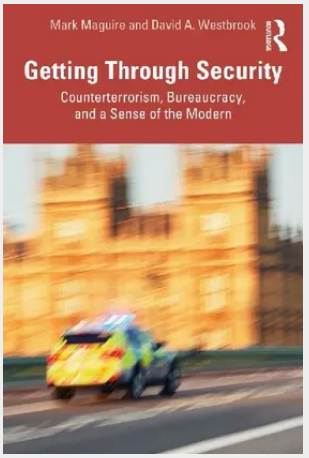
Maguire / Westbrook

Getting Through Security

Counterterrorism, Bureaucracy, and a Sense of the Modern



Getting Through Security offers an unprecedented look behind the scenes of global security structures. The authors unveil the “secret colleges” of counterterrorism, a world haunted by the knowledge that intelligence will fail, and Leviathan will not arrive quickly enough to save everyone. Based on extensive interviews with both special forces and other security operators who seek to protect the public, and survivors of terrorist attacks, Getting Through Security ranges from targeted European airports to African malls and hotels to explore counterterrorism today. Maguire and Westbrook reflect on what these practices mean for the bureaucratic state and its violence, and offer suggestions for the perennial challenge to secure not just modern life, but humane politics. Mark Maguire has long had extraordinary access to a series of counterterrorism programs. He trained with covert behavior detection units and attended secret meetings of international special forces. He found that security professionals, for all the force at their command, are haunted by ultimately intractable problems. Intelligence is inadequate, killers unexpectedly announce themselves, combat teams don’t arrive quickly enough, and for a time an amorphous public is on its own. Such problems both challenge and occasion the institutions of contemporary order. David Westbrook accompanied Maguire, pushing for reflection on what the dangerous enterprise of securing modern life means for key concepts such as bureaucracy, violence, and the state. Introducing us to the “secret colleges” of soldiers and police, where security is produced as an infinite horizon of possibility, and where tactics shape politics covertly, the authors relate moments of experimentation by police trying to secure critical infrastructure and conversations with special forces operators in Nairobi bars, a world of shifting architecture, technical responses, and the ever-present threat of violence. Secrecy is poison. Government agencies compete in the dark. The uninformed public is infantilized. Getting Through Security exposes deep flaws in the foundations of bureaucratic modernity, and suggests possibilities that may yet ameliorate our situation.

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