

Political Booknotes

It's All the Rage: Crime and Culture

Wendy Kaminer

Addison Wesley, \$22

By John J. Dilulio, Jr.

In 1994, Delaware Democrat Joseph Biden chaired the Senate Judiciary Committee as it groped its way toward a \$30 billion-plus crime bill that had something for just about everyone—prison construction firms, Mayberry-sized police departments, drug rehabilitation therapists, midnight basketball referees, and unemployed executioners. Republican ingrates said the Biden-led bill was full of pork. Untrue! As the GOP rushes to steal poor children's lunch money, they must learn the difference between pork and baloney.

The main baloney in Biden's crime bill was its "100,000 cops" provision. On average, it costs \$50,000 a year for a cop, and that's not counting the badges, blue suits, patrol cars, and pension liabilities. And with four shifts (three on, one off), non-patrol work (desk supervisory, special assignment), sick leave, days off, and training time, putting ten sworn officers on the payroll buys barely one around-the-clock beat cop.

Last August, instant analyses by conservative critics found that the bill's \$8.8 billion for police funded only 20,000 cops, but even this figure was way too generous. In reality, the bill offered only a fistful of seed money for three years. Sunnyvale, California—the city that inspired "reinventing government"—was offered \$450,000 in Biden dollars. But to meet its quota of six cops, it found it would have to spend \$8 million of its own. The city said no thanks. In February the Justice Department hustled grants for 7,000 cops to 6,600 other small cities.

Wendy Kaminer's *It's All the Rage: Crime and Culture* is at its best

exploring how America's Joe Bidens—well-intentioned lawmakers who know better—have produced such a large, ineffective, dishonest, and downright dopey body of federal anti-crime legislation. Kaminer, who worked briefly as a public defender and is now a contributing editor to *The Atlantic Monthly*, examines how over the last two decades the crime issue has turned potential profiles in courage into pandering politicians. The title of chapter seven, "Knowledge is Irrelevant—Federal Crime Control," just about sums it up. In a typically pointed passage, Kaminer writes: "Protesting the influence of politics on policy, you feel a little like Claude Rains protesting gambling at Rick's. It's hard not to be *shocked! shocked!* by the utter politicization of criminal justice debates."

Or for a more contemporary cinematic reference on federal crime policy, how about *Dumb and Dumber*? In place of Biden's oft-repeated white lie about "100,000 cops," the Contract-bound Republicans have told a whopper, namely, that the best way to "Take Back Our Streets" is by dropping a do-whatever-you-want \$10 billion grant on the states.

Knowledge, including history, is irrelevant to these folks. I hereby sentence House GOP leaders to reading the thousands of pages that have been written about the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA). Born under Johnson and buried under Reagan, the LEAA channeled billions to the states but did virtually nothing to combat crime. Block grants on crime are recipes for leaky-bucket inter-governmental administration, cost overruns, and outright corruption. I also hereby sentence House GOP leaders to a course in remedial logic; the same Republicans who clamor for block grants in the name of our third "new federalism" since 1970 (please!)

have attached tight strings to the \$10.5 billion earmarked for prison construction.

But I would offer suspended sentences to anyone who agreed to undergo treatment by reading *It's All the Rage*. In addition to her cogent assessment of federal crime policy, Kaminer devotes entire chapters to victims' rights, the death penalty, and the prosecutor's perspective on crime and punishment. With no pretense to detailed expertise on any of these subjects (the research for this book consisted mainly of selective secondary reading plus interviews, many of them with liberal crime analysts), Kaminer shows admirable frankness about where she's coming from. (She confesses, for example, that she's never been a fan of the death penalty and isn't going to start now.) She thinks out loud, writes with a refreshing, show-me attitude, and offers several keen insights.

Immanuel Kant couldn't quite square the circle of free-will-versus-determinism in relation to "justice," so no one should fault Wendy Kaminer for failing to do so, or for occasionally sounding sophomoric in addressing our "existential confusion" about who is "guilty" of what. Instead, credit her with the intellectual intuition to understand that our crime debate is irrational not merely because of the sensational mass media. Rather, our crime-crazed culture springs from the lack of any consistent criteria for deciding who ought to be punished, for what crime, how, by whom, and under which conditions.

Kaminer writes that she "felt challenged and sometimes intimidated by the wealth of research and commentary by people who've spent years studying the death penalty and litigating capital cases." I'm glad that she overcame these feelings long enough to write the book. I wish more top-

flight journalists would make such stabs. But on the death penalty and other complicated issues, I also wish she had been more careful and balanced.

For example, one would never know from Kaminer's account that between 1977 and 1993 some 350,000 Americans were murdered. Over the same period, just 226 death row inmates were executed. In 1993, about 42 percent of the nation's 2,716 death row inmates were on probation, parole, or pretrial release at the time they had killed, and 66 percent had one or more prior felony convictions. Many of their victims would be alive today had the offenders not been released from custody. Studies show that many death row prisoners whose sentences were commuted have committed new acts of violence, including murders. Most murderers in state prisons spend under nine years behind bars. As for the question of racial disparities, the fact is that over 80 percent of murders are intra-racial. Solid majorities of Americans from every demographic description favor the death penalty, not strictly as a deterrent, but for the sake of retribution. Moreover, the National Research Council found that, historically, black homicide rates have never been less than five times white rates. In recent years, black homicide rates have been over ten times white rates. Still, in 1993 about 58 percent of death row prisoners were white. Such data do not prove that post-1972 capital sentencing is color-blind. But this does suggest that capital sentencing is far less color-sensitive than Kaminer allows.

I could go through the same tutorial on prisons. Kaminer writes that lengthening prison terms has not "proven effective." Not true. Studies show that keeping violent and repeat offenders in prison longer has averted hundred of thousands of crimes. There's a mountain of evidence that community-based criminals commit millions of crimes each year (35 per-

cent of all violent crime arrestees are on probation, parole, or pre-trial release). There are site-specific tallies of how many people are murdered by parolees. And, of course, there's common sense: If we randomly released 25 percent of the prison population tonight, do you suppose we'd have more or less crime next week-end?

Still, this book merits favorable

attention. Buy a copy, read it, and then rush it off to your favorite representative or senator with the inscription, "No more silly crime mega-bills, please."

John J. Dilulio, Jr. is professor of politics and public affairs at Princeton University. His latest book (with Donald Kettl) is Inside the Reinvention Machine: Assessing Governmental Reform.

YOU can help

MEMO OF THE MONTH

*

TIDBITS & OUTRAGES

*

NEWSSTANDS & LIBRARIES

*

IDEAS & LETTERS

We couldn't do what we do without our readers. Send us the memo that drove you batty. Or that tidbit that outraged you. Check your local newsstand or library to make sure they carry the *Monthly*. Offer us your story ideas. And send us letters. We want your suggestions.

THE WASHINGTON MONTHLY
1611 CONNECTICUT AVE.
WASHINGTON DC, 20009
FAX (202) 332-8413



The Media and the Mayor's Race: The Failure of Urban Political Reporting

Phyllis Kaniss

Indiana University Press, \$39.95

By Dale Russakoff

It would be hard to find a mayoral election with higher stakes than Philadelphia's in 1991. The city government stood at the brink of fiscal ruin. It was stifling creditors, from foster parents to giant utilities. The threat of bankruptcy loomed so large that one candidate, Republican Sam Katz, scored points in a televised debate by intoning the number of days until the city was to go belly up. "Ninety-five days to default!" he said archly.

Phyllis Kaniss, assistant dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, saw that Philadelphia's 1991 mayoral race offered a rare opportunity to evaluate the performance of the local media. With a city's very survival in

the balance, she asks, how well were constituents informed on issues and candidates by the local media?

Her conclusion is clear from the subtitle: "The Failure of Urban Political Reporting." Kaniss asserts that the city's major newspapers, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Daily News*, and the three local television stations were not up to the task at hand. Her narrative also highlights some troubling aspects to the coverage of the Philadelphia race—all the more troubling, she suggests, since these foibles are not limited to the Philadelphia press.

Kaniss is at her best when painting vivid images of the race. And this was no ordinary race. Frank Rizzo, a veteran mayor who emerged from retirement to capture the Republican nomination, died shortly afterwards in the bathroom stall of his campaign headquarters. The eventual victor, Democrat Edward G. Rendell, is a captivating character in his own right.

And there's a stellar supporting cast, led by bookish financial analyst Sam Katz.

Buoyed by its personalities, the race was also an epic struggle in a city with a rich history of racial and ethnic politics. And Kaniss, with a unique perspective and a fine eye for details, has written a very readable book.

Her analysis of what went wrong with the media coverage, though, is badly flawed. She argues, for example, that local television stations cater to the flipperies of affluent suburbanites at the expense of covering the city election, often substituting "fluff" for serious reporting. Fair enough. A local station manager quoted in the book admits as much—with no regrets. But Kaniss errs in drawing a direct parallel with newspapers. Her formula—that the search for audiences in the suburbs has led newspapers to abandon urban reporting—is simplistic. Yes, Philadelphia newspapers, like papers everywhere, have broadened suburban coverage. But it will be clear to anyone who has worked as a newspaper reporter—which Kaniss evidently has not—that many of the flaws she points to have less to do with external economic pressures than with a failure of imagination on the part of reporters and editors.

Kaniss chalks up every flaw she finds in the coverage of the election to her theory of economic determinism, missing an opportunity to explore how newspapers really work and how they could be made to work better—much better—on the local level. What about the status ladder that consigns local reporting at many newspapers to the bottom rung, with "star" writers and editors assigned to the national and foreign beats? Also, Kaniss overlooks a subtle point: The very nature of newspapers is that they cannot cover everything in depth. One editor I worked for put it this way: We'd like newspapers to be floodlights, illuminating the whole community, but in fact they are more like revolving

"A tour de force"*

Presidential War Power

Louis Fisher

"This important book deserves the widest possible readership and should be compulsory reading for every Congressman and President." • LEONARD W. LEVY,* editor-in-chief of *Encyclopedia of the American Constitution*

"A lucid and thoughtful work by the nation's top authority on the separation of powers doctrine.

It's a classic." • MICHAEL J. GLENNON, author of *Constitutional Diplomacy* and *When No Majority Rules*

288 pages. \$29.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper

Available at bookstores or from the press
Phone 913-864-4155, Fax 913-864-4586
Visa/MasterCard accepted.



University Press of Kansas

2501 West 15th Street, Lawrence KS 66049