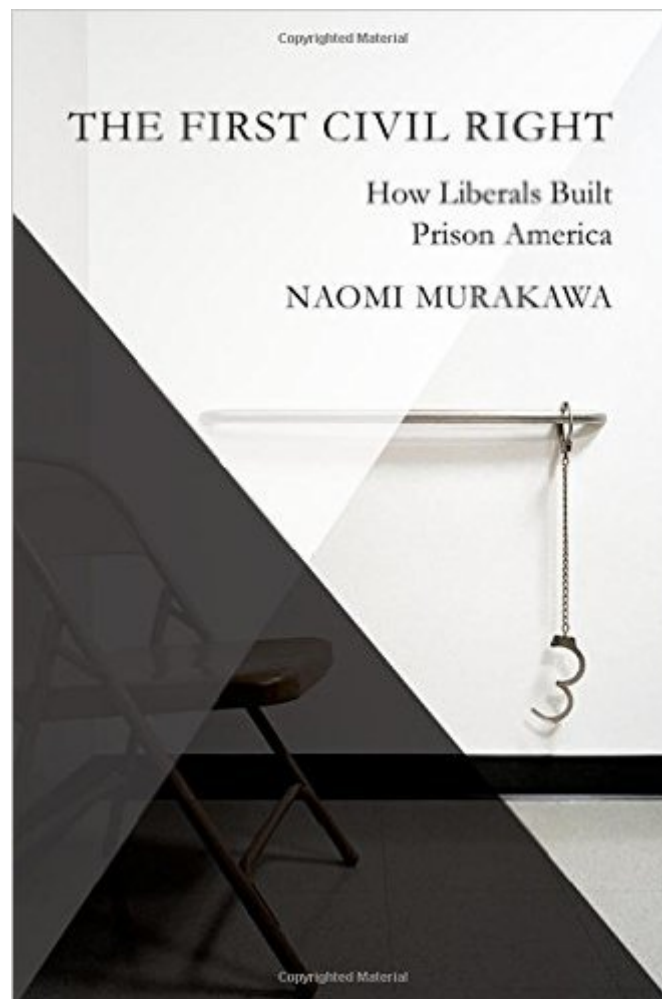


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# The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America (Studies In Postwar American Political Development)



## Synopsis

The explosive rise in the U.S. incarceration rate in the second half of the twentieth century, and the racial transformation of the prison population from mostly white at mid-century to sixty-five percent black and Latino in the present day, is a trend that cannot easily be ignored. Many believe that this shift began with the "tough on crime" policies advocated by Republicans and southern Democrats beginning in the late 1960s, which sought longer prison sentences, more frequent use of the death penalty, and the explicit or implicit targeting of politically marginalized people. In *The First Civil Right*, Naomi Murakawa inverts the conventional wisdom by arguing that the expansion of the federal carceral state—a system that disproportionately imprisons blacks and Latinos—was, in fact, rooted in the civil-rights liberalism of the 1940s and early 1960s, not in the period after. Murakawa traces the development of the modern American prison system through several presidencies, both Republican and Democrat. Responding to calls to end the lawlessness and violence against blacks at the state and local levels, the Truman administration expanded the scope of what was previously a weak federal system. Later administrations from Johnson to Clinton expanded the federal presence even more. Ironically, these steps laid the groundwork for the creation of the vast penal archipelago that now exists in the United States. What began as a liberal initiative to curb the mob violence and police brutality that had deprived racial minorities of their 'first civil right—physical safety—eventually evolved into the federal correctional system that now deprives them, in unjustly large numbers, of another important right: freedom. *The First Civil Right* is a groundbreaking analysis of root of the conflicts that lie at the intersection of race and the legal system in America.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Anyone interested in mass incarceration needs to read this book. Before this book was published, I heard Prof. Murakawa give a talk based on it and that talk is still one of the most electrifying talks I have ever heard. Her argument in the book is one that we seem to have to keep on learning: that well-intentioned liberals are a part of the problem. This book is a warning that our current focus on improving criminal justice administration through liberal reform is misguided and only bound to make criminal justice seemingly legitimate but still racially deadly. The chapter on Truman, chapter 2, remakes our understanding of law and order politics and places responsibility squarely on the shoulders of liberals and the national democratic party by revealing the failure of liberal form.

A clear, compelling and deeply researched work, Murakawa complicates the widely-believed understanding that the expansion of the carceral state was the result of conservative appeals to law and order when in fact it was a bipartisan endeavor whose foundations were laid by liberals. She shows, quite convincingly, how American fears of black people were leveraged by politicians to expand a prison industrial complex that exists, increasingly, simply for its own sake. I look forward to reading the scholarship it hopefully inspires.

Loved the critical approach to this serious issue in our country. Its easy to point the blame at others that look at the justice system as a money maker or wants to see the growth of it, but if you are against the prison system its necessary to see how "liberal" reps and views contributed to the construction of it. Knowing this will help with future decision making in the future. My only challenge with the book is that I felt the author's point was made early on in the book and there wasn't a lot of additional perspective to share, the book slightly dragged on.

A book that will stand the test of time. No matter the environment - US or Europe - we find a white majority avoiding root causes, at all cost, a pervasive double standard in hiring practices, legal outcomes, economic situation, etc to maintain white supremacy. When challenged on disparities, white supremacists always resort to the tried and true capitalist mantra, "pull yourself by your bootstrap" or "too much crime in those minority neighborhoods (black, Hispanic, Muslim)" in order to relieve themselves from having to deal with historical context. This book meticulously pieces

together the ugly truth why this is so.

An incredible study of the legal and political history of the carceral state from the civil rights era onwards that reveals how liberal conceptualizations of law-and-order and rights-based ideology undergirded the development of the modern American carceral state and its transfiguration of state-sanctioned racial violence. Murakawa forcefully and rigorously explores the development of carceral policies across the bulk of the book, leading to a beautifully written and powerful conclusion that serves as a stark warning against seeking procedural or administrative solutions to state violence. The development of the carceral state, which might seem like a paradox from the mainstream framing of civil rights era history, is rendered here a direct outcome of liberal neutrality discourse on race in the United States, where victory and failure are often one and the same for the civil rights movement. Particularly interesting was also how the role of state legitimation is revealed in this narrative -- for the state, the problem posed by the civil rights era, from on-the-ground activists to liberals to conservatives, was not racism per se, but the potential delegitimation of the state; in this view, the expansion of the carceral state as mediator of racial violence, through the interest convergence of liberal and conservative politicians, seems obvious (or at least ironic) rather than paradoxical.

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