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**CAMPAIGN FOR AN EFFECTIVE CRIME POLICY
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**REMARKS OF STEVEN HOLMES ON
MEDIA, POLITICS, AND PUBLIC OPINION**

ACQUISITIONS

Thank you Oliver. I have been asked tonight to emerge from my accustomed obscurity to address crime, media and politics.

These are big subjects, and ones that I approach with a measure of trepidation. But they are also subjects that I have dealt with in some form or fashion - both professionally and personally - for years.

From my first journalism job as a police reporter in Yonkers, New York, to covering legal issues as a Supreme Court reporter for Time Magazine, to writing about demographic trends and race relations with the New York Times, the issues of crime, how the media deals with it and how politicians sometimes exploit it, have never been far off my radar screen.

But beyond professional considerations, crime and violence have also touched my life in ways to make examination of the issues more than a mere academic exercise.

Don't get me wrong. I am not trying to convince you I am another Nathan McColl, The Washington Post reporter who served time in prison. I have never had any run-ins with the law, unless you count the time last year when two undercover D.C. cops busted me for eating a bag of peanuts in a subway station.

I wondered how I would explain to my daughter that her Dad has a record for felonious munching.

Still, I have seen a cousin, whom I grew up with, become an I-V drug abuser, serve time in prison, and die this year of AIDS. I recall the horror several years ago when my sister-in-law called me to say my brother had been shot during a street corner robbery attempt in Brooklyn. Fortunately, he was not seriously hurt.

As a student, I put myself through college by driving a taxicab in New York City. And I still vividly recall my fear as I stared into the barrel of a gun and heard the voice of a person who I thought was an innocent passenger hiss at me, "Give me your money, NOW!" I also remember my frustration with the police who seemed powerless and, to me, nonchalant - about trying to catch the "perp" who held me up.

The point of these examples is not to impress you with my bona fides as some kind of working class hero. Rather, it is to say that issues of crime are ones that I have pondered for some time and that I welcome the opportunity to address.

For the past year - and it's been almost exactly a year - the country has been in the throes of one of its periodic paroxysms about violent crime. News shows have bombarded us with the latest outrage. Politicians vie for the opportunity to show who was the toughest. During the recent campaign, I saw so many police officers in commercials that I felt that really the best way to fund police departments was to have all officers join actors' equity.

Yet if the proverbial man from Mars suddenly dropped down in the U.S. he would wonder, what the heck is going on? Sure crime is bad, but hasn't it been worse? Aren't crime rates going down?

Given the current environment, one would never think that the murder rate has been relatively flat for years. That the number of violent crimes in 1992 was almost exactly the same as it was in 1981. That there were only about 1,400 more rapes in 1991 than there were in 1973 - an astoundingly small increase when you consider the impact the women's movement had on making police and prosecutors more sensitive to rape victims and on empowering more women to report that crime.

Given what seems to be a disconnect between prevailing public attitudes and the reality, it seems to me that the fact of crime, politicians and the media have combined to create the old physicists' dream: A perpetual motion machine. You start with the raw material which is the fact that violent crime remains at stubbornly high levels. That gets fed into a media hungry for dramatic stories, add in politicians seeking an issue and a public that takes it all in and adds their own concerns, and you have a situation where each element fuels the other.

But why did crime rise as an issue for both the media and the public in the first place. One theory I have of that is a variation of the physicists' axiom that nature abhors a vacuum. The media and politicians abhor the lack of a problem. In 1992, the national press was consumed with a presidential campaign in which the economy played a central role - remember, it's the economy stupid?

It was for good reason. The country was just coming out of a recession, and unemployment was hovering around 7.5 percent - even higher in California and New York, two states whose experiences often drive the tone of national reporting.

But with the election over, President Clinton's economic package being passed by Congress and unemployment trending down, the national news media was bereft of a problem.

A report by the Center for Media and Public Affairs indicated the change in network news coverage of crime. Last year, the three major networks aired nearly 1,700 crime stories - nearly five stories a night - a total that was nearly double the number of crime stories of 1992, and triple the number of murder stories the year before.

Most tellingly, the networks averaged 111 crime stories a month after July, up from 66 a month in the early part of the year when the attention was on economic news and the Clinton Budget Plan.

Polls conducted by the New York Times and other news organizations document how much public concerns towards crime increased as the economy improved and network news coverage of the issue increased.

In a New York Times-CBS news poll conducted in January, 1993 respondents were asked an open-minded question: What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?

In January of that year, only one percent named crime and violence, ranking the issue lower than the economy and jobs, the deficit and health care. By November, as the economy improved, the percentage of people listing crime as the number one problem had risen to 16 percent.

Meanwhile, 42 percent cited the economy and jobs as the most pressing issue in January, 1993. By November that percentage had slipped to 30 percent.

But if the increased crime coverage by the network news and increased economic security had helped push crime onto the front burner, another part of the media makes sure it never goes away. And that is the 11 o'clock news.

First we have to realize the incredible power of the late local T.V. news. It is by far the most heavily watched of all news programs. Neilson ratings from 1992 indicate that the late local news has a greater audience share than the early news in such major markets as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas, and Houston.

The reason for this is simple: potential viewers are not bogged down in rush hour getting home, or eating supper with their families. Also people have spent the evening watching "Seinfeld", or "ER" or "NYPD Blue" and will stay in front of their T.V.s for no other reason than to find out what the weather will be the next day or to get the late sports scores.

So what do these millions of viewers get when they tune into the late local news? In one sense they get the same thing they get from all newscasts - news generated by government institutions.

There is a difference though. When the early news concentrates on what government institutions do, they often lead with stories generated by a city's mayor or city council, or school board or even the governor or the state legislature.

But like any business, Government, for the most part, closes down after six o'clock, thus generating little news for the late broadcast. There is, however, one governmental institution that is still open, generating fresh stories that can lead the late news - the police.

For local news operations, finding fresh items for the late news is simple - just listen to the police scanner, and dispatch a crew to the most recent act of violence.

A recent late broadcast in Washington to me is illustrative. This happened to take place on November 7th on WRC, the NBC affiliate in Washington, but could easily have been almost any late news, on almost any night in almost any city.

First news item: Two men found shot in a car on Capitol Hill.

That was followed by a story of three people (two men and a woman) found shot to death in an apartment on Capitol Hill.

Third story: Man arrested for kidnapping and assaulting a six year old boy.

Next item: A rapist operating in Fairfax County spurs police to hold self-defense classes for women.

Next item: A new self-defense item - a spray that incapacitates an attacker and marks him with indelible dye hits the market.

Next item: Susan Smith, the woman who confessed to killing her two children in South Carolina, is considering an insanity defense.

Next item: The latest from the O.J. Simpson murder trial.

Finally a commercial. But I have to admit by this time, I'm scared to leave my den and walk to the bathroom.

Sitting in their living rooms watching the late news, is it any wonder the general public feels that crime is out of control?

But the emphasis on crime stories on the late local news does more than frighten the bejeezus out of viewers. It also contributes to deteriorating race relations and a feeling that crime is a problem caused by "them," with the "them" being black people.

Now I want to be clear on this. I am not of the view that the problem is simply that news organizations are run by a bunch of racists hell-bent on portraying blacks in the most negative light. But it is an inescapable fact that while crime rates have remained stable or declined among the population at large, as you have heard during this conference, they have skyrocketed among the black urban poor. So what we have is less a problem of racism and rather the results of the fact that local news operations are in big cities where reporters and camera crews don't have to travel very far to get pictures of the carnage. And by the way to broadcast those images to predominantly white suburbs.

Indeed, I often think that one day I will hear during a commercial break of "Roseanne," a promo for the upcoming news show that goes something like this: "Police investigating a double murder. Blacks at 11."

But if the retreat of the economy as a major concern, the increase in crime stories on the network news and the continuing glut of murder and mayhem on the late local news laid the groundwork for the current panic over crime, I believe the issue took off after events that occurred within a week of each other last December.

On December 4th, 1993, searchers found the body of Polly Klaas, the 12-year old Petaluma, California girl who was kidnapped during a slumber party at her parents' home. Three days later Colin Ferguson, a deranged man, opened fire on commuters on a Long Island Railroad train, killing five and wounding 18.

If, as some feel, the death of University of Maryland basketball star Len Bias of a drug overdose fuelled the war on drugs, these two crimes had an enormous impact on both the public and the political environment.

Again let's look at the polls. In September, 1993 - three months before the Polly Klaas and Colin Ferguson events - 15 per cent of those responding to a poll conducted by the Times-Mirror Center for People and the Press cited crime as the most important issue facing the country. In December after these two crimes, that percentage jumped to 25 percent. For the first time, concerns about crime equalled worries over the economy. The two issues have remained neck-in-neck ever since.

I feel it was not just the brutality of the two events that caused them to have such an impact. I sense that the two crimes tapped into a deep feeling of powerlessness that many Americans feel. Consider this: even with a reviving economy, polls show large numbers of Americans worried about their jobs in the future. Corporations continue to downsize, the last recession showed that holding a white collar job was no longer protection against being laid off. The news is filled with stories about the long-term viability of the Social Security system, people worry if they will be able to afford to send their kids to college, or have as good a living standard as their parents - the list could go on.

And now, you have two heinous crimes that occurred not in the ghetto but where people tend to feel safe. A child is taken from a parents' home when one of the parents was actually there, asleep in another room. And the Long Island Railroad commuters were coming home. They had already made it through another day in the unsafe city.

I believe it was these factors that fed into a feeling that even if crime is isolated in poor inner city neighborhoods, you are not safe anywhere, that gave these two events so much power.

And what power they had. In November, prior to these crimes, The Senate passed the Crime Bill. At the time, the Clinton Administration was not a significant player in fashioning the Bill.

After the two crimes, however, President Clinton jumped into the fray, embracing the crime issue and urging passage of the Three Strikes provision in his State of the Union Address, dispatching Ron Klain, a White House counsel and a former aide to Senator Joe Biden, Chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, over to the Justice Department to shepherd the Bill the rest of the way through Congress.

And what about the Republicans. Yes, the Senate Bill which had overwhelming bipartisan support was a get-tough bill. It expanded Federal death penalties, \$8.9 billion for communities to hire more police and \$3 billion to build more prisons and had a "Three Strikes You're Out" provision.

But look at some of the other provisions it contained: Increased drug treatment for federal prisoners, drug courts, \$600 million for alternatives to incarceration, \$400 million in youth programs, \$300 million over two years for sports and recreation programs for low-income kids; the only difference was that they didn't speak specifically of midnight basketball.

After its passage, Senator Orrin Hatch said the measure had "the right combination of tough-on-crime provisions and prevention."

I look forward to what that will bring.

So call me an optimist, but I firmly believe that despite the problems I've sketched out tonight, the next time you have someone like me stand before you, maybe, just maybe, you will not want to bury his stories but to praise them.

Thank you very much.