

Book Review: David J. Thomas, *The State of American Policing: Psychology, Behavior, Problems, and Solutions*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger. 2019. ISBN: 9781440860065 (Hardcover). 210 pages. \$48.¹

Reviewed by Patryk Jaroszkiewicz²

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Since the United States has a highly decentralized and complex police system, composed of nearly 18,000 law enforcement agencies that employ over one million public safety officers, it is formidably challenging to universally discuss the role of police in American society. In *The State of American Policing: Psychology, Behavior, Problems, and Solutions*, Dr. David J. Thomas provides a thought-provoking and forthright analysis of several vexatious issues facing contemporary policing, such as taboo aspects of the controversial history of American police, racial tensions with African American communities, the militarization movement, use of deadly force, and psychological barriers within the policing culture. It needs to be highlighted that not only is Thomas a 20-year, African American veteran police officer and professor of forensic studies at Florida Gulf Coast University in Ft. Myers, Florida, but also his Ph.D. in forensic psychology and a master's degree in education add a significant value to his erudite perspectives on these critical issues. Therefore, given the author's impressive resume, his expertise in several subjects within policing, and easily approachable writing style, this book has a wide potential audience. Not only students who desire to join careers within the law enforcement arena can benefit from this title, but also the current practitioners and researchers who wish

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to enrich their existing knowledge and understand certain controversial dynamics from a unique angle.

Thomas believes that current issues cannot be addressed without firm understanding of the larger context. The author begins the first chapter with the uneasy history of policing in the United States, which was initially synonymous with racism, corruption, brutality, and political connections. Thomas argues that while police evolved as an organization, particularly on matters of training and professionalism, the “psychology of oppression” is a far more complex phenomenon that is deeply rooted within the historical context. Based on that aspect, the author presents his colloquial concepts of modern racial profiling, such as “Walking while Black” and “Driving while Black,” which exemplify contemporary forms of discrimination and stereotyping. Thomas concludes with a summary of the infamous “war on drugs,” which disproportionately targeted Blacks and triggered long-lived instability among African American families.

Given the historical prelude of the opening chapter, the author reflects on how history and tradition directly influence police culture and how new officers can be ultimately “encultured into many subcultures.” Additionally, while Thomas discusses some new tools given to the Department of Justice to scrutinize police misconduct, such as consent decrees, the Collaborative Reform Initiative Program, and several internal affairs policies, he also makes an interesting and objective observation that African American communities must not display “Black hysteria.” While it may seem like a controversial concept, explained in detail in further chapters, the author notes that anecdotal arguments, which are not based on any evidence and lack credibility, should not be used as proof of police misconduct. In a similar tone, Thomas also challenges community policing and the cliché motto “to protect and serve,” as he analyzes the ambiguity of interpretation when it comes to implementation of this particular policing strategy. Rather than populist slogans that aim to build artificial partnerships with communities, the author argues that community policing must be correlated with problem-oriented approaches in order to yield effective results, which will naturally form a true relationship between the police and its constituents. Such genuine partnership is especially necessary with often isolated, yet heavily policed, minority communities.

In Chapter 3, Thomas explores various types of biases, racism, and racial stigmas within policing. While implicit bias sometimes is used interchangeably with other forms of stereotyping, the author returns to the origins of the former and provides the reader with a comprehensive

analysis of this often-misunderstood phenomenon. While Thomas acknowledges that some may view implicit bias just as a theory, the empirical research embedded in this part of the book, such as the infamous Clark Doll Experiment (1939), illustrates several dangers of subconscious stereotypes, which can sometimes lead to questionable police interactions. As the author elaborates on various stigmas from a historical perspective and describes the origins of police as “the White male club,” he concludes the chapter with women’s role in policing. As some similarities are drawn between race and gender, the overall assessment of women in policing is rather laconic and would certainly benefit from a more comprehensive review of the existing literature.

While Chapters 4 and 5 focus on a subject that is scrutinized by the public – police decision-making and use of force – the former discusses the legality of nonlethal incidents and explores potential psychological explanations for this this phenomenon. Moreover, Thomas further divides this subject into state statutes, the agency’s policies, and procedures to present the readers with the legal framework, which allows officers to use force depending on specific circumstances. The author tackles the complexity associated with defining use of force and translates the advanced legal jargon in a user-friendly manner, which ensures readability for broad audiences. Drawing from several concepts rooted in psychology, he presents numerous pragmatic explanations for use of force, as well as distinguishes between proper and improper decision-making processes. Given the author’s background, his knowledgeable perspective on such hot button issues is invaluable. Lastly, Thomas criticizes the warrior mentality prominent in today’s policing and not only associates it with poor judgment calls, but also police brutality, aggression, and use of deadly force.

Chapter 5 is probably the one that many who are not associated with the criminal justice arena will find most compelling, as Thomas thoroughly analyzes several controversial subjects of public debates, such as the use of deadly force, Black Lives Matter vs. Blue Lives Matter movements, and politically influenced incidents of racial discrimination from the past few years. This chapter is particularly enriched with several detailed case studies that aim to present the audience with different scenarios and dilemmas concerning police shootings, which are crucial aspects often omitted by the media. Similar to the previous chapter, the author focuses on not only the policies and laws guiding the use of force, but also acknowledges the presence of ubiquitous human elements in these unfortunate incidents. Thomas concludes the chapter with dissection of the aforementioned movements, in which he claims that the

so-called “war of words” on both sides continues to create division between law enforcement and the minority communities. Lastly, the author presents an intriguing analysis of certain morale-boosting symbols used by some police officers, which include items such as various Punisher skull paraphernalia and the “Thin Blue Line” flag, and he reflects on how these potentially trivial factors epitomize systemic oppression and encourage the faulty “warrior mentality” among officers.

Consequently, Chapter 6 discusses a nationwide trend of police militarization and again analyzes historical events that lead to this problematic movement. While Thomas acknowledges the dangers of policing, not only does he question the quasi-military tactics and equipment, but he also explores the psychology associated with the “us against them” mentality. Given that this phenomenon is highly visible to the public and certainly has ignited many debates, his perspective is particularly crucial, as the author worked in the field and provides readers with a participant’s expert perspective on the issue.

In Chapter 7, Thomas begins to collect the puzzle pieces retrospectively from the previous chapters and puts them into a bigger, more lucid frame of reference – 21st century policing. The author questions that some contemporary solutions within the criminal justice system can be described as “new packaging, old concepts,” which is an attempt to demonstrate stagnation within policing. He concludes that since several of the issues are systematic in nature, there needs to be a genuine change within the culture of policing, such as shift from the mentality of crime fighters to guardians.

In the final chapters, 8 and 9, Thomas provides the audience with some recommendations for effective change, yet stresses it is a complex and involved process that must involve not only law enforcement officers, but also politicians and their constituents. The author asserts that the inevitable resistance to change is an inherited problem based on several historical aspects and the overall decentralization of policing system, which enables isolationism that is particularly visible in the minority communities. Thus, honest and transparent policing emphasizing community partnership is vital to trigger meaningful change, but it is much more demanding than the commonly executed community policing approach. In the final pages of the book, Thomas encourages readers to reflect on the rhetoric presented by both sides of the equation, yet in his last paragraph, he leaves the audience on a pessimistic note.

Those who are committed and motivated to challenge the status quo in policing, bridge the gap between police and the Black community, and

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help to ignite a long overdue dialogue between both sides should certainly consider reading this book. In the current political “thaw,” this book is particularly applicable, as we can all certainly use a refresher on how to reintroduce science and evidence-based strategies to enact policies and implement change.