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Book Review

Steeped in a Culture of Violence: Murder, Racial Injustice, and Other Violent Crimes in Texas, 1965–2020

Edited by Brandon T. Jett and Kenneth W. Howell
(College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2023. ix + 266 pp.
Bibliography, contributors, index. \$45, hardcover.)

The rise in the number of mass shootings in the United States over the last several decades has led many to place blame on the prevalence of a “culture of violence” that underlies American society, exhibited in anything from violent video games to the military-industrial complex. The editors and authors of *Steeped in a Culture of Violence: Murder, Racial Injustice, and Other Violent Crimes in Texas, 1965–2020*, attempt to uncover whether such a “culture of violence” exists in Texas, by examining acts of violence from 1965 to 2020. Editors Brandon T. Jett and Kenneth W. Howell, along with their essayists, find that despite a decline in violence from the 1990s to the late 2010s, “a powerful cultural undercurrent lingers among segments of the Texas public that seems to justify or legitimize certain acts of violence in certain circumstances” (p. 16). The edited volume, although faced with the difficult task of conceptualizing acts of violence that in many cases occurred fairly recently, provides a remarkably comprehensive look at the many motives for, reactions to, and implications of violence in Texas in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Each contributor focuses on a different aspect of violence in Texas over the fifty-five-year span—homicide, intimate partner violence, anti-LGBTQ violence, racial hate crimes, gang violence, prison violence, and mass shootings. Christopher P. Haight’s chapter, “Fighting the Killing Trail,” does an excellent job of demonstrating victim agency and activism. Haight shows how gay advocacy organizations in Texas moved from fearing state violence in the 1970s and 1980s to relying on the state as a protector from anti-gay violence in the 1990s. Their sustained activism led to the inclusion of “sexual orientation” as an explicit category in the James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Act of 2001. Betsy Friauf and Michael Phillips’s chapter, “Those Boys Didn’t Learn to Hate Here” is another sobering standout. Demonstrating that racial violence in Texas has not disappeared since 1965, but has instead become professionalized in police power, the authors warn that if the state does not truly reckon with its long history of white supremacy,

racial violence will continue, as will fraught relationships between communities of color and the police.

Collectively, these essays all attest to the importance of continued research on the contributing factors and motives behind violent acts, and each one is worth reading for its in-depth attention to a specific form of violence. A chapter on the military's role in a Texas "culture of violence" would have been a welcome addition, especially given that several of the mass shooters identified in Kenneth W. Howell's chapter, "Beyond the Gun," had military backgrounds. Still, *Steeped in a Culture of Violence* is a useful resource for anyone interested in contextualizing violence in the modern United States.

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