ForeWord Reviews

POLITICAL SCIENCE

Politics on Trial: Five Famous Trials of the 20th Century
William Kunstler
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During his colorful and controversial career as a defender of radical causes, the author viewed the law as a "method of control created by a socioeconomic system determined … to perpetuate itself." Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and the inmates of Attica State Prison in New York were among those defended by Kunstler, who died in 1995 at the age of seventy-six. His life is well-told in David J. Langum's William M. Kunstler: The Most Hated Lawyer in America (New York University Press, 1999).

Kunstler's book, originally published in 1963 as …And Justice for All, includes brief and cogent summaries of important legal cases that tested the promise of civil liberties guaranteed by the Bill of Rights: Sacco and Vanzetti (1927), The Scopes "Monkey Trial" (1925), The Scottsboro Nine (1931), the Rosenberg atomic secrets Trial (1953), and Engel v Vitale (1958), which found school prayer in violation of the First Amendment prohibition of a state religion. The Sacco and Vanzetti and Scottsboro Nine cases are the most captivating, illuminating the hatred of foreigners and disrespect for African Americans that made a mockery of equality of law. These two trials, along with Scopes, alienated Americans from each other during the post-World War I era, when ethnic intimidation and xenophobia were fevered. The Rosenberg and Engel cases played out against a cold war backdrop of the fear of encroaching Communism.

The timeliness of Kunstler's thoughtful summaries is enhanced by the addition of an introduction and commentary on each trial, revisiting them in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, provided by Karen Kunstler Goldman, the author's daughter and an assistant attorney general in New York; Michael Ratner, president of the Center for Constitutional Rights; and Michael Smith, an attorney in New York. The editors are dismayed by the suspension of civil liberties that followed President Bush's declaration of war on terrorism. The USA Patriot Act, with its provision for military tribunals and its detention of suspects who have not been charged, could undermine the Bill of Rights, unless, as they conclude, public vigilance is forthcoming.

This book can help readers sort out their beliefs about the importance of civil liberties when terrorist attacks on American soil have become a reality.

Karl Helicher