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"THE CRIME PROBLEM AT HOME AND ABROAD"

RADIO ADDRESS

by

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In the

NATIONAL RADIO FORUM

Broadcast Over a Nation-Wide Network of

The National Broadcasting Company

Monday, October 28, 1935.

10:30 P. M.

Recently I have been engaged in examining the methods of criminal law administration in three of the countries of Western Europe - Great Britain, Belgium and France. Tonight, through the kindness of the National Radio Forum, I am afforded an opportunity to report upon some of the results of that investigation.

I embarked upon this tour of study in the hope of obtaining information that might be utilized in the war on crime at home; to learn how the problem presents itself in other countries, and to ascertain what methods have been there devised to deal with it; and, in the still further hope, that through a comparison of foreign methods with our own I might have a more acute understanding of the reasons for our failures, and a sounder confidence in the reasons for our successes.

The first place I visited was Scotland Yard. It is a virile and efficient organization, splendidly officered and admirably conducted.

Scotland Yard is the coordinating factor in the varied police forces of England and Wales. The bulk of its work, however, is confined to policing London. Its investigative excursions outside of that area are infrequent, and assistance is not rendered to local authorities except upon specific request. It is under the general supervision of a Cabinet minister responsible to Parliament. The personnel of Scotland Yard numbers more than 20,000 men, including about 1,000 detectives assigned to the famous Criminal Investigation Department, the C. I. D. known to popular fiction. Its annual expenditure runs to about \$35,000,000.

The new police training school recently established at Hendon is an institution of great promise and one of which they have every reason to be proud. It strikes a modern note of marked significance. It is patterned somewhat along lines which we have been following in the training of our Agents in the Department of Justice.

During the visits I paid this great institution, I examined its technical facilities and equipment, its methods of training, its filing system, its scope of activities and its general mode of procedure. Comparisons are ungracious and I have no intention of entering upon them except to suggest that a study of Scotland Yard and of our own Federal Bureau of Investigation reveals the profound differences existing between the problem of crime in the United States and the same problem in Great Britain.

Quite apart from constitutional limitations, it is apparent at once that Great Britain - an island, relatively small in territorial extent, homogeneous in population, without conflicting sovereignties and jurisdictions - has a problem far less complex and difficult than our own. The roving criminal, who carries on his depredations across State lines and whose activities cover vast geographical areas, is unknown to Great Britain. That is the problem that brought our Federal Government upon the scene. Investigation of the Urschel kidnaping case, for example, extended over an area of nearly 700,000 square miles, which, if superimposed upon a map of Europe, would cover most of the countries in the Western part of that continent.

I was interested to learn that the number of fingerprint cards filed each day at Scotland Yard is between 200 and 300, while the most recent report from the Federal Bureau of Investigation shows that the Department of Justice is receiving as high as 3700 a day. These figures of themselves suggest the greater scope of crime in the United States, the vast geographical extension of criminal operations, the almost infinite possibilities of a criminal losing himself in a land where passports and other methods of personal identification are unknown, and the importance of having at least one focal point for the exchange of criminal information, such as is now represented by our Federal Bureau of Investigation at Washington.

My visit to the famous Surete' Nationale in Paris was an intensely interesting experience. One could not fail to be impressed by the alertness of its representatives and the infinitely painstaking methods in vogue. France, I should say, is one of the most difficult countries in the world in which one may become lost. Its wide flung method of personal check, its cards of identity, its registration through hotels, lodging houses, and "the concierge system" are of great assistance in police work, though hardly adaptable to the genius of our own institutions. It suggests, however, the advisability of extending the voluntary civil fingerprint system recently established in the Department of Justice and in which we already have recorded about 50,000 fingerprints of reputable persons, in all walks of life. I predict that this method of recording identities will be resorted to more and more generally as its merits, as a protective measure for the benefit of the average citizen, become increasingly manifest.

The Police System of Belgium is not unlike that of France in its broad outlines; and it is highly effective.

The School of Criminology at Brussels is an admirable institution and includes in its curriculum a course of instruction for Magistrates.

I have heretofore recommended to the Congress, in connection with a proposed Bureau of Crime Prevention, a course of training for U. S. Attorneys, U. S. Marshals, and U. S. Commissioners, though the approval of the project has thus far been withheld. I am still hopeful, however, that I shall be able to make progress along that line.

During the course of my trip I inquired concerning the number of prisoners in the countries I visited. I found that in England and Wales there are about 11,000 persons in penal confinement, in Belgium about 4,000 and in France between 30,000 and 35,000. How many prisoners do you suppose there are in the United States? The appalling answer is - about 220,000. In other words, on an adjusted basis of relative population the United States has seven times as many persons in prison as England, four times as many as Belgium and more than twice as many as France. This, ladies and gentlemen, is a staggering fact, a discreditable fact, a fact that stares all of us in the face.

Manifestly we have not met our crime problem as well as they have theirs. True we have made great progress. We have broken the backs of the kidnaping bands. We have improved our facilities, we have strengthened our law enforcing agencies, we have secured greater co-operation all along the line, and we are devoting our thought and efforts with increasing intensity to this national menace. But much, much remains to be done. We cannot relax our efforts for a moment and we cannot afford to fail.

The statistics I have cited are, of course, subject to certain explanations, but these explanations do not alter the ultimate fact. It has been suggested, for example, that certain acts are punished as crimes in the United States which are not thus dealt with on the continent of Europe, such as drug addiction, drunkenness and certain sex offenses. It is further suggested that about five-sixths of all the automobiles in the world are in the United States and that offenses growing out of the misuse of the motor-car account for a substantial proportion of our crime. Again it is suggested that our problem of assimilating diverse strains into our citizenship is responsible to some degree for the situation under discussion. Some foreign observers point to the fact that prison sentences in the United States are longer than those in foreign countries and thus our prison population accumulates. Others have suggested that our traditional insistence upon the rights of the individual has at times militated against control of persons of anti-social behavior. Another explanation offered is that apprehension and punishment are much more swift and certain abroad than in the United States.

Doubtless there is some truth in all of these suggestions, but the fact remains that we have an immense and disproportionate prison population that is increasing all the time.

While I was at Scotland Yard a message came in to the effect that a pickpocket had snatched a woman's purse on one of the principal London thoroughfares. An immediate call was sent out. Before I left the Yard two hours later the criminal had been arrested. Later that same week I asked what the status of the matter was. This was the answer.

"He's serving time."

This was just 72 hours after the offense had been committed. Does it not suggest that in Great Britain, where the prison population is decreasing and crime is largely under control, swiftness of apprehension, speed of trial, prompt and inescapable punishment, have proved effective deterrents? And does it not suggest a line of procedure which we might profitably follow?

While I was in Paris I attended a murder trial at the Assize Court for the District of the Seine. One man had killed another in a quarrel about a girl. The defendant claimed that it was a case of self defense. There were three judges on the bench. There were twelve jurors in the box. There were five alternate jurors in attendance available to replace any who might become ill or otherwise incapacitated. The trial lasted less than three days. The judge's charge was completed in ten minutes. He submitted four written interrogatories to which the jurors, after a deliberation of 25 minutes, returned negative answers. The defendant was thereupon brought into court and informed that he had been acquitted. He bowed his acknowledgments, was assessed one franc in damages to be paid the family of the deceased and -- that was that. And let us note that he had been in jail since the crime was committed, and that even had his alleged offense been a lesser one, he would not have been out on bail.

I notice that in France and elsewhere there is no such abuse of bail as is all too common in the United States. When a man is charged with a crime and placed in detention until brought to trial, he is anxious to have his case heard. His attorneys are not interested in postponements and legal technicalities. In the United States when a defendant charged with a serious offense is admitted to bail, it is all too often a fact that public opinion becomes indifferent, witnesses disappear, die or lose their memories, and the initiative of prosecution is dissipated.

I do not suggest that the bail system be abandoned but I do suggest that those who wish to improve the administration of criminal justice in the United States might well turn their attention to the outrages committed against justice in abuse of the privilege of bail - an abuse that so often has no other result than to permit persons guilty of crime to escape punishment. Both our civil and our criminal methods of procedure are sadly in need of reformation.

In the conferences which I was privileged to hold with Cabinet Ministers of European Governments, with judges and with police officials, I heard frequent expressions of incredulous surprise when I told them of the ease with which criminals in the United States are able to secure possession of lethal weapons of offense. The 73rd Congress enacted a bill known as the National Firearms Act. This is only a partial remedy. It requires the registration of certain firearms with Collectors of Internal Revenue in the various districts, but applies only to machine guns, sub-machine guns, sawed-off rifles or shotguns and silencers. This was as far as the Congress would go at that time. It contains a fatal exemption from all measure of Federal control of pistols and revolvers. In the 74th Congress, in the session just concluded, I, therefore, submitted a bill which would place pistols and revolvers within the terms of the National Firearms Act. That bill was not reported from the Committee. I intend to continue my efforts in that direction at the next session.

I do not expect, of course, that criminals will step up and register their weapons, but I do expect that all honest citizens will be willing to have their weapons registered so that when a criminal is caught with an unregistered weapon he will be deemed guilty of a serious offense. I can put this situation in graphic form when I state that this afternoon I obtained

from the Federal Bureau of Investigation cases reported since January 1, 1933, to date showing robberies, and thefts from National Guard armories and other public institutions of Government-owned firearms and ammunition as follows:

Number of firearms stolen . . . . . 2,047.

This includes pistols, rifles, automatic rifles and  
machine guns.

Number of rounds of ammunition stolen . . 273,326.

These figures seem to me to be appalling. While hundreds of these weapons have been recovered and while prison terms have been meted out to many of those who stole them, the fact remains that our great American underworld is armed to the teeth. It steals its heavier weapons and purchases its pistols. There is no legitimate reason on earth for an individual to have possession of a machine gun; nor do I believe that any honest citizen should object to having all classes of lethal weapons placed under registration. To permit the present situation to continue indefinitely amounts to a disclaimer of national intelligence. I appeal for public support for a more effective Firearms Act.

Of course, I have brought home from my visit abroad no magic formula for dealing with crime, nor do I ever expect to find one. It is a far flung problem and the battle must be fought on many fronts. You may be assured, however, that the Department of Justice will not for a moment abate its efforts in this field of common concern. We hope to do better and better work as the days go by. As you know there has been set up in the Department, a Police Training School which, under the remarkably able direction of Mr. John Edgar Hoover, Director of our Federal Bureau of Investigation, is offering training facilities to selected groups of State and municipal police officers.

Our experience in this line of work has been distinctly gratifying.

A group of 23 such officers have already been graduated, and we have on file more than 300 applications for admission to our next session of the School. We shall admit them to the extent that our facilities and our funds permit. I hope also to establish a similar training school for prison administrators and other penological officers under the experienced direction of Mr. Sanford Bates, head of our Federal Bureau of Prisons. Moreover, I desire to extend our work into the field of crime prevention, where much effective coordinating work can be done. From these schools and bureaus, we hope, in addition to technical training, to send out helpful impulses that will assist in the invigoration and in the integration of our whole law enforcement structure throughout its varied jurisdictions and in all its aspects.

In short, we are developing in the United States a method of dealing with crime that accords with our constitutional limitations, the genius of our political institutions and the traditions of our people. The need of controlling crime is one of the most exigent of our national problems. There can be legitimate differences of opinion concerning appropriate remedies for our economic and social ills, but there can be no room for such differences when the question is one of protecting our persons, our financial, industrial and business structure, our families and our homes from the predatory criminal and the menace of the underworld. Unless our lives and our homes are safe, unless there be a secure domestic peace in which great human problems can be thoughtfully dealt with, then all that we strive to accomplish for the betterment of our people rests upon the treacherous sand of disrespect for order and defiance of law.