TYRE NICHOLS, GEORGE FLOYD, Breonna Taylor, Laquan McDonald, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and a horrifyingly long list of other African American citizens have died at the hands of policemen in the opening decades of the twenty-first century. These killings reflect a century-old police practice of using deadly force against African Americans. During the decades after World War I, New Orleans law enforcers, for example, fatally shot Louis Joseph, Percy Thompson, Charles Handy, Wilbert Moore, and dozens of other African American men. Police officers during both eras beat, tortured, and killed African Americans at dramatically higher rates than whites and more often employed coercion to extract confessions, shot unarmed suspects, and deployed preemptive deadly force during arrests. These practices bred—and continue to breed—gaping racial disparities in American criminal justice, inflicting searing social and political ruptures on the nation.

Trends in police violence are not identical in the two periods, but they are chillingly similar, grounded in systemic racial discrimination. *Bluecoated Terror* explores the early twentieth-century roots of modern police brutality.1

It focuses on racialized criminal justice in the interwar South because this was a formative era for the institutionalization of such violence. Racialized police brutality was not new a century ago, though it increased significantly and assumed new forms during the decades after World War I. Before the Great War, white civilians, as slave patrollers, night riders, and Lynchers, committed the lion’s share of interracial murders, but cops rapidly supplanted them during the 1920s and 1930s.2 Every form of police violence, from aggressive searches to murders, soared and became commonplace components of urban law enforcement, forging a racial disparity in brutality that has

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**Introduction**
persisted and that roils twenty-first-century America. The rate of fatal police shootings of African Americans, for example, swelled to five times the white level during the interwar period and has narrowed but remains far higher. Thus, examining the early institutionalization of this race-based gap sheds light on modern police brutality and especially on the crucial blurring of race control and law-and-order policing. For early twentieth-century white Southerners, and many others across the nation, violent police methods for preserving white supremacy seemed justified and consistent with the rule of law. One hundred years ago, racial brutality became baked into the core operation of law enforcement and criminal justice. Echoes of this elision of racial dominance and law and order lingered long after Jim Crow waned and continue to haunt modern America.

Racial disparities in criminal justice grew rapidly in the interwar South and metastasized across the nation. These differentials became more pronounced and virulent with the modernization of the American police, the expanding authority of prosecutors, and the increasing use of prisons, rather than rough justice, to punish those perceived to be challenging racial custom and disrupting order. Before the Great War, patrolmen typically inflicted punishment on suspected criminals and suspicious individuals, clubbing them with their billies. When cops arrested suspects, grand juries rarely returned indictments and prosecutors seldom filed charges and secured few convictions. Even for the most heinous felonies, three-quarters of offenders escaped punishment of any sort. The crime surveys of the 1920s exposed the amateurish, feeble state of American criminal justice and unleashed a wave of legal reform and expansion. Throughout the nation, but particularly in the South, the municipal police quickly gained greater responsibility for controlling crime but also for managing racial order. With this early twentieth-century shift, formal criminal justice institutions became mechanisms for preserving a white definition of “law and order,” and race-based differentials in law enforcement widened. Cops, more than self-appointed white sentinels, assumed tasks of controlling criminals and African American citizens.

Early twentieth-century Southern police officers, still nearly all white, embraced a worldview consisting of a series of overlapping binaries. They divided society into crude blocks, categorizing citizens as good or bad, honest or deceitful, respectable or dangerous, orderly or disruptive, law abiding or criminal, and white or Black. Moreover, these binaries elided. According to early twentieth-century ethnographers, Southern cops believed that good
people were honest, respectable, orderly, law abiding, and white, whereas bad people were deceitful, dangerous, disruptive, criminal, and usually African American. Insisting that their mandate was to serve the needs of the first group, police officers saw African Americans as menacing, lying, violent predators, and they defended law and order and safeguarded social stability accordingly. Jim Crow reshaped the operation of the legal system when cops replaced vigilantes and prisons supplanted street justice as punishment. And policemen and prosecutors established and cemented their authority with voters, virtually all white in the heyday of disfranchisement, by preserving this racialized conception of social order and, hence, targeting African Americans.

Southern racial violence has deep historical roots, but a seismic shift occurred during the first half of the twentieth century, redefining American law enforcement and criminal justice. Police brutality emerged as the primary method of safeguarding racial dominance, rapidly supplanting rough justice. The latter did not disappear but contracted sharply. White Americans, particularly in the urban South, increasingly relied on law enforcers to buttress white supremacy. Police violence and mob violence shifted in opposite directions. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the number of lynchings plunged by 81.7 percent, while police homicide surged. In New Orleans, for example, cops began to commit the overwhelming majority of white-on-Black homicides. At the start of the new century, civilians committed nearly three-fourths of these murders. By the early 1930s, policemen killed two-thirds of African American residents murdered by white New Orleanians. In a three-decade span, the civilian white-on-Black homicide rate contracted by 70.9 percent. Interracial violence assumed a different form, for the rate of police white-on-Black killings more than doubled. Nonlethal racial violence changed in comparable ways. Parallel shifts occurred in Memphis, Atlanta, Birmingham, Mobile, and throughout the urban South. In the largest cities, with the most developed legal institutions, the transformation occurred fastest and most completely. In smaller towns and rural areas, the process was more protracted, and formal and informal mechanisms of race control overlapped. “Once the classic method was the rope. Now it is the policeman’s bullet,” a civil rights activist explained. This “present lynching technique,” according to a Birmingham observer, “has all but superceded [sic] the old method of lynching.” Police violence against African American residents became an “accepted practice,” a New Orleans writer lamented.
Reflecting the new role of the state, racial disparities in arrests, indictments, convictions, incarcerations, and executions soared as well. The toxic blend of aggressive policing and racialized law enforcement also encouraged the increasing use of force to extract confessions from African American suspects, even after the 1931 publication of the attorney general’s Wickersham Commission report ignited a national scandal over the use of sadistic third-degree interrogation tactics. These practices channeled skyrocketing numbers of African American suspects into criminal courts and then prisons, which, in turn, generated seemingly objective social-scientific evidence to support stereotypical associations of race and criminality.

Racialized police brutality became an intentional, coherent law enforcement strategy in the urban South during the decades after the Great War, no longer operating as an informal, individual practice. To be sure, some patrolmen and detectives remained especially violent, but the wider use of brutality to manage race relations and maintain an overtly racialized notion of social stability and public safety became formalized and a “standard procedure.” Police brutality assumed a central role in the preservation of “law and order.” Prosecutors, elected officials, and police leaders encouraged violent methods, while most white Southerners—and most white Americans—endorsed such an approach to crime fighting and protecting law-abiding (white) citizens. “Negroes are Negroes to police officers. All are regarded as potential criminals. Clubs, guns, and public opinion uphold the ‘law’ in cases of Brutality to Negroes,” a Birmingham editor observed. By the 1930s, violence against African Americans changed from an ad hoc, civilian practice to an established law enforcement strategy. Moreover, Southern mayors, police chiefs, and district attorneys not only tolerated beating and wantonly shooting African American men, they defended such violence as justified and consistent with the rule of law. Defining targeted police brutality as a necessary, lawful activity institutionalized racialized violence, embedding it in the core mission of the American criminal justice system.

This transformation was more calculated and purposeful than merely operating as a by-product of long-standing racial attitudes. To the contrary, policymakers, cops, and criminal justice officials explained and defended their racialized practices, especially reserving brutality for African American suspects. Simply put, African Americans were criminals, a linkage that blended well-entrenched white assumptions about race with the social-science research of the era. The elision invoked early twentieth-century scientific racism to explain and justify the anxieties of Southerners who
insisted that the early Great Migration flooded cities with vicious predators and thus endangered good, honest, decent, respectable, law-abiding white residents.18 The police had to protect them and employ unflinching methods to preserve law and order.

In the eyes of white Southerners, one sociologist explained in 1940, “Negroes are just ‘natural killers.’”19 White editors echoed this view. New Orleans journalists, for example, maintained that African Americans committed the lion’s share of violence in the city. “Most of the murders in New Orleans,” the New Orleans Item reported in 1924, “are committed by negroes.”20 Many white residents often expressed this view in more unvarnished ways. A Louisiana lawyer, for instance, attributed violent crime to “murderous n-----s” and “baboons.”21

When homicide rates surged during the 1920s, white city dwellers insisted that African Americans had laid siege to their communities, placing them in dire danger. The nation’s murder rate swelled by 19.2 percent between 1920 and 1925. In Southern cities, it surged much more, rising by 52 percent in Memphis, 120 percent in Nashville, and 139.2 percent in New Orleans. The region had four-fifths of the nation’s most murderous urban centers, and white residents claimed that African American newcomers were responsible for the violence. “The increase,” the New Orleans Times-Picayune argued, “is all on the side of the negroes.”22 “Were it not for the colored murders,” the city’s police superintendent explained, “New Orleans and the entire South would have an excellent record.”23 Similarly, a Birmingham observer concluded that the stratospheric violence was “due to the large per cent of Negroes in these Southern cities.”24

White Southerners—the electorate in the region—demanded that the police protect them from these predators and employ any means necessary to do so. Due-process protections and constitutional restrictions on the use of torture and coercion in law enforcement, they charged, undermined crime fighting, endangering law-abiding citizens. Legal constraints on police authority “coddled” murderers and rapists. In order to safeguard constitutional order, cops must be granted “license” to employ aggressive methods of preserving law and order, including third-degree interrogations and the preemptive use of deadly force.25 By virtue of their criminality, criminals sacrificed their rights to due process and legal prohibitions against police brutality. White government officials, newspaper editors, community leaders, and voters explicitly exempted some segments of the population from legal guardrails. Their notions of social order and law-abiding citizens
included only white Americans. Suspected criminals and dangerous people—African Americans—were not entitled to civil liberties. Cops could beat, torture, coerce confessions from, and shoot African Americans without in any way violating the law or the constitution. “Commonsense justice” dictated that some democratic rights did not extend to these Americans. In the age of Jim Crow—and beyond—racialized police violence operated in the faithful service of the rule of law.

From the distance of a century, the idea of selective, situational constitutional rights and protections seems unimaginable. Recent events, however, also led many Americans to question the boundaries of constitutional rights. According to legal scholars and political scientists, people who genuinely supported free speech and rejected the use of torture in interrogations often wavered about affording such protections to suspected terrorists after the 9/11 Twin Towers attacks, just as many mid-twentieth-century Americans had insisted that communists and suspected spies sacrificed their due-process rights. These more recent examples are not parallel to systemic racial oppression in the age of Jim Crow, but they illustrate the tension between an abstract commitment to constitutional protections and perceived emergencies and crises. Believing that they were under siege from criminals, interwar white Southerners often saw themselves as civilized and fair-minded but demonstrated no reluctance to grant police officers the discretion and authority to beat, bludgeon, torture, and even kill African Americans in the name of law and order and the defense of public safety.

Early twentieth-century Southern whites’ willingness to deny fundamental civil rights to African Americans reshaped law enforcement. Because this was the era when police departments expanded and modernized, a racialized construction of criminal justice, complete with race-based limitations on legal and constitutional protections, became normalized. If the mandate of cops was to preserve public order, and if the “public” consisted exclusively of white residents, the police possessed free rein to beat and brutalize African Americans.

Disfranchisement undergirded this formulation of the rule of law. Often relying on nominally race-neutral policies and rules, such as the use of “understanding clauses” and literacy tests, whites systematically suppressed African American voting and monopolized political control. On the eve of World War II, for example, African American New Orleanians comprised 30.3 percent of the population but 0.38 percent of eligible voters. Whites denied them the core rights and privileges of citizenship. In 1944, the sociolo-
gist Gunnar Myrdal explained that “just as they are practically voteless in the South, Negroes there have a minimum of what we have called ‘legal justice.’”29 “Southern courthouses,” an ethnographer noted, operated as the “bulwark of white supremacy.”30

Ironically, the brutal, unrestrained treatment of African American residents enhanced police authority and legitimacy in the eyes of Southern whites. Demagogic politicians and criminal justice officials exploited white fears of racial turmoil, reminding them that violent policing safeguarded law-abiding residents from the ravages of African American predators. Likewise, brutal, murderous cops insisted that their methods eliminated dangerous predators and hence protected decent, innocent white residents. When police officers thus argued that their tactics reflected the values and served the needs of white residents, what legal scholars and psychologists call “normative alignment,” white Southerners believed that cops were fair, responsible, and had earned capacious discretionary authority, regardless of legal and constitutional constraints.31 White residents increasingly ceded race control to police officers and supported cops who beat, tortured, and murdered African American suspects—in the name of justice and white supremacy. This perception of enhanced police authority accelerated the shift from individual, civilian, vigilante racial violence to institutionalized police violence targeting African American citizens.

Law enforcers who beat and tortured African American suspects gained a tangible incentive to employ overtly racialized tactics, for such brutality demonstrated their commitment to the protection of skittish white residents, generating white support and funding. City and criminal justice officials, therefore, not only defended but championed the use of violent police tactics to control crime, and sadistic cops who wantonly murdered African American suspects portrayed themselves as heroic guardians of order, decency, and social stability. They boasted about cleaning the streets of dangerous predators and defined racially targeted police brutality as the unmistakable defense of law-abiding citizens. Racial control, crime control, violent policing, and the rule of law blended and blurred in the interwar white Southern worldview.

Such enhanced police legitimacy and discretionary authority unleashed soaring levels of racialized brutality, thinly disguised as preserving law and order. Racial dominance shifted from a mob activity to a state-sponsored mandate. With few legal or constitutional boundaries, cops had virtually unrestrained power to beat and murder African American residents. Early
twentieth-century ethnographers observed that every African American Southerner had witnessed, heard about, or endured such violence from law enforcers and felt vulnerable to white policemen. The threat of state-sponsored brutality at the hands of patrolmen and detectives loomed at every moment and developed into racial terrorism masquerading as the rule of law. “The killing of Negroes has become police policy in the United States,” one activist concluded.

These attitudes, law enforcement methods, and racial disparities expanded and became nationalized during the post–World War II era, when the Great Migration accelerated and the African American populations of Northern cities swelled. Racial tensions in urban centers exploded throughout the country. A backlash against the civil rights movement, the protest rebellions of the 1960s, particularly the 1964 turmoil in Watts, and the Warren Court led mayors and police chiefs to embrace racialized, militarized law enforcement, create S.W.A.T. units, celebrate “warrior cops,” and unleash “shoot-to-kill” policies. Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Crime” and Richard Nixon’s and Ronald Reagan’s “tough-on-crime” platforms amplified these developments and provided capacious justifications for the aggressive policing of African American residents, often deployed in stop-and-search, broken-windows, and more recently in stop-and-frisk practices. But decades earlier, Southern police departments had already announced a “war on crime,” launched militarized, rapid-response units equipped with armored assault vehicles, bullet-proof vests, army-grade machine guns and sniper rifles, tear-gas grenades, and established racialized stop-and-search mandates and shoot-to-kill protocols. Thus, late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century militarized, violent policing targeting African American residents broadened the law enforcement practices that had been forged and institutionalized in the Jim Crow urban South. Interwar cops in New Orleans, Memphis, Atlanta, Birmingham, and Mobile, in short, constructed the scaffolding for racialized criminal justice in modern America.

Bluecoated Terror devotes particular attention to police violence in New Orleans for two reasons. First, trends in policing in the city were typical for the region, and remarkably complete police records have survived for New Orleans. Municipal police case reports and court files provide concrete measures of the magnitude of the interwar transformation of law enforcement
and criminal justice. Homicide data offer a particularly clear illustration. In 1920, New Orleans cops killed African American residents at 2.8 times the white rate. A decade later, the gap had expanded to 7.6 times higher, and in 1936 it ballooned to an 11.8-fold gulf. Soaring racial disparities in the fatal shooting of the unarmed reveal a similar trend. During the early 1920s, 66.7 percent of white suspects killed by city cops were unarmed, compared with 57.1 percent of African American victims. A decade later, policemen fatally shot unarmed African American residents at quadruple the white rate. Similarly, during the interwar years, the African American homicide conviction rate soared, while the white rate plummeted. Disparities in the use of coercive interrogation methods and execution rates mushroomed as well.

Records from Memphis, Birmingham, Atlanta, and Montgomery indicate that comparable racial disparities in police violence and criminal justice unfolded throughout the urban South. NAACP branch files, FBI archives, Department of Justice sources, and local newspapers chart identical trends in police brutality as well. Furthermore, ethnographic studies from the era reveal the same shifts in law enforcement across the region. Racialized policing, justified in the service of public safety and the defense of law and order, became unapologetically entrenched in American criminal justice during the interwar era and provided the template for the late twentieth-century law enforcement initiatives, including mass incarceration.

The second reason for the local focus is the richness and depth of surviving source material. Extraordinary New Orleans records, such as homicide witness statements and the case files of the Louisiana League for the Preservation of Constitutional Rights, reveal another important facet of the early normalization of police violence. Quantitative data, such as rates of killing by law enforcers and race-based disparities in convictions, incarcerations, and executions, fail to reveal the human, personal dimension behind the numbers, the trauma, and haunting vulnerability endured by survivors, or the purposeful ways in which policymakers and law enforcers formulated, defended, and deployed this violence and institutionalized racial terrorism. This book attempts to strike a balance between charting tangible, measurable trends in criminal justice and exploring the human consequences and purposeful sources of these shifts.

Finally, an explanation of the language used in the book and the scope of my analysis is in order. As much as possible, Bluecoated Terror relies on the words of police brutality victims, the perpetrators, their enablers, and white Southerners passively complicit in the racial suppression and uses quotations
from brutalized suspects, violent cops, and criminal justice officials, including offensive terms such as “n-----.” Sadistic policemen and their defenders and apologists used this and other abhorrent words to convey violence, coercion, and racial dominance. Softening their language risks sanitizing or veiling the vicious intent bound up in their terminology. The book focuses mainly on the police policies and practices that institutionalized racial disparities in law enforcement. Although the actions, protests, and experiences of African American residents receive considerable attention, the analysis concentrates on the behavior and attitudes of white cops and the white New Orleanians who supported their violent methods.

In sum, *Bluecoated Terror* explores the process through which police brutality became a systemic law enforcement strategy. This largely occurred during the two decades after the Great War, when policymakers and criminal justice officials expanded law enforcement institutions in the urban South and, in the process, blended race control with crime fighting. Police brutality changed from an individual practice by cops to a purposeful, standard departmental strategy. White Southerners, and eventually their counterparts throughout the nation, began to embrace police violence against African American citizens as a normal, appropriate component of law and order and consistent with their understanding of the rule of law.

Racial disparities in law enforcement did not begin during the interwar years but they widened egregiously between the world wars and persist in the twenty-first century. In early twentieth-century New Orleans, city cops killed unarmed African Americans at a slightly lower rate than white suspects. A decade later, they shot African Americans four times more often, and in modern America the gap remains three-to-seven times greater. Differentials in police homicide, convictions, sentencing, incarceration, and executions follow comparable trajectories, surging after the Great War and remaining astonishingly pronounced today.

Modern police brutality is not a new phenomenon and is not the product of the isolated misconduct of a few “bad apples.” But neither is such violence a fixed, unchanging practice dating to the seventeenth century. A century ago, most cops were not murderous or sadistic, and this remains true today. Moreover, American racial violence extends to the earliest moments of European colonization. Police brutality—and the threat of police violence—