Can majorities be entrusted to support rational policy ideas on issues like crime and security? Or are they inevitably *la bella multorum capitum*, the many-headed beast, demanding impulsive, irrational and mercurial policies, even when actual risk is very low? Using a comparative case study design, this project analyzes the public and political salience of crime across three countries (U.K., U.S., and the Netherlands) over fifty years. I find that serious violent crime is a necessary but not sufficient condition for sustained public and political attention to crime, and that high crime and low salience is a far more common condition than high salience and low crime. In addition, the structure of political institutions plays a crucial role in shaping policy responses to crime. Contrary to much received wisdom, I argue that the most punitive nation in the world -- the United States -- suffers from a *democratic deficit*, rather than a democratic surplus, and that it is this deficit that leads to high crime and high rates of imprisonment.