

# H-Net Reviews

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Gabriel J. Chin, ed. *New York City Police Corruption Investigation Commissions, 1894-1994*. Buffalo, N.Y.: William S. Hein, 1997. 6 volumes. \$325.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57588-211-6.

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## Meat-eaters and Grass-eaters

All professions develop their own jargon and the police profession is no exception. No police force in the United States has possessed a higher profile and undergone more praise and condemnation than the nation's oldest police force, the New York City Police Department. In the argot of the New York Police Department, and recounted by the 1972 *Knapp Report*, corrupt police practices can be divided into two types: meat-eaters and grass-eaters. As defined by the *Knapp Report*, those police officers who "aggressively misuse their police powers for personal gain" are meat-eaters, while "grass-eaters simply accept the payoffs that the happenstances of police work throw their way" (p. 4). For example, plainclothesmen who routinely shake down gamblers and drug dealers and demand protection money to look the other way in exchange for not arresting such persons are meat-eaters, while the precinct patrolman who accepted a free coffee and danish in the Greek diner on the corner is a grass-eater.

I, myself, corrupted a Louisville, Kentucky, policeman just the other day. One morning a couple of weeks ago, I sat at the counter of my local Denny's enjoying my coffee and fuming at the local liberal newspaper. A policeman entered the restaurant and sat down a couple of seats away from me and ordered his breakfast. Just as his food arrived, a couple rushed into the Denny's carrying a small child and literally screaming that their son had stopped breathing. The officer stood up, used his radio to call for EMS, and took charge of the situation. He pried a wad of gum out of the child's throat and administered a little C.P.R. to the boy to re-start his breathing. Once

the medical technicians arrived, they took over the boy's care and transported the now revived child (and overwrought parents) to the hospital; the officer returned to his seat at the counter. Denny's warmed the officer's breakfast for him and I corrupted him—I picked up his tab and bought his breakfast for him.

I was glad to help the officer and buying his breakfast fulfilled one my goals in life—to buy off a police officer. Okay, so I did not exactly "buy off" the officer, but he and I both knew that letting civilians buy a policeman a meal is against department policy and we both ignored the rule. That sort of grass-eating is indelibly part and parcel of police work, just as more aggressive, and less common, meat-eating appears as a constant theme in police history. The reprint series nicely demonstrates the constant of corruption within the New York City Police Department (and really all police departments) and the constant of investigation and "reform" of the Department. Meat-eating and grass-eating will not cease; how to prepare to better manage these constants of police work is the on-going theme running throughout these six important reprinted police reports—The Lexow Committee Report (Volume I), the Curran Committee Report (Volume II), the Seabury Investigation Report (Volume III), the Helfand Investigation Report (Volume IV), the Knapp Commission Report (Volume V), and the Mollen Commission Report (Volume VI).

Spanning one hundred years of police investigations, these previously hard-to-find reports have been gathered together and ought to find a home in most every research library and law library. Assistant Professor of Law at

Western New England School of Law Gabriel J. Chin provides an introduction to the entire series at the beginning of the first volume, the *Lexow Report*, and he provides an historical introduction and preface before each report in this series. Specialists in criminal justice and police history will find Chin's introductions adequate to the topic but hardly thorough in their coverage of the primary and historiographical literature (the important work of Wilbur Miller is glaringly absent, for example). But Chin's purpose is not to recast the shape of the interpretations of police corruption; his only purpose is to provide scholars and students with primary sources previously difficult to locate and consult. By gathering together these reports, Chin has provided an important and useful service.

Reading these varied reports, historians will be struck by the change and continuity visible through time. These six reports, covering a century of police evolution and each reflecting its own particular context, reveal some similarities. Usually, some particularly troubling event occurs or an outraged reformer (or newspaper) reveals a meat-eating or grass-eating policeman or police practice. Politicians then respond by appointing an investigative committee. Funded by the city and by private persons and groups, these anti-corruption committees hire investigators hold public hearings, receive headline-grabbing testimony, and, in time, issue a report. Only one of these commissions, the Helfand Commission of 1954, possessed the power to prosecute those accused of violating state law. In response to these investigative reports, the New York City Police Department adopts new rules and regulations, institutes new training and sensitivity courses, tinkers with its recruiting standards, and re-organizes the department's internal oversight and controls over its officers. Then a "reformed" police department drops from the headlines, patrolmen and plain-

clothesmen adjust to the new rules and guidelines, and the grass-eaters and the occasional meat-eater return to grazing. This pattern emerges in each and every one of these reports and it suggests that this pattern will continue into the future.

Yet one key new issue appears in the last report of this series, the *Mollen Report* of 1994: the effect of illegal drugs and the drug trade on the meat-eaters. As previous reports made clear, instead of taking money to look the other way from criminal activities, by 1994 groups of policemen had become active participants in the drug trade, buying and selling narcotics while on duty. They used their police intelligence to raid rival drug dealers, stole drug dealers' money and drugs, resold the drugs, and physically abused the dealers. Because of the enormous amount of money available through such activities, a few police officers had literally become just another dangerous drug gang in town. Not that anyone needed further reenforcement about the dangers of drugs, but this development demonstrates just how corrupting illicit drugs and the drug trade can be to police and on the general urban environment. Whether this latest evil for the police and the city will be (or can be) controlled is still unclear, but drugs truly challenge the city and its police force to maintain a police department with a minimal number of meat-eaters and a tolerable number of grass-eaters. Regardless, these reports are important reading for urban, institutional, and criminal justice historians, and Daniel J. Chin has performed a worthwhile service in reprinting these engaging and important police corruption investigations.

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