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WTVJ'S MIAMI CRIME WAR: A TELEVISION CRUSADE

by PAUL G. ASHDOWN*

STATION WTVJ, MIAMI, broadcast sixty-five consecutive week-day editorials against Dade County crime in 1966. These editorials, supported by documentary news reports and interviews, reportedly "shook the political foundation of the State of Florida and sent shock waves rocking the underworld that were felt in the crime capitals of the world."¹

While its effects are disputable, the series well may have been television's first and most significant editorial crusade. United States Senator Estes Kefauver's widely-publicized Senate Crime Committee conducted hearings in Miami in 1950 and branded the city a "plunderground . . . for America's most vicious criminals."² A reporter at those hearings was twenty-two-year-old Ralph Renick, who broadcast the first live television newscast in Florida on July 16, 1950. Renick had graduated in 1949 from the University of Miami, where in his senior year he held the first H. V. Kaltenborn Foundation Research Fellowship to study "the theory and practice of communicating ideas through the broadcasting media or the press."³ During that year, Renick began working with WTVJ, which started broadcasting on March 21, 1949, as Florida's first television station.

In the aftermath of the Kefauver hearings, Renick reported about crime along with other news, but refrained from any commentary. Before 1949 broadcasters in Florida and throughout the nation had been proscribed from editorializing and showed little interest in complying with a subsequent Federal Communications Commission suggestion that they could begin to "editorialize with

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1. Paul Einstein, "Camera on Corruption," *The Quill* (May 1967), 12.
2. Estes Kefauver, *Crime in America* (New York, 1951), 60.
3. Ralph Renick, "News on Television" (Coral Gables, Florida, 1950), 1. A copy of this unpublished document is in the Florida Collection, University of Miami Library.

fairness."⁴ There was no tradition to encourage them, and they were reluctant to commit the necessary air time for rebuttal. Furthermore, they feared losing viewers and advertisers by becoming involved in controversies, and few stations had news departments capable of substantive reporting, or commentators capable of effective commentary. Renick, for example, admitted to the Radio-Television News Directors Association in 1958 that he "personally did not feel ready to editorialize until last year."⁵

Then when Renick finally was prepared, he made a major breakthrough. In 1957 WTVJ became the first television station to institute a daily editorial.⁶ Renick cautiously developed the editorial segment, making occasional diffident attacks against organized crime that were generally applauded by the television industry and the FCC.⁷ By 1966 Renick was in a strong position to intensify an attack on crime by capitalizing on his unique advantages as a spokesman. Contrary to the practice of most stations that editorialize, WTVJ used Renick as both newscaster and commentator. Thus the credibility he had established as Florida's top-rated newscaster in some sixteen years of broadcasting had the potential to carry over to his emerging role as editorialist.⁸

Until 1966 few, if any, television stations anywhere had attempted to conduct a full-scale editorial crusade in the tradition of the best American newspapers.⁹ There was then, and remains today (1980), considerable doubt that television, essentially an

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4. Federal Communications Commission, "Editorializing by Broadcast Licensees," 14 *Federal Register* (1949), 3055.
 5. Ralph Renick, speech at the thirteenth annual Radio-Television News Directors Association Convention, Chicago, October 16, 1958.
 6. William A. Wood, *Electronic Journalism* (New York, 1967), 62.
 7. Ralph Renick, statement to the FCC (Washington, D.C., 1959) Docket 12782; Hearings before a Sub-Committee of the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce on Broadcast Editorializing Practices, House of Representatives, 88th Congress, 1st Sess. (Washington, D.C., September 20, 1963), 424-27; "Television Raises Its Voice," *TV Guide* (April 23, 1960), 5-7.
 8. Lee W. Ruwitch, "Election Editorial: Use Only in Emergency," *Sponsor* (June 3, 1963), 65. For a discussion of the role of the editorialist, see Edd Routh, *Dimensions of Broadcast Editorializing* (Blue Ridge Summit, Pennsylvania, 1974), 142.
 9. The trade literature in which such crusades would have been reported does not show any crusades during this period. A notable exception concerns a crusade conducted by WJXT in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1966. Here too the target was municipal corruption, although the roots of the crusade do not appear to be as deep as those of the WTVJ crusade. See Michael Hornberger, "How TV Can Move a City Into Action," *Television Magazine* (October 1966), 43-61.

entertainment medium, can conduct a serious in-depth editorial crusade.¹⁰ Renick believed that a television crusade was different than a newspaper crusade and that it required intensity and a dramatic element to attract public interest. The spark was provided when the *Miami Herald* hired Hank Messick to investigate crime in the city. Messick, according to the *Herald*, "probably knows more about the underworld and their ties to dishonest officials than any newspaperman in the nation."¹¹ Messick's reputation had been built largely on his reports of corruption in Newport, Kentucky, which had been published in the *Louisville Courier-Journal*. He had also spent two years on a Ford Foundation grant investigating organized crime throughout the country. It was claimed that he had survived "numerous attempts to frame him or smear his character," and that there had been repeated threats on his life.¹²

According to Messick, in Miami, "Almost every racket known to man was operating. . . . Corruption was nearly complete. Anything and almost anyone was for sale."¹³ Dade County was ranked as the third most crime-ridden community in the nation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in statistics released in July 1966.¹⁴ Renick reported that justice department officials had stated in 1964 that Miami was "totally corrupt."¹⁵ A grand jury subsequently concluded that "the public reports of systematic and regular collection of money from gamblers, prostitution operators and operators of other forms of vice were in fact more widespread

10. Victor H. Bernstein, "TV Editorials: How Brave & Free?" *The Nation* (September 4, 1967), 170-73; Dan Rustin, "TV Station Editorials: Why Are They Suffering from Advanced Innovation Malnutrition?" *Television/Radio Age* (October 15, 1973), 26-62; Peter M. Sandman, David M. Rubin, and David B. Sachsman, *Media, An Introductory Analysis of American Mass Communications* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1972), 288.

11. *Miami Herald*, April 1, 1966.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Hank Messick, *Syndicate in the Sun* (New York, 1968), 8.

14. United States Department of Justice, *Uniform Crime Reports for the United States, 1966*, 78-90. The Federal Bureau of Investigation cautions that these figures are subject to wide misinterpretation. Crimes may be unreported, or the figures tampered with by officials to make law enforcement agencies appear more effective than they actually are. Also, the figures lump together all crimes and do not differentiate among serious offenses, or offenses that might relate directly to organized crime. The figures do serve as a general indicator of the security of a community.

15. *Miami Herald*, September 14, 1966.

and upon a far greater scale than had been indicated by the reports which brought about the investigations."¹⁶

Moreover, there was an undercurrent of lawlessness in the city during the period that had to do with narcotics trafficking and the political disturbances in the Caribbean. Messick colorfully characterized the period: "Miami in the sixties was very much like Casablanca in the forties—a city full of stateless men and women, soldiers of fortune, spies and secret agents, con men of all persuasions, and even a few patriots."¹⁷

Messick's reports revealed a complex pattern of bribery relating to the sheriff's office, within the context of Dade County's new metropolitan government. After "Metro" was created in May 1957, Dade County's elected sheriff, Thomas J. Kelly, fell out of favor with County Manager Irving G. McNayr, who, under the Metro charter, had authority to appoint a new sheriff. In 1963 he selected Talmadge Buchanan, a high-ranking aide to Kelly. Then Kelly was able to promote a Metro charter amendment that would again make the office of sheriff elective.¹⁸ Buchanan resigned as appointed sheriff in December 1963, to run against Kelly, and he defeated him.

Roy O'Nan was a "political adviser" both to Kelly and Buchanan. In this capacity, he said that he "was involved in their political campaigns and, being on a close level, on a close association personally with them, I was in the position to advise them on their political strategy. And not only just campaigns, but what was going on at that particular time also."¹⁹ O'Nan had once owned a drug store in North Miami and employed Renick as a soda jerk when Renick was seventeen. O'Nan had also served as president of the North Miami Chamber of Commerce. After Buchanan became sheriff again, O'Nan threatened to talk to a Dade County grand jury investigating allegations of bribery in the sheriff's office.

On January 15, 1966, three days before he was to testify,

16. *Final Report of the Grand Jury, Circuit Court of the Eleventh Judicial Circuit of Florida, for Dade County, Spring Term 1966.*

17. Hank Messick, *Of Grass and Snow: The Secret Criminal Elite* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1979), 51-52.

18. *Dade County vs. Kelly*, Fla., 99 So. 2d 856; *Dade County vs. Kelly*, Fla., 153 So. 2d 822.

19. "The Price of Corruption," broadcast on WTVJ, September 6, 1966. Copies of all WTVJ editorials are in the station's files and were made available to the author by Ralph Renick.

O'Nan was nearly murdered in the parking lot of a Hialeah liquor store in which he had an interest. Two or more men in a late model blue car pulled in front of O'Nan's vehicle about 3:50 a.m. and shot three bullets into the windshield. O'Nan escaped by diving through the open door to the pavement. "This was for real," O'Nan said. "They were professionals. They were trying to kill me."²⁰

O'Nan was placed under guard at his Miami Springs home, and he later testified against Sheriff Buchanan, who was indicted on April 19 on charges of lying about a \$25,000 campaign contribution. The sheriff was then suspended from office.²¹ Tried for perjury, Buchanan was acquitted when a corroborating witness failed to testify. Reinstated as sheriff, he immediately fired George Leppig, who had served as acting sheriff, and Charles Zmuda, head of technical services. He claimed both had been "disloyal" during the time of his suspension.²²

Renick, who had been desultorily commenting on the situation for months, began on August 15 what was to be three and one-half months of sustained editorializing by claiming that Buchanan had dismissed both officers for "not playing politics." Renick argued that if Buchanan was "a lawman and not a politician, he will either reinstate both men and get back to the business of law enforcement or he will let both men stay fired and follow them himself in leaving the Sheriff's Department."²³ In subsequent TV editorials, Renick chided public apathy, urged State Attorney Richard Gerstein to investigate the sheriff's office, and called for grand jury action.²⁴

Lacking evidence to press the station's own investigation, Renick searched "for a person who had been a part of the operation, someone who could give credence to the reports we had been receiving."²⁵ That turned out to be O'Nan, who told Renick that he was prepared to talk publicly. Messick, meanwhile, was angry with *Miami Herald* attorneys, who, he said, "had just rejected a new series I had prepared. I was annoyed. Television would give

20. *Miami Herald*, January 16, 1966.

21. *Final Report of the Grand Jury, Circuit Court of the Eleventh Judicial Circuit of Florida, for Dade County, Fall Term 1965.*

22. WTVJ Editorial, "Ralph Renick Reporting," August 15, 1966.

23. *Ibid.*

24. WTVJ Editorial, "Ralph Renick Reporting," August 16, 1966.

25. Einstein, "Camera on Corruption," 14.

me a chance to bring material to the public and, at the same time, prove how baseless were the attorney's [*sic*] fears."²⁶

Renick began a series of five interviews with O'Nan and Messick on August 22. O'Nan explained how the protection rackets operated.

Renick: Well now, you say you were the bagman for the gamblers. Did you have any direct connection with the sheriff personally in your capacity as a bagman?

O'Nan: Yes, definitely.

Renick: Tell us about that.

O'Nan: Well, in a position that I was in which I was representing both the sheriffs in the protection business that I was involved in, in Dade County. Closely associated with them personally, socially and business-wise in this protection business that I was involved in.

Renick: Would you actually give the money directly to the sheriffs?

O'Nan: Yes . . . uh-huh.²⁷

Messick and O'Nan told of the existence of evidence linking the payoffs to a wide variety of unnamed officials in local and state government, but claimed that when some of the evidence reached the state attorney, "a great investigation was launched, which ended up, as many of Mr. Gerstein's investigation [*sic*] end up, with exactly nothing."²⁸

Rival broadcast media in Miami, "madder than the dickens because Channel Four's Ralph Renick has scooped them," accused Renick of sensationalism and claimed WTVJ had paid O'Nan for his appearances. Renick denied this charge.²⁹ He "nightly presented shocking facts, topped with lucid, hard-hitting editorials. Rival TV commentators began to scream-and to fire back with pro-Buchanan editorials. Even the late night radio 'talk' shows got into the battle. Most were anti-Messick, anti-Renick. Buchanan was live on one or the other almost every night."³⁰

26. Messick, *Syndicate in the Sun*, 219.

27. WTVJ Editorial, "The Price of Corruption," September 6, 1966.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Miami News*, September 16, 1966.

30. Messick, *Syndicate in the Sun*, 220.

Buchanan complained to the FCC, charging that WTVJ had not acceded to his demand for an "immediate retraction and apology for any direct or implied reference . . . which might tend to injure my reputation."³¹ In reply the FCC informed Buchanan: "We note that, in this case the station has made several offers to you of free time on which to express your views. Apparently you have not accepted these offers. Since this is the case, no commission action in this matter appears warranted."³²

Dramatic events continued when WTVJ newsmen, acting on a tip from O'Nan, hid in a green panel truck for twelve hours on September 26 and photographed sheriff's captain Richard Gladwell meeting with five well-known Dade County racketeers. The film was shot at a warehouse, which, according to O'Nan, was a popular hangout for racketeers and police.³³ Renick aired the film on his October 3 program and editorialized: "If such a chummy relationship can be filmed by a TV station, is it too much to expect the sheriff himself or the state attorney to check on the relationship between the police and the underworld in this town? If we could get this in an afternoon's work, just think what a continuing police investigation could have unearthed."³⁴

The crusade coincided with the state's 1966 gubernatorial campaign. Republican candidate Claude Kirk blamed his Democratic opponent, Miami Mayor Robert King High, for corruption in the city. Although Florida had not elected a Republican governor since Reconstruction, Kirk capitalized on a national political swing toward the right to run a law and order campaign. Miami offered a rich harvest of votes, and the crusade worked to Kirk's advantage. Throughout the campaign he referred to Miami as a "cesspool of crime."³⁵ Kirk charged that High had done nothing to end neighborhood crime, and had contributed to lack of morale in the police department by opposing pay raises for seven years.³⁶ "I wouldn't let my mother walk alone here at night . . . even to go to my old business office just two blocks away," Kirk told an audience at the McAllister Hotel. He promised that,

31. Talmadge Buchanan to Ben F. Waple, October 3, 1966, copy of letter in Station WTVJ files.

32. Waple to Buchanan, October 25, 1966, Station WTVJ files.

33. *Miami Herald*, October 4, 1966.

34. WTVJ Editorial, "Ralph Renick Reporting," October 3, 1966.

35. *New York Times*, November 10, 1966.

36. *Miami Herald*, September 7, 1966.

as governor, he would put pressure on Miami officials to combat crime in the city.³⁷

The incumbent governor, meanwhile, refused to act and called the problem a local matter. "If Haydon Burns wasn't a lameduck governor you can bet he wouldn't use such a lame excuse," said Renick.³⁸ Asked by WTVJ if he thought O'Nan's charges were true, Governor Burns replied: "I think it's ridiculous. . . . I don't hold that you can buy off 700 Miami policemen and 900 deputy sheriffs and the Treasury officials and the FBI. . . . If crime is as prevalent as is said by many officials including the Mayor of Miami, then it is a problem . . . and the responsibility for doing something about it is with the local law enforcement officers."³⁹

On November 4, Buchanan and several top aides were indicted by the grand jury on charges of corruption. This virtually ensured passage of an amendment to the Metro charter again making the sheriff an appointed official, and it facilitated Kirk's election.⁴⁰ Mayor High's defeat was blamed on a faulty election strategy, largely engineered by Scott Kelly, whom High had defeated in the Democratic primary along with Burns. Kelly had been angered by Burns during the primary and supported High when High was angered by Burns during the primary, and he supported High in his runoff against Burns. The High-Kelly strategy was to campaign primarily in rural north and central Florida, areas presumed to favor Kirk, while counting on a large vote in Dade, Pinellas, Hillsborough, Palm Beach, and Broward counties. But Kirk concentrated on these very counties, and swamped High in Pinellas, Broward, Palm Beach, and Duval, and defeated him in much of rural Florida. Hillsborough and Dade gave High only marginal support, and this was viewed as decisive. Other factors which lead to High's defeat included Burns's refusal to support the Miami mayor, and High's identification with Lyndon Johnson and Democratic party leaders who were being blamed for high taxes, racial unrest, unpopular Great Society programs, and the stalemated Vietnam War.⁴¹

37. *Ibid.*, October 12, 1966.

38. WTVJ Editorial, "Ralph Renick Reporting," September 7, 1966.

39. *Ibid.*, September 9, 1966.

40. *Final Report of the Grand Jury, Circuit Court of the Eleventh Judicial Circuit of Florida, for Dade County, Spring Term 1966*. See *Miami Herald*, November 9, 1966, for a full text of the Grand Jury's report.

41. *Miami Herald*, November 9, 1966.

On December 19, 1966, E. Wilson "Bud" Purdy took office as sheriff. Purdy had been an FBI agent in New York and Florida, chief of the St. Petersburg police force, and director of the Pennsylvania state police. He promised "no millenium," but reorganized and expanded the department's criminal-intelligence and vice divisions and began arresting "gambling's middle echelon," including Santo Trafficante, reputedly Florida's Mafia chieftain.⁴²

On January 2, 1967, "amid the high emotional pitch of the community during the WTVJ crime campaign," a former Army captain named Thomas L. Roberts entered the WTVJ studios carrying a revolver.⁴³ Renick was off-camera during a commercial break in his evening newscast at the time. Roberts later told police he went to the station "to make Renick read a statement over the air and took along the gun because it was the only way I'd get him to listen to me."⁴⁴ The statement was a general criticism of the nation's news media. Renick, seeing Roberts holding the gun, later admitted that, "The only thing I could think of was to dive for the gun hand." Not until the end of the newscast did Renick, shaken and breathless, tell the audience what had happened.⁴⁵ Whether or not the incident was related to the crime crusade is secondary to its probable effect on the audience. Here seemed proof that lawlessness could strike suddenly and that those who spoke against it would be the first targets. Roberts was subsequently committed for psychiatric examination.

The consequence of the crusade is open to many interpretations. After his inauguration in Tallahassee, Kirk said Florida was "faced with a threat of being enslaved by organized crime. We must wage a new kind of war, a war to save our future from mob and individual violence."⁴⁶ To conduct that war, Kirk hired the Wackenhut Corporation, a private security agency, to look for criminal activity. George Russell Wackenhut, the firm's president, hired Messick to investigate organized crime. Messick served for only seven weeks, and later wrote: "The governor had begun campaigning for the Republican Vice-Presidential nomination within seconds of his election. The crime war was a propaganda

42. *Time* magazine, "Messiah in Open Town" (April 28, 1967), 24.

43. Einstein, "Camera on Corruption," 13.

44. *Miami News*, January 26, 1967.

45. *Miami Herald*, January 26, 1967.

46. *New York Times*, February 19, 1967.

tool in the new effort." Very little was achieved, according to Messick.⁴⁷

A long fight between Kirk and the state legislature led to the creation of a Bureau of Law Enforcement that took over what was left of the discredited war on crime on October 1, 1967. Richard Nixon selected Spiro Agnew instead of Kirk as his running mate in 1968, and High died shortly after the election.

WTVJ claimed its crusade had "proved the overall effectiveness of the television editorial" which "provided the impetus for individual and community action during a critical community crisis."⁴⁸ The *New York Times* noted that "after the public became aroused at last, reform became a political football that seems, even today, to be missing what should be the legitimate goal posts of genuine reform."⁴⁹ Paul Einstein, a Miami freelance journalist, formerly with the *Miami News* and the *Tallahassee Democrat*, described the Dade County campaign in an article published in *The Quill*, official magazine of Sigma Delta Chi, the Society of Professional Journalists. Einstein claimed the crusade had international ramifications for organized crime, had virtually driven criminals from Miami into Biscayne Bay, reformed Florida government, and had crushed Robert King High's ambitions to become governor of the state.⁵⁰ *Time* magazine concluded modestly that the "uproar" leading to the indictments "was sufficient to allow reformers to win a referendum."⁵¹

Seven years later Renick examined the situation again and concluded that there was less corruption in Miami than there had been during the Kefauver hearings in relation to the size of the population. Fewer people, he said, were then involved in major governmental decisions.⁵² But in 1977 no Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area with a population above 500,000 had a higher rate of crime per capita than Miami-8,169.8 crimes per 100,000 citizens. Miami was third in that category in 1966 and 1967; crime per capita actually increased from 3,196.4 per 100,000 to 3,596.2 during the crusade.⁵³

47. Messick, *Syndicate in the Sun*, 237.

48. WTVJ pamphlet, "News is not a By-Product of WTVJ" (Miami, 1969).

49. *New York Times*, April 13, 1968.

50. Einstein, "Camera on Corruption," 12-13.

51. *Time* magazine, "Messiah in Open Town" (April 28, 1967), 24.

52. Interview with Ralph Renick, August 7, 1973.

53. United States Department of Justice, *Uniform Crime Reports for the United States, 1966, 70-90; 1967, 80-93; 1977, 54-73.*

Ratings compiled by the American Research Bureau showed that the percentage of area television households reached by the station during the editorial segment in 1966 increased from twenty-one to twenty-five per cent at 6 p.m. during the crusade while the station's chief competitor declined from twenty-two to nineteen per cent. WTVJ viewers increased from 227,600 to 258,900; its share of the audience increased from thirty-eight to forty-five per cent.⁶⁴ These figures suggest, but do not prove, that controversy increases viewership.

Any attempt by either the *Miami Herald* or WTVJ to claim credit separately or together for events that followed the crusade would ultimately fall to the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy. But certainly the attack on Renick, O'Nan's confessions, the secret filming of gangsters, hints of moral turpitude—all the ingredients of successful television programming—provided the necessary drama. The perennial fascination with evil-doers and evil-doings had been cited to explain public interest in the televised Kefauver hearings fifteen years earlier.⁵⁵

Crime in Miami is immeasurably worse in the spring of 1980 than in 1966. It may well be that crime is uncontrollable in a burgeoning international city that is a port-of-call for illegal aliens, narcotics importers, saboteurs and counter-intelligence agents, revolutionaries, weapons traffickers, and gamblers, and is a haven for the perennial commerce in human vice that usually surrounds a tourist economy. The power of any news medium to restrict such evils must always be limited, but WTVJ did establish that television could try.

54. American Research Bureau Reports, Miami, June/July 1966, January 1967.

55. Bernard Rubin, *Political Television* (Belmont, California, 1967), II.