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Governing Through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear (Studies in Crime and Public Policy)

Jonathan Simon

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Across America today gated communities sprawl out from urban centers, employers enforce mandatory drug testing, and schools screen students with metal detectors. Social problems ranging from welfare dependency to educational inequality have been reconceptualized as crimes, with an attendant focus on assigning fault and imposing consequences. Even before the recent terrorist attacks, non-citizen residents had become subject to an increasingly harsh regime of detention and deportation, and prospective employees subjected to background checks. How and when did our everyday world become dominated by fear, every citizen treated as a potential criminal?

In this startlingly original work, Jonathan Simon traces this pattern back to the collapse of the New Deal approach to governing during the 1960s when declining confidence in expert-guided government policies sent political leaders searching for new models of governance. The War on Crime offered a ready solution to their problem: politicians set agendas by drawing analogies to crime and redefined the ideal citizen as a crime victim, one whose vulnerabilities opened the door to overweening government intervention. By the 1980s, this transformation of the core powers of government had spilled over into the institutions that govern daily life. Soon our schools, our families, our workplaces, and our residential communities were being governed through crime.

This powerful work concludes with a call for passive citizens to become engaged partners in the management of risk and the treatment of social ills. Only by coming together to produce security, can we free ourselves from a logic of domination by others, and from the fear that currently rules our everyday life.

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