

# H-Net Reviews

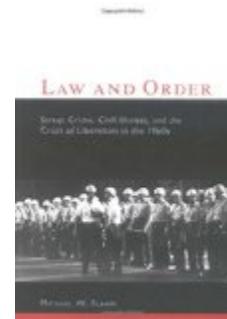
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Michael F. Flamm. *Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Unrest, and the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. ix + 296 pp. \$34.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-11512-4.

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## It's Security, Stupid

When George W. Bush won re-election in November 2004, many pundits initially pointed to social/cultural issues such as gay marriage as the decisive factor. Others have more recently stressed the centrality of the war on terrorism. They insist, persuasively, that Bush was able to convince enough people he would do a better job than John Kerry of protecting the nation from additional terrorist attacks. Talk of “soccer moms” gave way to analysis of “security moms.” The commander-in-chief became protector-in-chief.

John Kerry thus joins Michael Dukakis, Hubert Humphrey, and Lyndon Johnson in a line of prominent Democrats whose political fortunes ran aground on the shoals of personal security. Indeed, as Michael W. Flamm cogently argues in his brisk and engaging book, Republicans used the issue of personal safety to revive their sagging party following Barry Goldwater’s crushing defeat in 1964. Over the next four years they made law and order a rallying cry that undermined liberalism and helped “usher in a new age of American politics, in which nightmares of criminal chaos replaced dreams of a Great Society” (p. 180). Republicans succeeded because they clearly identified a cast of villains—the Supreme Court, Lyndon Johnson and his Great Society, and radicals such as Stokely Carmichael—and offered such straightforward solutions as tougher punishment of criminals, exhortations from the White House for traditional values, and cutting or ending government programs that allegedly encouraged rioting and crime.

In contrast, Flamm observes, Democrats were never able to persuade a sufficient number of voters that they could be trusted on this issue. Democrats denounced crime, of course, but at the same time they talked about the need to uphold civil liberties and maintained that violence stemmed from social ills such as poverty and discrimination. What Democrats considered sophisticated analysis of complex problems, many voters saw as misguided and dangerous indulgence of a social menace.

Flamm rightly focuses his analysis on the period from 1964 to 1968, but he offers a compelling look at the emergence of disorder as a public policy issue in the late 1950s and early 1960s. National media became interested in juvenile delinquency in the mid-1950s, as movies such as *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rebel Without a Cause* painted a disturbing picture of alienated youth free from parental or social control. The topic took on a racial dimension as newspapers and magazines began to write about growing numbers of African Americans in large urban areas of the Northeast and Midwest engaging in street violence. The Eisenhower administration paid little attention to this matter, but the Kennedy team enthusiastically plunged into a flurry of activity. John F. Kennedy established a Commission on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime, and signed the Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offenses Control Act, while his brother Robert launched a special delinquency program at the Justice Department. More important, the Kennedy administration crafted an intellectual legacy from which Johnson and his aides would

draw in conceptualizing the Great Society. Youth violence, according to these policymakers, stemmed not from individual moral failings or broken families, but rather a lack of opportunity to fulfill middle-class aspirations. The solution—using government to open up educational and economic avenues for advancement—seemed obvious. Some scholars looking for the roots of the Great Society have emphasized Johnson’s personal sympathy for the less privileged and his need to identify an issue and make it his own to establish himself as a legitimate president. Others claim that the Great Society stemmed from the desire of liberal Democrats to buy off African-American voters, or the enormous confidence of social scientists in their ability to remake the world. In stressing policymakers’ worry over urban disorder, Flamm adds an important and underappreciated variable to this debate.

Crime surged to the fore of public debate in 1964 as both George Wallace and Barry Goldwater sought to use the issue to undermine Johnson. Running in the Democratic primaries in the North that spring, Wallace shamelessly exploited white working-class fear of crime. “If you are knocked in the head on a street in a city today, the man who knocked you in the head is out of jail before you get to the hospital,” he declared (quoted, p. 35). Such rhetoric propelled him to strong showings in Wisconsin, Indiana, and Maryland. That summer, race riots broke out in Harlem, Rochester, and New Jersey. Violence, the Johnson campaign worried, was the one issue that could cost the president the election. Goldwater tried to capitalize on voter anxieties that fall by attributing the rise in violence to the welfare state’s undermining of personal responsibility and liberals who were, he claimed, “concerned over the criminal and careless for his victims” (p. 42).

Johnson largely avoided a direct debate over crime and coasted to an easy victory, but events over the next four years proved him prescient about the political dangers the issue posed for liberal Democrats. The president helped dig his own (and liberalism’s) grave in announcing a War on Crime in the fall of 1965. He won congressional approval for the Law Enforcement Assistance Act and established the Presidential Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice. Like the War on Poverty, the War on Crime drew fire from both conservatives and leftist radicals. The former criticized it for ignoring the role of recent Supreme Court rulings protecting the rights of the accused and for having too much faith in government’s ability to solve problems, while the latter blasted it for offering timid solutions to the social roots of crime and for avoiding the problem of police bru-

ality. Moreover, as Flamm astutely notes, the War on Crime elevated the issue in importance, thus giving Johnson’s enemies a target and raising public expectations to a level that could not be met.

Flamm explores how the crime issue played out locally as well. He chronicles how Ronald Reagan rode the issues of the 1965 Watts riot and ongoing trouble at Berkeley to win the governorship of California. Fear of crime was also evident during the fall of 1966 in the successful effort to repeal a civilian police review board in New York City. The board’s opponents played upon gender anxieties in distributing a poster showing a woman exiting the subway system into a dark and deserted street; the caption read “the Civilian Review Board must be stopped! Her life ... your life ... may depend on it” (p. 76)! In an ominous sign for the Democrats, support for abolition was solid among Jews and white working-class voters. Worse, the law and order issue resonated strongly with voters in areas where crime and unrest were not prevalent. Many whites were not yet ready to jump to the Republican party, but they were having more doubts about Democrats.

The racial unrest of 1967 dealt crippling blows to the Johnson administration. The riot in Detroit, a city widely believed to be making solid progress in dealing with racial tensions and other social ills, especially took the administration by surprise. Some officials assumed a nefarious conspiracy was to blame; others, such as Attorney General Ramsey Clark, found this explanation unconvincing. A sense of frustration pervaded the White House. “We talk about the multitude of good programs going into the cities, and yet there are riots, which suggests that the programs are no good, or the Negroes past saving,” observed presidential aide Harry McPherson (p. 94). Attacks from conservatives and radicals on the Left mounted, as each contended that liberalism was contributing to social chaos. Liberals weakly responded by first trying to claim that statistics showing a rise in violent crime were misleading and by pointing out that white-collar crime (“crime in the suites”) was also a serious matter. They continued to talk about root causes. Those points had varying degrees of intellectual merit, but a public increasingly afraid to walk the streets at night had little patience for such arguments. Liberals, Flamm convincingly maintains, were too wrapped up in a rational analysis of the problem. They underestimated the depth of raw emotion on this issue and were unable to craft a clear voice to address very real fears. In contrast, conservatives connected with voters emotionally through the direct language of law and order.

Johnson tried to gain control of the issue by naming the Kerner Commission to study the causes of the riots and offer solutions. This effort failed badly when the Commission submitted its report in the spring of 1968. Instead of building support for the Great Society, the Commission went well beyond Johnson's expectations. Citing white racism as the central cause of the problems, the Kerner Commission called for massive new government spending, much more than Johnson, who had made Vietnam his chief priority, wanted to allocate. Thanks to strong research in primary material from the Johnson Library, Flamm weaves a compelling story of an administration coming apart.

Liberalism's travails, of course, were on full display in 1968. For Flamm, a growing concern for law and order formed the decisive factor behind Richard Nixon's victory that November. Voters, Flamm maintains, perceived little or no difference between Humphrey and Nixon on the Vietnam war, but they saw a huge gap on law and order. Wallace once again helped force the issue onto center stage, and so created a golden opportunity for Nixon. The Republican nominee could occupy a middle ground between Humphrey, whom voters found too weak on law and order, and Wallace, whom many considered too punitive. Like Johnson before him, Humphrey was trapped between a broader public fed up with social chaos (a Harris Poll reported that 66 percent of the public approved of the way the Chicago police handled protesters at the Democratic convention) and the Democratic base, which continued to call for more spending on social programs. Humphrey tried to bridge the gap with an "order and justice" theme, but that approach fell flat. Meanwhile, Nixon regularly attacked the Supreme Court and the attorney general, insisting, "Let us recognize that the first civil right of every American is to be free from domestic violence" (pp. 177-178).

Other examinations of the political history of the 1960s have noted the importance of law and order, but Flamm is the first to place it center stage. He not only presents a wealth of information about the evolution of this issue, but his interpretations are sensibly balanced. This is most evident in his careful treatment of race. Conservative claims that race was peripheral or not related at all to law and order, he shows, are unconvincing. Many in the Goldwater campaign knew full well the racial implications of law and order rhetoric and the film *Choice*, which included images of rioting blacks. At the same time, Flamm wisely rejects a reductionist view that any concern over civil unrest was tantamount to racism. Many African Americans, after all, were deeply worried

about crime as they were most likely to be victims of violence. One could support racial justice while also expressing opposition to rising violence. While acknowledging the role of race as a critical variable in the era's politics, Flamm distances himself from works by Thomas Sugrue and Thomas and Mary Edsall. These authors, he contends, overstate the role of race in liberalism's demise and underplay the significance of the broader theme of security. Race and security overlapped, but they were not identical.[1]

Gender was also an underlying issue. Conservatives frequently couched the virtues of law and order in language of male protection of females and children. The Nixon campaign, Flamm points out, ran an ad showing a white woman walking down a deserted street while a male announcer relayed crime statistics. Flamm makes effective use of campaign commercials to illustrate this and other points throughout the work.

He also strikes a nice balance in focusing on both the demise of liberalism and the rise of conservatism. Flamm shows how Johnson, Humphrey, and other Democrats struggled in vain to manage the issue. He appropriately criticizes them for numerous failings, but at the same time emphasizes the underlying "solidarity of conservatives, who capitalized on a climate of crisis and turned the politics of street crime to their lasting advantage" (p. 125). In looking so closely at Goldwater, Nixon, and other Republicans, Flamm offers a strong complement to the rapidly expanding list of works exploring the rise of conservatism in the 1960s.[2]

Law and order largely retreated from national debate for much of the era from the 1970s through the 1990s, but it remained central in state and local politics as Republican governors and mayors, such as Rudolph Guiliani, vowed to get tough on crime. Flamm provocatively concludes his work by suggesting the centrality of "security" to national politics since the 1930s. The New Deal offered economic security, while World War II and the Cold War made external enemies the chief threat to Americans' safety. The 1960s witnessed a return to a domestic emphasis, but, after a couple of decades in which security slipped to a secondary role nationally, it made a dramatic and surprising return with the attacks of September 11. Mugging or car theft is not the same as a terrorist attack, of course, but, thanks in part to events from the 1960s, Karl Rove, George W. Bush, and other Republicans could tap into a deep reservoir of public doubt about the Democratic Party's ability to keep citizens safe from harm.

This book will be of interest to anyone who teaches

and/or writes about the politics of the 1960s. It deepens our understanding of the era, and will spark heated discussion on a wide range of controversial issues which continue to resonate in contemporary politics.

#### Notes

[1]. Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); and, Thomas and Mary Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1991).

[2]. See, for example, John Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Mary Brennan, *Turning Right in the Sixties: The Conservative Capture of the GOP* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Matthew Dallek, *The Right Moment: Ronald Reagan's First Victory and the Decisive Turning Point in American Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2000); and, Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

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