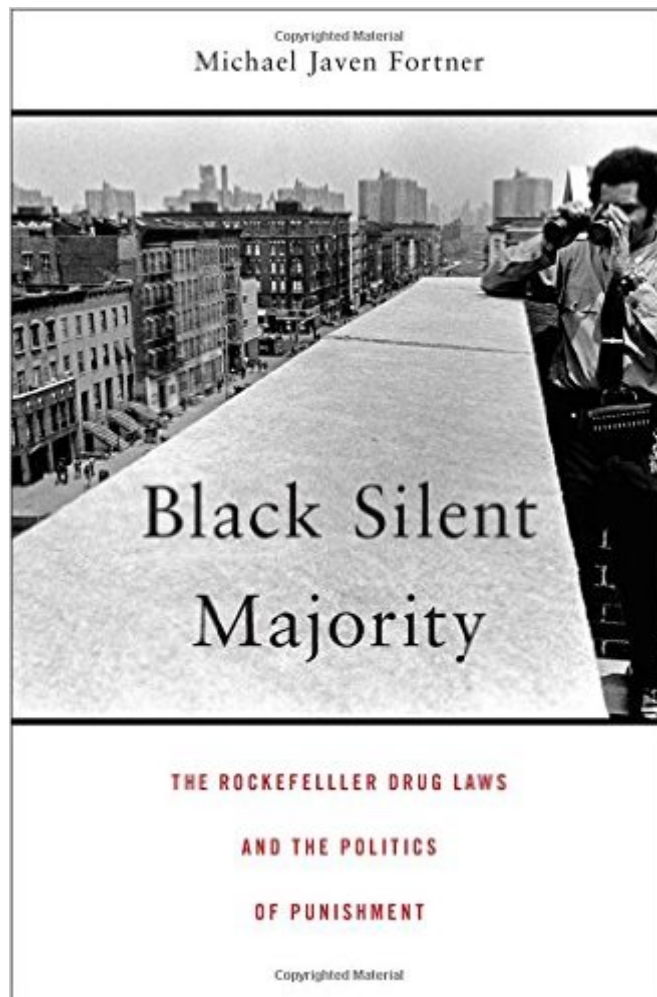


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Black Silent Majority: The Rockefeller Drug Laws And The Politics Of Punishment



Synopsis

Often seen as a political sop to the racial fears of white voters, aggressive policing and draconian sentencing for illegal drug possession and related crimes have led to the imprisonment of millions of African Americans—far in excess of their representation in the population as a whole. Michael Javen Fortner shows in this eye-opening account that these punitive policies also enjoyed the support of many working-class and middle-class blacks, who were angry about decline and disorder in their communities. *Black Silent Majority* uncovers the role African Americans played in creating today's system of mass incarceration. Current anti-drug policies are based on a set of controversial laws first adopted in New York in the early 1970s and championed by the state's Republican governor, Nelson Rockefeller. Fortner traces how many blacks in New York came to believe that the rehabilitation-focused liberal policies of the 1960s had failed. Faced with economic malaise and rising rates of addiction and crime, they blamed addicts and pushers. By 1973, the outcry from grassroots activists and civic leaders in Harlem calling for drastic measures presented Rockefeller with a welcome opportunity to crack down on crime and boost his political career. New York became the first state to mandate long prison sentences for selling or possessing narcotics. *Black Silent Majority* lays bare the tangled roots of a pernicious system. America's drug policies, while in part a manifestation of the conservative movement, are also a product of black America's confrontation with crime and chaos in its own neighborhoods.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Balanced, well researched, and informative, *The Black Silent Majority* provides a timely review of how drugs, crime, and racism intersected to affect the black middle class and lead to harsher drug laws. Currently we hear much about "mass incarceration" and its racial implications. Before we can address the subject, we need to understand it. Why did we start increasing drug and violent crime sentence length? When did it first occur? Is it all secondary to racism? If not, what other factors led to increasing incarceration of individuals, primarily those of color? Fortner's book stands out for its reasoned approach in explaining a complex history and helps us understand similar problems today. His book covers the time period from the Civil War up to Governor Rockefeller's enactment of harsh drug crime laws in New York in 1973. This information is timely for today's discussion because everything that happened up to 1973 has just repeated itself. Every issue we discuss today was discussed then. Every solution presented today, was also presented previously. What worked and what didn't? Contrast Fortner's book with Michelle Alexander's *"The New Jim Crow"*. Like Fortner, she does considerable research and outlines our racist legal history very well.

Unfortunately, Alexander cites many of the facts selectively, highlighting those that superficially seem to make her point, mainly that white racists, in an attempt to control blacks when Jim Crow laws seemed to be fading, made laws that unfairly singled out blacks and increased their sentences in order to get them off the streets. She specifically cites Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton as leaders in this effort.

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