

## Editorial: Crime and Justice in the Clinton Era

Anthony M. Platt

“THE CRIME BILL HAS GIVEN US A WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE in America.... We need to stem the tide of crime and take back America for the children and for the future,” proclaimed Janet Reno in her speech to the American Society of Criminology in Miami. It was November 11, 1994, three days after the elections that brought a new Republican government to power, and I was in the privatized safety of downtown Miami for a conference. I huddled for comfort with my friends. We all felt somewhat numb, as though a *coup d'état* had just occurred, but decided to attend the keynote address by the lame duck Attorney General. She gave her usual talk of generalities to an audience that applauded whenever she mentioned anything that evoked liberalism (e.g., “prevention”) or called for more research and more cooperation between policymakers and criminologists. It was not just opportunism that created this momentary bond between speaker and audience: it was also a unity built on mutual impotence. By all accounts, Reno had long been out of the power loop, ever since the White House decided to try to out-muscle the Republicans in law and order toughness. Moreover, most of the criminologists present had been out in the cold for so long that we’ve forgotten what it’s like to have any influence over public policy.

When Bob Weiss and I developed the proposal for this special issue of the journal early in 1994, there was a debate among progressives about the Clinton administration’s crime program — concerning the extent to which political space been created for liberal and grass-roots projects, how much we should support or criticize the government, etc. Consequently, we solicited articles from a variety of commentators who had something to offer to this debate: some in or close to the trenches in Washington, D.C., with practical experience in the policy arena (such as Marc Mauer, Diana Gordon, Barry Krisberg, and June Kress); some, like Leslie Wilkins, with lessons to pass on from past involvement with governmental policies; some academic critics of the Clinton administration, the media, and progressive movement (Lynn Chancer, Pamela Donovan, Tony Poveda, Gregg Barak, and Lynn Zimmer); and some grass-roots activists (Donald Specter and Robert Perkinson).

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By and large, the articles in this issue paint a sobering, if not depressing, portrait of criminal justice policies in the Clinton era. Whereas it might be argued that in some areas of public policy (such as health care, reproductive rights, gay and lesbian rights, or the environment) the Democratic government at least opened up space for a progressive agenda, it is hard to make a similar case for the intertwined issues of crime and welfare (see *Social Justice* Vol. 21, No. 1 for a critique of the Clinton administration's policies on "Women and Welfare Reform"). Long before the New Democrats won the White House, their position on crime was indistinguishable from that of the New Right Republicans. "The simplest and most direct way to restore order in our cities is to put more police on the streets," noted the 1992 Democratic Party platform.

Moreover, as I argue in my article on "The Politics of Law and Order," the shift to the right in criminal justice policies predates the 1992 elections. Its roots can be found in the 1960s, when for the first time in 30 years the U.S. criminal justice system was transformed and the foundations of a more coercive state were put into place. The deepening racial divide and abandonment of affirmative action in the last decade have been the major impetus for more police and prisons.

We no longer need to debate how much space exists within the Clinton administration. The issue is moot and the space, if it ever existed, is gone. Now we face the long and difficult task of reconstructing a progressive/liberal/left vision that will resonate in most people's lives and experiences, a vision that can offer an alternative to the Right's very successful articulation of an authoritarian populism.

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