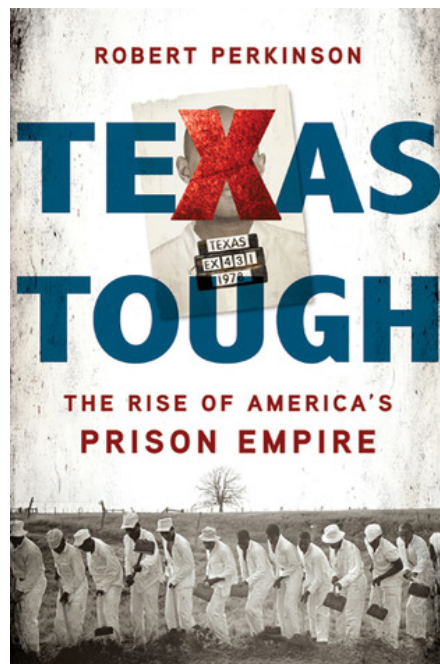




Texas Tough: The Rise of America's Prison Empire

Robert Perkinson

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A vivid history of America's biggest, baddest prison system and how it came to lead the nation's punitive revolution

In the prison business, all roads lead to Texas. The most locked-down state in the nation has led the way in criminal justice severity, from assembly-line executions to isolation supermaxes, from prison privatization to sentencing juveniles as adults. *Texas Tough*, a sweeping history of American imprisonment from the days of slavery to the present, shows how a plantation-based penal system once dismissed as barbaric became the national template.

Drawing on convict accounts, official records, and interviews with prisoners, guards, and lawmakers, historian Robert Perkinson reveals the Southern roots of our present-day prison colossus. While conventional histories emphasize the North's rehabilitative approach, he shows how the retributive and profit-driven regime of the South ultimately triumphed. Most provocatively, he argues that just as convict leasing and segregation emerged in response to Reconstruction, so today's mass incarceration, with its vast racial disparities, must be seen as a backlash against civil rights.

Illuminating for the first time the origins of America's prison juggernaut, *Texas Tough* points toward a more just and humane future.

Texas Tough: The Rise of America's Prison Empire Details

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From Reader Review Texas Tough: The Rise of America's Prison Empire for online ebook

Robert Perkinson says

I wrote this book, and I learned quite a lot in the process.

Jason Browning says

I was eager for this book to arrive so that I could learn more about the history of the prison system, particularly in Texas; unfortunately, my eagerness for this tedious, plodding book to end far surpassed this initial anticipation.

Prepare yourself for a heavy helping of the word “sanguine” (sometimes spiced up a bit, with “sanguinity”); other than this repetition, the author writes as though he held his notes in one hand and a thesaurus in another. The sentences and paragraphs throughout this work are lofty at best, but more often just obtuse and awkward. There were rarely instances of conciseness, but many instances of exposition – the author devotes several pages to a minor folk singer who spent time in a Texas prison, but largely irrelevant to prison history.

Indeed, rather than a history of the prison system, this book focuses primarily on the history of slavery and how the author feels it has been institutionalized into prisons over time. While this is an interesting assertion and indeed a part of prison history, it is one component. It is interesting that there is little of note on prison management, private prison corporations, or even the architecture and internal workings of prisons over time.

Perhaps the most interesting – and failed – component of this work is the author’s attempt to link George W. Bush and his administration to Abu Gharib. The author’s effort to connect the Texas prison system with military action at Guantanamo Bay comes across as partisan and tenuous.

The last 1/3 of the book comprises the author’s notes section, presumably in an effort to lend credibility to the tome. While illuminating at points, this book was largely a bleeding heart assessment of Texas justice and a lament of the current prison environment. If you are interested in the social policy implications of criminal justice, you may find this an interesting read. For a historical assessment and survey, I recommend that you look elsewhere.

JQAdams says

Perkinson looks to Texas as the pace-setter for most trends in American incarceration practices: mass incarceration, for-profit prisons, highly punitive rather than rehabilitative practices, and the like, all of which Texas did earlier and more aggressively than did most other states. The book thus attempts to both be a history of Texas's prison system over the centuries and to say things more generally about corrections practices elsewhere in the United States. Doing those things makes for a somewhat ungainly book, with the narrative lurching back and forth between sustained accounts of Texas and more compressed sketches of things happening elsewhere. Since Perkinson is interested in the personal experience of people involved in the prison system, both inmates and officers, the account slows down as it gets to the present and there are

more people that he can interview directly. Still, it gets through its account reasonably briskly; between extensive back matter and thick pages, it is not as long of a book as it might look.

It really could have been improved with a map or two to help those of us with a weak grasp of Texas geography, though.

Straw says

I really enjoyed the history, but felt the arguments for why the South was at the forefront of the prison movement became a little thin.

Will Corvin says

An exhaustingly comprehensive account of the many transformations of Texas's penal system. Does a great job of depicting convict conditions under each regime, and also of the political and economic considerations that propelled Texas officials toward rehabilitation then back toward punishment. I found it hard to keep track of all the individual people, and thought the ending comparison about Bush's War on Terror was a weak connection.

Angela says

A thorough, diligently-researched, thought-provoking book that anyone interested in human rights, civil rights, public policy or prison reform should read, *Texas Tough* details the history of the Texas prison system and its spreading influence in the last half of the 20th century. Perkinson explores the racial disparities and inequalities of the penal system from its early days as a profitable forced-labor stepchild of slavery to more recent increases in racial disparities among prison populations and death penalty sentencing. A long history of abuses and their changing forms over time is thoroughly treated, and Perkinson has clearly spent more time in Texas than his book has me convinced anyone should in order to interview people involved on all sides of the system. The changes that have brought us to the current system don't exactly allow the story to end on a happy note; long before explicitly stating it Perkinson shows through historical example the repeating cycle of hopeful reformation, budgetary contraction, and crisis point once the system is stretched to broken. It is of possibly small consolation that given the economic crisis, strained state budgets, and political deemphasis of vindictive sentencing, we may be about to yet again pass from crisis to reformation. Unfortunately, as Perkinson shows, the reforms don't always improve conditions for inmates or guards.

The historical focus may be a deterrent to readers expecting a broader indictment of modern prison conditions; it surprised me that the book contained so much history, but I certainly learned a lot about Reformation, Jim Crow, and the civil rights movement, so I can't fault *Texas Tough* for that. Chapters are arranged chronologically, but within each chapter, Perkinson describes developments by topic and gives each its own chronology, leading to a bit of a temporal mishmash; for example, he jumps from discussing George W. Bush to Reagan back forward through the '90s within a few pages. These jumps occur repeatedly throughout the book, and make it confusing to see exactly what the effects of major influences like the civil rights movement or the Ruiz case were, and where individual events occurred on the timeline of prison evolution. Ideologically, the narrative is not unbiased, but it's mostly balanced, admitting many of the problems that arose with reform along with those that racism and "tough on crime" politics have given us.

Discussions of the Patriot Act seem somewhat out of place, but they're only a few of the 375 pages and since George W. Bush was known for his death penalty stance as the governor of Texas before he was setting up Guantanamo and rolling back the fourth amendment, the connection is more solid than I might have thought before reading the book.

Overall, *Texas Tough* is incredibly insightful and above all informative. This is the kind of history that is rarely taught and not widely known.

Nicholas Lariviere says

A comprehensive history of the penitentiary system in the US, with the unique approach being to examine all of the historical developments from their adoption in Texas. Exhaustive and pretty depressing, there's a lot of great information about how and why the prison system has ended up the way it has, and ends with some hope of how things might improve.

Ryan Young says

the history of the last 170 years through the lens of the american (mostly texan) penal sytem. i did not know that prisons as we know them today are a relatively new phenomenon, and i did not know how horrific they were for inmates through much of that history.

prisons undoubtedly keep some dangerous people off the street. prisons undoubtedly deter some people from committing some crimes. i have oftentimes let people live only because the consequences are unsavory to me.

but such an unwieldy, costly, and in many ways inequitable system? it would be wonderful to find an alternative. one that recognizes the systemic causes of crime and attempts to reclaim individuals. of course this starts with poverty and culture.

our laws are largely a system of rules that allow 'haves' to keep 'havenots' from taking or damaging our stuff. and prisons, by and large, punish people who tried to take our stuff. that and minor drug offenders...let's not even talk about that.

in this book you'll hear about the texas political machine and its attitude toward crime and punishment. you'll read how texas executed mentally disabled people until the federal government outlawed it (IN 2004!). you'll read about lifelong convicts whose childhoods were worse than the brutal confinement they experience as adults.

personally, i feel safer with a certain class of offender in prison. but i wish for 3 things: 1, that we'd redirect some effort from punishment to rehabilitation, 2, that we'd decriminalize things like drugs and other victimless crimes, and 3, that things would just get better for the type of person who feels like he has to turn to crime in the first place.

well written, though cumbersome. informative, though disorganized. recommended for the idle liberal.

Sue says

Blech . . . bleeding-heart book whining about the fact that TX doesn't "play" in a nation that supersedes the rest of the world when it comes to lock-down and capital punishment.

Yea, well, in other countries they just KILL 'EM DEAD. Incarceration is big business--for everyone involved.

Kalem Wright says

3.5/5. Texas Tough is a thoroughly detailed and well-argued work overall. It gives readers a glimpse into competing social visions for the role of prisons in America and their evolution over time. Perkinson demonstrates how Texas's iterations were founded initially on notions of plantation labor and inherent racial difference and later on states' rights resulting in profit and power for those who held the keys. Perkinson does a wonderful job of illustrating what he calls the prison's "corrosive cycle" of crisis, reform, and disappointment and the role that prisoners played in resisting the worst abuses – classic ground-up history. His argument falters slightly as he explores the counterrevolution era – he demonstrates ably how conservatives recoded racial language into anti-crime slogans with deleterious impact on people of color yet he abandons the profit-making argument for the prison. I was disappointed that he failed to include anything substantive on the industry of prison management and its major players although I acknowledge that access to primary source documentation may be a major issue here. Also less than successful is Perkinson's inelegant charting of Bush II's ascension from Texas royalty to the presidency. Perkinson makes a tenuous connection to Bush's apparent callousness towards clemency and prisoner's human rights to the well-documented and stomach-turning abuses at Abu Ghraib. The connection as a whole seems far less effective than demonstrating, for instance, how concentrating power in the executive may have enhanced the power of the prison-industrial complex. Despite an awkward final chapter, however, I'd really recommend this as a way to learn about the colossal power of the prison in Texan history.

Buffy Weill-greenberg says

Phenomenal book. If you only read one book about the us criminal justice system, read this one.

Rob says

An interesting approach on the development and sustaining power and influence of the Texas prison system. The author takes a partisan and political stance that focuses on Texas prisons as an institutionalization of slavery. Though politics have a strong influence in corrections, prisons, and criminal justice policy and practice at the state and federal level of government, I lost interest quickly toward the final 2-3 chapters due to the author's obvious over-focus on politics. The author's position on the matter is apparent throughout, such as his criticism of one political party over another.

Patty Templeton says

OI! What a GD terrifying doorstopper. A fourth of it's weight is from the notes section and it took ten years of research to write. Robert Perkinson outlines the two beginnings of the American prison system: reformation and retribution - and retribution has out-paced its rival from the beginning. It's always been cheaper to cage a person than to teach them.

Perkinson focuses on the Texas prison system because it's the nation's largest and it set the tone of penitentiaries from the Emancipation Proclamation onward. Why teach a prisoner when you could work 'em fifteen or more hours of the day and make some money? Why let those criminals sit on their haunches staring at a wall when they could be out in a field picking cotton? There was, after all, a shortage of field workers after the Civil War.

"If a profit of several thousand dollars can be made on the labor of twenty slaves," posited the Telegraph and Texas Register, "why may not a similar profit be made on the labor of twenty convicts?" (pg 74)

"Their aim...was to adopt a coercive system of labor to replace slavery. Their instrument would be a new body of civil and criminal laws known as the 'Black Codes.'" (pg 88)

Yep, there were laws that only African Americans could break. Some were as simple as vagrancy. If a person was found to be "idle" in public they could be arrested, then fined. If you couldn't pay the fine, you were "leased" for labor until the nebulous fine was paid.

Prisoners were routinely worked so hard in Texas fields that, finally, in the 1930s they started to rebel. Rather than have to work a harvest field for twenty hours a day, some would cut their Achilles tendons so they couldn't work.

"Self mutilation is prevalent throughout the state prison system," admitted one board member. "It's no surprise to find convicts injecting kerosene or gasoline into their legs and arms..." (pg 214)

Others cut off toes, arms or legs in attempts to get out of the fields...and that was knowing that the prison hospital was near useless. There were some that even sliced their skin open and packed the wounds with lye so that they would create festering sores. Prisoners committed *"...violence against the self to spotlight the violence of the state."* (pg217) Some wardens made them try to work the fields with their newly acquired stumps.

Towards the end of the book, Perkinson's partisan bias becomes increasingly apparent. I found his thesis thin as he reached for a connection between the Texas prison system and military actions at Guantanamo Bay. But he did have thoughtful commentary on other modern day prison issues, up until this point. There are deep discussions of race, the culture of the South, civil rights and the War on Drugs.

At the end, I found myself skimming, when the overwhelming attention to detail got a bit dry, but it was a (mostly) masterful history of the American prison system.

Mike says

After spending three weeks in a courtroom, and watching our criminal justice system in action, I've become very interested, almost obsessively, in that system. In particular, something happened in 1970 or so, and the

prison population, mostly African Americans, has quadrupled since that date, after staying pretty much flat for many decades. I wanted to read (and still will) "The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness" but this book came across my desk first. It is, essentially, a history book of the prisons in the last 200 years. It is also, unfortunately, a story of how slavery was replaced in Southern states (particularly Texas) with a system of prisons that remarkably resembles slavery. Thousands of black convicts, treated like farm animals, worked in plantations under the eyes of white men on horses with guns, while the plantation owners got rich.

Like MLK, Perkinson seems to believe "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice," or at least his Conclusion seems to indicate that. However, the rest of his book hardly supports that. First, it's not an arc, more like a declining sine wave, going up and down, and the trend toward justice seems to take centuries. The language of racism has changed, but it remains very strong in parts of this country.

Barry says

Loaded with detailed facts/ checked there bibliography
