

# Off Center

Sol Plafkin

1968

Publisher Anthony Wierzbicki of the *Detroit American* is constantly explaining his extensive “crime” coverage. In a recent front-page editorial he stated: “We firmly believe that it is the duty of a newspaper to advise its readers of the truth—the entire truth. Then, and then only can the public make proper decisions and demand proper civic action.”

Unfortunately, the “proper” decisions and action are, in his mind, to “unshackle” the police and “get tough.” The ultimate conspirator in his mind is probably the U.S. Supreme Court which, almost 200 years after the adoption of the Bill of Rights, has only recently begun to give citizens minimal constitutional safeguards. And it is this same kind of thinking which is basically behind the struggle to block the promotion of Abe Fortas to Chief Justice and the appointment of Homer Thornberry as Associate Justice of the U. S. Supreme Court.

The anti-Supreme Court thinking is confusing a great proportion of the American public, 72% of whom, according to a recent nationwide poll, is convinced that the new Supreme Court requirement of an attorney in all phases of criminal proceedings—starting at the arrest—has turned thousands of criminals loose, hampered law enforcement and helped make our streets unsafe.

That illustrious Republican candidate for President, former Vice-President Dick Nixon, has claimed that the Supreme Court has “given the green light” to “criminal elements.”

Yet current statistics have definitely indicated that conviction rates are high and have not dropped since the controversial Supreme Court decision.

Lois Willis, writing in the Chicago *Daily News*, reports that criminologists say that the entire issue of crime in the streets is fogged by false figures, the impact of mass media and fear of social change. They admit violent crime is rising, but no faster than the staggering increase of young persons in the slums.

Slums have always bred crime in this country, she says, and have always housed most of the victims of crime. Middle-class Americans crying for law and order today “are really crying for more control of black people,” says Chicago Alderman William Cousins, Jr.

One of the historic cases involved ( Ernesto Miranda, a 27-year-old truck driver from Arizona. In 1966, the Supreme Court ordered a retrial because Miranda had not been informed of his right to have an attorney before police obtained a confession.

Yet, Miranda was tried again and convicted on other evidence—a fact overlooked in all the furor over the Miranda decision.

Before the Miranda decision, about 65 per cent of all persons arrested for murder confessed in Cook County (Chicago area). After Miranda, only 17 per cent have confessed.

“But we have not been handcuffed or hamstrung,” says Chicago Police Superintendent James B. Conlisk, Jr. “Our record shows that. As a result of the rulings, better investigative techniques were needed and are being developed.”

Even white-backlash U.S. Congressman from Chicago Roman Pucinski (who violently opposed school busing earlier this year) had to admit that “the Supreme Court hasn’t hurt convictions. It has worked the other way, Police are now building stronger cases. In the past judges often had no alternative but to dismiss a case because the

evidence was so poor, improperly obtained. Now they've adjusted to the court decisions and they are getting better convictions."

Wierzbicki tries to justify his extensive crime reporting: "By pointing out that it is the Negro law-abiding citizen who is the greatest victim of these street thugs, we hope to inspire the Negro community to lead the way in demanding a restoration of law and order, particularly in the inner city."

But the concerned publisher, who incidentally is a candidate for one of the two Common Council vacancies up this year, fails to go one step further—to point out that the Negro, or Black man, has very little control over what happens over his own community. Any attempt of the Black community to achieve a decent degree of self-determination and self-government of their own lives is constantly being frustrated by benevolent "white liberal" and "Tom" politicians.

The district plan for electing city councilmen, introduced twice in the state legislature by Rep. Jackie Vaughn III, and which would give people in all parts of Detroit a greater feeling of a personal stake in their community, has been crushed by these politicians who are fearful that such a plan would undermine their present powers.

The suggestion of Richard and Milton Henry that there be district police commissioners, elected by and responsible to their local communities, has never even received serious consideration.

So if Tony Wierzbicki is seriously concerned about the "crime" situation, he might do well to push for these minimal measures of reform, instead of paternalistically lecturing the Black community on what they should do. Also, he should work for the elimination of the horrible slum conditions that exist in our town and which help breed the type of behavior which so disturbs him.

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