

Has violence-ridden America lost its moral compass?

Like all Americans, I have experienced times that I almost despised of what my country was doing. Somehow, in the past, new forms of hope and optimism returned. But my despair over the conduct of the nation in the past several years seems to be deepening and becoming something permanent.

The return to violence in the war against Iraq and the unbelievable national self-glorification over that victory helped to persuade me that the nation is determined to escape from reality and to avoid thinking of all those moral demands that clearly are the obligations of the richest nation in the history of the world. In addition, America is blinding itself: A vast country of 250 million people beats up a small nation, militarily and economically exhausted, and Goliath gloats.

Recently, additional bad news has confirmed my pessimistic view that America has lost its moral compass. A report issued by the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee demonstrates that in 1990 "the United States led the world in the rates of its murders, rapes and robberies."

The United States surpassed every other nation that keeps crime statistics. The murders — at least 23,300 or nearly three an hour — made the United States

Jesuit Father Robert Drinan is a professor of law at Georgetown University.



Robert F. Drinan

the "most violent and self-destructive nation on earth." The murder rate in the United States is four times that of Italy, nine times England's and 11 times Japan's.

The number of rapes is similarly vastly higher than in other nations: More than 1.8 million Americans were murdered, raped or robbed in 1990; this is the highest rate of crime in any year since the FBI began to collect statistics.

Over the past generation, the number of violent crimes has risen 12 times faster than the population. The U.S. population has grown 41 percent since 1960, while violent crimes have increased 516 percent.

These statistics do not, of course, include white-collar crimes. As violent offenses increased in the 1980s, the affluent and the federal government plundered the nation's resources and the country's financial institutions. The greedy rampage pushed millions of work-

ing people into or nearer to poverty.

Violent crimes grew partly in response to the "rip-off" engaged in by the rich and the powerful. As inner cities became disaster areas comparable to sections of the Third World, racism, poverty, drug addiction and crime were allowed to fester.

The euphoria over the war has, at least, temporarily diverted the nation's attention from the moral and social chaos in the administration of criminal justice. America invented a solution to the problem of violent crimes in the 1980s — more prisons. The more than doubling of the number of inmates in prison in the 1980s has unfortunately not curbed the escalation of violence and has, indeed, brought about a whole new series of problems.

Although America has always imprisoned its citizens at rates higher than the other Western nations, the numbers now in prison in the United States top all previous figures. In the early 1970s, there were 217,000 persons in prison; the number now is over one million.

This means that 426 out of every 100,000 residents are incarcerated — the highest rate of any nation in the world. The annual cost is, at least, \$16 billion.

Laws punishing criminals who use guns and drugs have been toughened so much during the 1980s that the number of people in prison in the year 2000 will be twice what it is now. Voices everywhere are calling for drug treatment instead of incarceration. Release under supervision

or probation outside of jail but with electronic surveillance.

Americans, at the moment, seem to have a desperate need to have something that will allow them to feel good about themselves. The White House has been able to make them feel proud and patriotic because their nation has bombed Iraq into a state that a U.N. team described as "near apocalyptic," which has brought Iraq back to a "preindustrial age."

Contrary to everything that I would like to think, I feel obliged to conclude that an aptitude to use violence has become alarmingly appealing to many Americans. It comes from a craving for instant solutions and quick fixes. It derives from a frustration over what America has been or should be in the world.

The proneness to violence now is at odds with the great moments in American history when its leaders wrote the Declaration of Independence, adopted the Bill of Rights, abolished slavery, created the United Nations and the World Bank, enforced the civil rights of minorities, created the Peace Corps and Europe to revive the economies of Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War.

When I am in distress over America's recent descents into violence, I remember its moral and political triumphs during the first 200 years of its existence. Let us hope and pray that a golden era of bold moral leadership still lies ahead for the United States. ■