

**A major voice in transnational American studies addresses politics and culture in post-9/11 America**

The study of prisons brought Tocqueville to America. For Rob Kroes, one of Europe's most distinguished authorities on contemporary American culture, it was the other way around. Deep knowledge of American culture brought Kroes to America and face to face with signs, Tocquevillian in their portent, that invited motorists exiting from Interstate 80 in Nevada toward a place called Independence Valley to keep their eyes open for a "Prison Area." In this collection of essays, Kroes invites us to take these signs seriously for their capacity to deepen our insights into America's cultural contradictions. The author's fascination with the myriad ways in which America changes face, from hard power to soft, from uses of force to the power of entertainment, always holding the attention of publics across the globe, is what ties the essays together.

**ROB KROES** is one of Europe's leading American studies scholars and author of numerous books and articles, including *Photographic Memories: Private Pictures, Public Images, and American History*.

"These essays are both brilliant and provocative."  
Richard Pells, author of *War Babies: The Generation That Changed America*

"Rob Kroes, the most acute European analyst of contemporary American culture, offers deeply grounded reflections on American politics and culture."

Thomas Bender, professor of history, New York University

"Rob Kroes illumines the modern American experience with rare penetration. His distinguished academic career has been marked by the effort to grasp why the United States arouses resentment abroad, even as he admires the self-correcting mechanisms that democracy and decency can encourage."

Stephen Whitfield, professor of American studies, Brandeis University

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ROB KROES  
**Prison Area, Independence Valley**



**Prison Area**

**ROB KROES**

**Independence Valley**

AMERICAN PARADOXES IN  
POLITICAL LIFE AND POPULAR CULTURE



DARTMOUTH

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## INTRODUCTION

This is a Tocqueville meets Gandhi moment:

Democracy in America? It would be a good idea.

—Pierre Guerlain, *The Huffington Post*, October 10, 2013<sup>1</sup>

IN NEVADA, WHILE driving along U.S. Interstate 80, I saw two road signs following each other in close order: “Prison Area,” and “Independence Valley.” The signs came as a shock. I instantly realized that I had found the title for my new book. Between them they seemed to capture poignantly the poles that my continuing fascination with American life and culture had always moved between, like a perpetual-motion pendulum, never finding equilibrium, never coming to rest. Under the unforgiving Nevada sun, the space around me had all of a sudden turned into a conceptual space, where “independence” along with close conceptual associates such as “freedom,” “equality,” and “democracy,” found themselves confined by a world view centering on imprisonment. Conflicting faces of America had popped up in the middle of the desert and kept riding along with me in the same way that the sun and the moon move along with the long-distance traveler while the surrounding landscape appears to rush by.

America a prison area? In many ways: yes. The country seems infatuated with imprisoning its citizens, and increasingly so. The United States has spent \$300 billion since 1980 to expand its prison system. It imprisons 2.2 million people, 25 percent of the

world's prison population. For every 100,000 adults in the country there are 742 behind bars. Some 5 million are on parole. Only 30 to 40 percent are white. Depending on the state, prisoners lose their political rights, including the vote, sometimes for life. This is a system of creeping disenfranchisement, weighted against the black population.<sup>2</sup> Another trend of equally ominous portents in with this: America now employs as many private security guards as high school teachers, nearly double their number in 1980. It is a trend that runs parallel to another one: the number of protective services employees tracks with America's growing inequality. In both respects the United States is ahead of all countries that we tend to think of as constituting the West, and increasingly so. As its inequality grows, so does the proportion of guard labor.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as I was pondering this behind the wheel, popular culture memories reminded me that some of the great sagas of rebellion and resistance against the spirit of incarceration, redeeming the inspirational lure of independence, come from America. There are many examples from American film history, but one came to my mind with particularly great force: *Runaway Train*.<sup>4</sup> Starting with an uprising of inmates against a tyrannical prison regime, it tells the story of one breakaway prisoner, an emblem of the unbreakable spirit of independence, on his way to the ultimate act of defiance, choosing liberty while racing toward certain death on his runaway train. Paradoxically then, prisons and their attendant images of chain gangs, watchtowers, barbed wire, and armed guards may take one back to an American inspirational repertoire of human agency and self-reliance.

America an independence valley, then? A safe haven, a refuge, extending a welcome to all those "yearning to breathe free," in Emma Lazarus's words as spoken by the silent lips of the mother of exiles—the Statue of Liberty—in New York Harbor? Again, in many ways: yes. Yet the welcome has increasingly become mixed in with a sense of threat, with distrust and suspicion. Tellingly, before getting to Independence Valley, Nevada, I had passed Camp Williams, near Bluffdale, Utah, between Utah Lake and Great

Salt Lake. It is the location for the new Utah Data Center, also known as the Intelligence Community Comprehensive National Cybersecurity Initiative Data Center, a mouthful but like nothing compared with the center's data storage capacity, estimated to be on the order of exabytes or higher. It is to serve as the ultimate repository for the continuing collection of Internet and telecommunication data, concerning U.S. citizens and foreigners alike. As Daniel Ellsberg, the father of all contemporary whistleblowers, has written, with sardonic wit, the U.S. government is realizing the ambition of the Stasi, the East German secret police, who wanted to know everything about everybody.<sup>5</sup> Following recent revelations by whistleblower Edward Snowden—now offered sanctuary in, of all places, Russia—it is hard to avoid the conclusion that they confirm the arrival of a full-fledged surveillance state to the United States. It is like a stealthy insurrection by the government against the spirit and letter of the law, and has proceeded apace, ever since 9/11, under both the Bush and Obama administrations.

Yet the threat of governmental invasion into the private sphere predates 9/11 and goes back to well before the exponential growth in computer data-mining capabilities. The following words eerily capture contemporary developments, yet were spoken in the 1970s:

The [National Security Agency's] capability at any time could be turned around on the American people, and no American would have any privacy left, such is the capability to monitor everything: telephone conversations, telegrams, it doesn't matter. There would be no place to hide. [If a dictator ever took over, the N.S.A.] could enable it to impose total tyranny, and there would be no way to fight back.

These are words from one of the most admired and influential politicians among American liberals in the last several decades: Frank Church of Idaho, the four-term U.S. senator who served from 1957 to 1981. He was, among other things, one of the Sen-

ate's earliest opponents of the Vietnam War, a former chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and the chairman of the committee (bearing his name) that in the mid-1970s investigated the widespread surveillance abuses committed under every president since FDR. That was the investigation that led to the enactment of FISA, the criminal law prohibiting the executive branch from intercepting the communications of American citizens without first establishing "probable cause" and obtaining a court warrant—the very law that the Bush administration got caught violating and that was gutted by the Democratic-led Congress in 2008, with the support of then-Senator Obama. The abuses uncovered by the Church Committee also led to the enactment of further criminal prohibitions on the cooperation by America's telecoms in any such illegal government spying, prohibitions that were waived away when the same 2008 Congress retroactively immunized America's telecom giants from having done so.

Much of what Senator Church had cautioned his fellow-citizens about has since come to pass. Nor is this the only cloud darkening Independence Valley. The train of associations that the valley's name gets going includes freedom, includes equality. Like independence, they are hallowed ideals, given protection in foundational texts like the U.S. Constitution and figuring centrally in America's national rhetoric. Yet, like independence, their actuality is often a far cry from the ideal. They are besmirched almost beyond recognition when coming from the mouth of a president who, in the dismal chaos wrought by the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, could proudly see "freedom on the march." And what sort of an ideal is equality when in fact the United States has known a widening gap in wealth and income between its higher and lower levels of society? As measured by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United States finds itself, with countries like Chile, Turkey, and Mexico, near one end of the scale, with a wide and increasing wealth gap, while many European countries are on the opposite end. Yet the stark picture of a small top layer holding an obscene

concentration of wealth and income may be revolting but rarely leads people actually to revolt. Protest movements pitching their pitiable tents in city parks fizzle out with almost no trace left.

One could easily go on in this vein, uncovering one revolting face of the United States after another. Yet there is always the pull of precisely the opposite America, presenting faces that in carnivalesque ways instantly recast its identity. As the American historian Michael Kammen reminded us in the early 1970s, Americans are “a people of paradox.” They refuse to live by the logic of any preconceived idea and, like the trickster or confidence man, blithely exchange one identity for another, leaving puzzled outsiders to sort out for themselves what is virtual and what real in their performance of a dizzying range of inventions. In their virtuoso multiplying of worlds, they virtually inhabit invented worlds as so many simulacra that turn the real world upside down and inside out, while producing incisive commentary on the fears and anxieties that run through their lives as they collectively live them. There is a redemptive, if not exhilarating, quality in this elan vital that has kept many observers of America spellbound.

This is a story that has kept repeating itself. Yet ever since the ominous day of 9/11 there has been an added urgency to following this story as it is unfolding, urging the observer to seek a new balance between feelings of revolt and fascination. In the many self-presentations that America offers to the world, more strongly than before the gloves have come off. America shows the naked face of a surveillance state and an imperial hegemon. Yet always it morphs endlessly into rival narratives, showing itself as the tragic hero, struggling to find mastery and control of his fate on a run-away train to ultimate doom.

Revulsion and fascination have been the poles that have kept me exploring the enigma of America over the last several years. This book offers the reflection of what is in many ways a personal quest, yet one that I hope will find sympathetic recognition among its readers.