



Reform and Regret: The Story of Federal Judicial Involvement in the Alabama Prison System

Larry W. Yackle

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When the deplorable conditions in Alabama's prisons were revealed at trial in 1975, Judge Frank Johnson declared the prison system as a whole to constitute cruel and unusual punishment in violation of the eighth amendment. He then issued an elaborate decree specifying improvements that must be made to satisfy constitutional standards. In this study, Larry W. Yackle describes the campaign to achieve prison reform in Alabama through constitutional litigation in the federal courts and surveys the process that produced Johnson's decree, and subsequent efforts to enforce his order in the face of bureaucratic inertia, administrative incompetence, and political demagoguery. A decade later, the prisons showed significant physical improvements, but Alabama's resistance to progressive penal policies remained intact and impeded lasting change. Covering the lawyers' strategies, Judge Johnson's creative actions, and the machinations of state and federal officials including the Department of Justice under President Ronald Reagan, this book conveys the frustrating yet effective effort at prison litigation and offers important lessons for other proponents of penal reform across the country.

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