro and white. Certainly racial animosities—and agonies—were the most visible causes. But riots were also the most virulent symptoms to date of another, and in some ways graver, national disorder—the decline in respect for public authority

and the rule of law in America. Far from being a great society, ours is becoming a lawless society.

Slipping Standards

The symptoms are everywhere manifest: in the public attitude toward police, in the mounting traffic in illicit drugs, in the volume of teen-age arrests, in campus disorders and the growth of white-collar crime. The fact that whites looted happily along with Negroes in Detroit is ample proof that the affliction is not confined to one race.

The shocking crime and disorder in American life today flow in large measure from two fundamental changes that have occurred in the attitudes of many Americans.

First, there is the permissiveness toward violation of the law and public order by those who agree with the cause in question. Second, there is the indulgence of crime because of sympathy for the past grievances of those who have become criminals.

Our judges have gone too far in weakening the peace forces as against the criminal forces.

Our opinion-makers have gone too far in promoting the doctrine that when a law is broken, society, not the criminal, is to blame.

Our teachers, preachers, and politicians have gone too far in advocating the idea that each indi-

vidual should determine what laws are good and what laws are bad, and that he then should obey the law he likes and disobey the law he dislikes.

Thus we find that many who oppose the war in Vietnam excuse or ignore or even applaud those who protest that war by disrupting parades, invading government offices, burning draft cards, blocking troop trains or desecrating the American flag.

The same permissiveness is applied to those who defy the law in pursuit of civil rights. This trend has gone so far in America that there is not only a growing tolerance of lawlessness but an increasing public acceptance of civil disobedience. Men of intellectual and moral eminence who encourage public disobedience of the law are responsible for the acts of those who inevitably follow their counsel: the poor, the ignorant and the impressionable. For example, to the professor objecting to de facto segregation, it may be crystal clear where civil disobedience may begin and where it must end. But the boundaries have become fluid to his students and other listeners. Today in the urban slums, the limits of responsible action are all but invisible. . . .

There is little question that our judicial and legal system provides more safeguards against the conviction of an innocent man than any other legal system on earth. We should view this accomplishment with pride, and we must preserve it. But

the first responsibility of government and a primary responsibility of the judicial system is to guarantee to each citizen his primary civil right—the right to be protected from domestic violence. In recent years our system has failed dismally in this responsibility—and it cannot redeem itself by pointing to the conscientious manner in which it treats suspected criminals. . . .

Any system that fashions its safe-guards for the innocent so broadly and haphazardly that they also provide haven from punishment for uncounted thousands of the guilty is a failure—an indictment, not an adornment, of a free society. No need is more urgent today than the need to strengthen the peace forces as against the criminal forces that are at large in America.

Midsummer Madness

The nationwide deterioration of respect for authority, the law and civil order reached its peak this past summer when mobs in 100 cities burned and looted and killed in a senseless attack upon their society, its agents and its law.

We should make no mistake. This country cannot temporize or equivocate in this showdown with anarchy; to do so is to risk our freedoms first and then our society and nation as we know it. . . .

The problems of our great cities were decades in building; they will be decades in their solution.

While attacking the problems with urgency we must await the results with patience. But we cannot have patience with urban violence. Immediate and decisive force must be the first response. For there can be no progress unless there is an end to violence and unless there is respect for the rule of law. To ensure the success of long-range programs, we must first deal with the immediate crisis—the riots.

An End to Violence

How are riots to be prevented?

The first step is better pay and better training and higher standards for police; we must attract the highest caliber of individual to the force. . . .

Second, there must be a substantial upgrading in the number of police. The first purpose of the added manpower is to bring the physical presence of the law into those communities where the writ of authority has ceased to run.

The responsibility of the police in these areas is not only to maintain the peace but to protect life and property. It is the Negro citizens who suffer most from radical violence. When police and firemen retreat under sniper fire from riot-torn districts to let them “burn out,” it is the Negro’s district that is burned out. . . .

There can be no right to revolt in this society; no right to demonstrate outside the law, and, in

Lincoln's words, "no grievance that is a fit object of redress by mob law." In a civilized nation no man can excuse his crime against the person or property of another by claiming that he, too, has been a victim of injustice. To tolerate that is to invite anarchy. . . .

To heal the wounds that have torn the nation asunder, to re-establish respect for law and the principles that have been the source of America's growth and greatness will require the example of leaders in every walk of American life. More important than that, it will require the wisdom, the patience and the personal commitment of every American.