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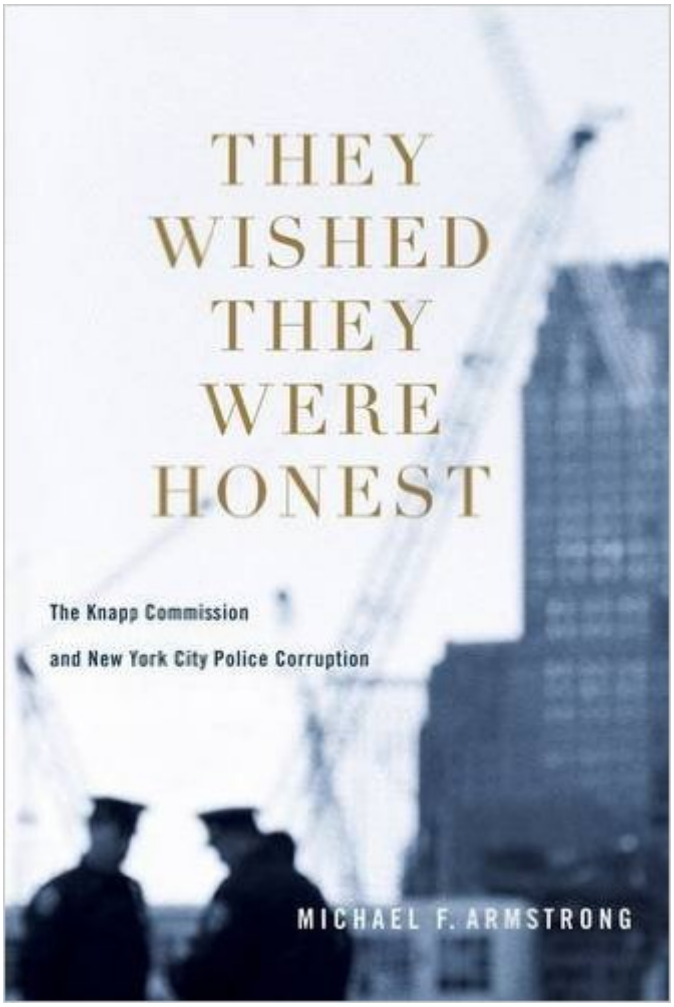
They Wished They Were Honest: The Knapp Commission And New York City Police Corruption



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Synopsis

In fifty years of prosecuting and defending criminal cases in New York City and elsewhere,Michael F. Armstrong has often dealt with cops. For a single two-year span, as chief counsel to the Knapp Commission, he was charged with investigating them. Based on Armstrong's vivid recollections of this watershed moment in law enforcement accountabilityâ •prompted by the New York Times's report on whistleblower cop Frank Serpicoâ •They Wished They Were Honest recreates the dramatic struggles and significance of the Commission and explores the factors that led to its success and the restoration of the NYPD's public image.Serpico's charges against the NYPD encouraged Mayor John Lindsay to appoint prominent attorney Whitman Knapp to chair a Citizen's Commission on police graft. Overcoming a number of organizational, budgetary, and political hurdles, Chief Counsel Armstrong cobbled together an investigative group of a half-dozen lawyers and a dozen agents. Just when funding was about to run out, the "blue wall of silence" collapsed. A flamboyant "Madame," a corrupt lawyer, and a weasely informant led to a "super thief" cop, who was trapped and "turned" by the Commission. This led to sensational and revelatory hearings, which publicly refuted the notion that departmental corruption was limited to only a "few rotten apples."In the course of his narrative, Armstrong illuminates police investigative strategy; governmental and departmental political maneuvering; ethical and philosophical issues in law enforcement; the efficacy (or lack thereof) of the police's anticorruption efforts; the effectiveness of the training of police officers; the psychological and emotional pressures that lead to corruption; and the effects of police criminality on individuals and society. He concludes with the effects, in today's world, of Knapp and succeeding investigations into police corruption and the value of permanent outside monitoring bodies, such as the special prosecutor's office, formed in response to the Commission's recommendation, as well as the current monitoring commission, of which Armstrong is chairman.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In the late 60's and early 70's, New York was probably not "the place to be." Never mind the rising crime, race riots, and arson; it was a time of anger and mean-spiritedness. You had the Baby-Boomers protesting against the Vietnam war, pitted against the "hardhat" WW2 veterans, and the conservative police who hated anyone that voted Democrat. The city was bankrupt, defaulted on its bonds, and Mayor Lindsay caved in to striking workers. Could things have been any worse?"They Wish They Were Honest" is a book by Michael Armsrong, a member of the Knapp Commission. It was simply a panel of investigators who were assigned to study police corruption, paid for by the city and staffed by detectives on loan from Federal agencies. But there were problems from the start; the bankrupt city had a limited budget for the commission, and in the early 70's, there were no cellphones. Surveilance equipment was in its infancy, and there was no money for the latest technology. Most of the agents worked with their wits alone, and were often in danger. But they did find valuable information and evidence; for starters, the NYPD routinely took bribes to scrap traffic tickets. Then they extorted money from tow truck drivers. Gambling establishments paid regular fees (pads) to vice cops, and Xaviera Hollander was practically paying the wages of some detectives. Cops would loot the scenes of robberies, get served free meals from the best restaurants, sell stolen goods, and end up making three times their salaries through theft.Police corruption was nothing new; poorly-paid NYC cops had taken bribes for years. But in an age of rising crime and drug use, the corruption made things worse, and the incentive to take payoffs was higher than ever. Cops had previously refused bribes from drug dealers.

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