

Volume 7

4/29/71  
L. L. L. L.

## WHITE-COLLAR CRIME

There is a kind of crime often committed in America today that adversely affects our country's well-being. It does our nation more harm than crimes of violence do, than civil-disobedience does, and than those crimes such as breaking and entering and robbery do. It is a type of crime that acts like a cancer—a crime that is like a malignant growth that feeds upon healthy cells until the whole body is corrupted and destroyed. The kind of crime I'm talking about, of course, is "white-collar crime." Its main elements are fraud and embezzlement, income-tax evasion, corruption of public officials and illegal securities transactions.

The sly and deceiving character of this crime undermines the basis of our American way of life. This makes it more dangerous and more harmful than any other criminal act. Yet it is a kind of crime hardly ever thought about by campaigners for law and order, because it is not spectacular. Unfortunately it is far too often accepted by the public and taken for granted, even though it is a disease that may someday destroy this nation. In this respect, white-collar crime is like treason. It eats away at America like a fifth-column of enemy agents and ought to be viewed as seriously as crimes against our national security are.

It is also a difficult kind of crime to explain, for it is always committed by people who have enjoyed the benefits of our society to a

greater extent than most other people have. Why such people should turn against our society and undermine its basis is difficult to understand, for white-collar criminals are usually well-educated, well-to-do, and respected in their communities. They are hardly ever needy individuals, and their criminal acts can be explained mostly as the consequence of personal greed or bad judgment.

Since you young men and women are interested in law and legislation and the well-being of our land, I want to call your attention to this kind of crime and its seriousness. In our society, it is generally ignored even though it is a great evil. Yet the way our legal and judicial systems treat it is especially harmful to our American way of life. White-collar criminals are usually socially prominent people who hold good paying jobs, who own property in the best parts of town, who are regular church goers, and who are often active in civic and charitable affairs. As prominent persons they can afford the best lawyers and long drawn-out legal battles involving appeals which turn on sophisticated points of law. When these appeals do not bring an acquittal on some legal technicality, the sentences judges impose are often ridiculously light in proportion to the seriousness of the crime. Let me give you a few examples.

Two men were recently convicted of fraud and embezzlement of more than six-million dollars. The offenses they committed included in addition false pretense, forgery, corruption of public officials, abortion, using a motel for illegal purposes, and sex offenses. One of these men received a suspended three-year sentence; the other seven to ten years.

But about the same time, a Negro man age thirty was convicted of

burglarizing a hundred-and-forty-dollar television set. He received a life sentence.

A life sentence for one hundred and forty dollars, and merely seven to ten years for more than six million. Surely justice has gone astray. And these are not isolated cases.

Let me give you some more examples:

A prominent attorney was recently convicted of embezzling one-hundred-and-eighty-six-thousand dollars from an estate. He received a suspended sentence provided he restore the money.

But recently, two teen-age defendants were found guilty of stealing at knife point ten cents from two Junior High School students. One of these defendants was sentenced to two years; the other six.

Six years for ten cents and not a day for one-hundred-and-eighty-six thousand dollars. Incredible, isn't it?

Again, let me repeat that these are not isolated cases. I can give you other examples that indicate that a pattern of such injustice exists. Let me give you two more.

A deputy tax collector embezzled more than seven thousand dollars from his county's tax funds. When convicted, he received a suspended sentence provided that he restore the money and pay for the audit his arrest necessitated.

But a young Negro male, convicted of possession of a small amount of marijuana, was sentenced to three to five years in prison.

Three to five years in prison for the possession of marijuana, but not a day for the theft of more than seven thousand dollars!

Is it any wonder then that so many of our poor and underprivileged

citizens have lost faith in our system of justice. It does not afford them equal treatment under the law. There does indeed appear to be a double standard of justice. And this double standard is destroying the greatness of this nation.

While the poor man is sometimes abused by our police, the policeman is often bought-off by the white-collar criminal. Our tolerance of such actions has bred disrespect for our police in general, not only for the corrupt policeman.

While the poor man usually receives a harsh sentence for a minor crime, the white collar criminal often receives a light sentence for a crime that tears at the fabric of our society. Our tolerance for such sentencing has bred disrespect for our judicial system, not merely for the judges who perpetrate this kind of thing.

And while a poor man will have his income tax forms audited at the slightest hint of underpayment, the white-collar criminal often pays no income tax at all. And this has bred disrespect for our whole way of life, for our nation was founded for the good of all the people and not just for the good of the advantaged.

If we are to stem the tide of such disrespect for our police, our courts, and our way of life, we must see that the white-collar criminal is given the punishment he deserves. And you young men and women, as the future leaders of our society, must shoulder the burden of this reform. So let us ask what you can do to save America from this insidious disease. First, you can vow not to become white collar criminals yourselves. Many of you have no doubt vowed not to add to the pollution crisis our technological

society faces. You must now vow to take your responsibilities to society seriously and vow not to become white-collar criminals.

Second, when you become prominent and respected leaders in your communities, you must vow not to tolerate the white-collar criminal in your midst.

Once he has been proven guilty, you must treat him as you would any other criminal. You must not condone his actions because you run in the same social circles, live in the same part of town, go to the same churches, or because your children are friends of his children.

Third, when you become leaders in business and industry, you must set the tone of your companies and corporations and make it known that you will neither tolerate nor condone white-collar crime.

Fourth, when you become voters, you must vow to remove from office any officials who perpetuate this scandle in our society.

And fifth, when you become elected officials yourselves, you must wage a constant war on the white-collar criminal.

In these ways, you can help defend America from her enemies within and help preserve this great nation of ours.

As young leaders of our society, you and your generation have recognized better than your elders that our nation's priorities need to be reordered. I am suggesting that we must also reorder our priorities in the arena of criminal justice. Years ago, when our society was simpler, assault was the most serious crime that a criminal could committ, because it endangered a person's life. In today's complex society, however, the most serious crime is white-collar crime, for it endangers our nation's life. In reordering our priorities therefore, we must treat white-collar

crime as it deserves to be treated. We must attach to it penalties equal to the degree of danger that it presents, and we must treat it with the contempt it deserves. Since my generation has not done it; if it is to be done, yours must, and I urge you to lead this battle in the way in which you are leading those other battles to reorder our nation's priorities. I know that this battle must be won, I think that it can be won, and I hope that you will wage and win it. America's greatness is at stake, and you are tomorrow's guardians of that greatness.