

Q & A with Michael Flamm, author of *Law and Order*

Q: You write that in the 1960s, a new issue known as law and order emerged at the forefront of national politics. What was law and order?

A: It was, first of all, a social ideal. Amid the turmoil and change of the 1960s, many Americans, especially middle-class whites, wanted to see a return to the stability and security of the 1950s, when individuals respected authority in the home, in the streets, and in the government. Second, law and order was a political issue that grew in popularity as street crime, urban riots, and anti-war demonstrations mushroomed across the country and fostered great fear.

Q: Why was law and order so potent an issue with many voters?

A: The main reason, I think, was because it combined an understandable concern over the rising number of traditional crimes—robberies and rapes, muggings and murders—with implicit and explicit unease about civil rights, civil liberties, and civil unrest. Law and order also reflected public concern about changing moral values, dress codes, and drug use. The issue became a virtual Rorschach test of public anxiety. What ultimately made law and order resonate was its amorphous quality, its ability to represent different concerns to different people at different moments, which conservative politicians like Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan, George Wallace, and Richard Nixon successfully exploited.

Q: What was the impact of law and order?

A: Law and order transformed the landscape of American politics. It fostered a credibility crisis for liberals, who failed to take the issue of personal security seriously until it was too late. It bolstered the populist credentials of conservatives, who were able to appeal to ordinary, working Americans. And it eroded support for civil rights and activist government. The legacy of law and order was a political atmosphere in which grim expectations displaced grand ambitions. It also brought Democratic dominance of the White House to an end and ushered in an age of Republican control.

Q: Why did law and order decline in significance in the 1970s and 1980s?

A: The decline of law and order in presidential races after 1968 was due to two main factors. First, the social landscape had changed. With new issues like Watergate and “stagflation” emerging, and old threats like the protests and riots receding, law and order lost some of the visceral appeal it had once had, although it remained a potent force in local and state elections. Second, the political context had shifted. In the national arena, conservatives like Richard Nixon soon discovered that controlling crime was more difficult than they had led the American people to believe. In a sense, then, the issue faded because it had served its purpose and because its advocates were reluctant to take responsibility for it.

Q: How does your book reconceptualize our understanding of the 1960s?

A: Until recently, our understanding of this critical period was dominated by accounts that were written by scholars who were themselves participants or actors in the major events of the decade. Now a new generation of historians, most of whom came of age in the 1970s and 1980s, are trying to restore a sense of balance and perspective. For example, what has become clear in

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hindsight is that it was conservatism – not liberalism or radicalism – that emerged from the 1960s as the dominant political ideology in America. What I have tried to do is present the 1960s as a time of countervailing tendencies in which liberalism, radicalism, and conservatism clashed in ideological combat for the hearts and minds of American voters. In the process, I have also tried to amplify the lost voices of what Richard Nixon would term “the silent majority”— those millions of Americans who were not demonstrating or protesting, who were instead working, raising families, and trying to build upon what their parents had started.

Q: What is the relevance of law and order today?

A: In hindsight, it seems evident that since the New Deal the politics of security, albeit in different forms, has dominated presidential campaigns. During the 1930s, in the depths of the Great Depression, economic security was the main concern. In the 1940s and 1950s, national security became the order of the day as the United States faced first the threat of fascism and then communism. In the 1960s, personal security as defined by law and order moved to the forefront. In the 1970s and 1980s, economic and national security returned to center stage. Only in the 1990s, briefly, were Americans able to indulge in the idea that they could transcend history and live in a world without danger.

But then came 9/11. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, twin symbols of America’s economic and military might, instantly shattered the sense of security most Americans felt. Suddenly the war on terrorism replaced the war on crime, and the face to fear became that of a Middle-Eastern, rather than African-American, male. And once again the nation faced a long, twilight struggle similar to the Cold War. Only this time the threat seemed both more immediate and more amorphous. Today, national security is personal security, and that is unlikely to change anytime soon – witness the results of the 2004 election, in which terrorism was the issue that returned George Bush to the White House.

LAW AND ORDER

Street Crime, Civil Unrest, and the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s

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