



Violence All Around

John Sifton

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A human rights lawyer travels to hot zones around the globe, before and after the September 11 attacks, to document abuses committed by warlords, terrorist groups, and government counterterrorism forces. Whether reporting on al Qaeda safe houses, the mechanics of the Pentagon's smartest bombs, his interviews with politicians and ordinary civilians, or his own brush with death outside Kabul, John Sifton wants to help us understand violence?what it is, and how we think and speak about it.

For the human rights community, the global war on terror brought unprecedented challenges. Of special concern were the secret detention centers operated by the CIA as it expanded into a paramilitary force, and the harsh treatment of prisoners throughout Iraq and Afghanistan. In drafting legal memoranda that made domestic prosecution for these crimes impossible, Sifton argues, the United States possessed not only the detainees but the law itself. Sifton recounts his efforts to locate secret prisons and reflects on the historical development of sanctioned military or police violence?from hand-to-hand combat to the use of drones?and the likelihood that technology will soon enable completely automated killing.

Sifton is equally concerned to examine what people have meant by nonviolent social change, and he asks whether pure nonviolence is ever possible. To invoke rights is to invoke the force to uphold them, he reminds us. Ultimately, advocates for human rights can only shame the world into better behavior, and their work may involve advocating the very violence they deplore.

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