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EXTRA CREDIT

PRISONERS AND THE MEDIA

Objects of horror and fascination, revulsion and contempt, prisoners occupy a strange place in the media landscape. In the past quarter century those incarcerated have made a transition from Johnny Paycheck's "Ladies Love Outlaws," and Merle Haggard's gorgeous prison poems (not to mention Elvis's stylized and clean-cut Jailhouse Rockers) to Kid Rock's rioting thugs in "All My Homies Are In Cellblock Six." The portrayal of prisoners in gangsta rap borders on the gargoyle iconography of medieval cathedrals, missing only bloody fangs and demon's wings.

Concurrent with music, the so-called serious media has joined the fray, piling on with highly opinionated and poorly balanced stories that boil prisoners down to the lonely wail of a siren and the tears of a grieving widow. The pretense of professional journalism, playing a detached surveillance role, is discarded as it applies to the prisoner.

While crime in California (and nationally) has shown a consistent, twenty-year downward trend¹, media coverage of crime has exploded. In fact, the "crime wave" so many free citizens feel they are being subjected to exists only in their television sets. The rates of crime for juveniles, assumed to be rising as a new generation of "super-predators" prowl the streets of our inner cities, falling on hapless victims, are less than half what they were in the '70s², long before the local news devolved to a crime report; the modern-day police blotter of old newspaper media.

The only crime-related statistic that, in reality, has shown a steady rise is the rate of incarceration.³ When I came to prison in 1980 the incarceration rate in California was roughly one prisoner per thousand citizens. (24,000 prisoners: 24,000,000 citizens) The same rate today would yield roughly 38,000 prisoners. Instead, after two decades of political demagoguery, the growth of the prison-industrial complex, and the rise of organized crime victims, more than 170,000 prisoners are housed by this

¹ Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey 2002

² Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey 2002

³ California Board of Parole Hearings (formerly Board of Prison Terms)

state; the vast majority for non-violent crimes and technical parole violations.⁴

In this paper I will address the role the media has played in this turn of events, as I see it.

As the early '80s dawned, the right wing in California seized on the public's fear of crime, which was rooted as much in the discomfort of traditionalists' adjustment to a post-modern world as it was to a relatively minor rise in crime.⁵ George Deukmejian, the attorney general, utilized the crime issue to bash Jerry Brown's Democratic Party, alleging a soft-on-crime set of policies that placed the "good" citizens of the state (read white, middle-class) in jeopardy.

The media, perhaps cowed by the endless barrage of being too liberal, perhaps too closely identified with only the middle-class, failed to accurately report the levels of crime and victimization. As would be seen in the post-Brown Democratic Party of Grey Davis, all the major players in the society, including the media, elected to adopt a "never-harsh-enough" on crime position. Inside prison this led to a degradation of conditions and a curtailment of

⁴ California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation 2005

⁵ Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey 2002

rights so severe that the past several years have seen mass rioting and federal court intervention.

As the get-tough approach overcame rational policies, the prison-industrial complex, comprised of those corporate entities that build prisons and jails, suppliers of materiel to operate the prisons, and the labor unions representing the workers, grew into a potent political force. California has built more than 20 prisons in the past 20 years; in the same period, only one new state college was opened. Rural counties competed with one another to open new correctional facilities, chock full of high paying jobs requiring little formal education or training. In some ways, prisons represent the perfect post-industrial edifices. They provide one of the few remaining well-paid, low skill jobs; they also provide a stick to maintain social control of de-industrialized America.

The media, until only recently, failed to report this radical shift in priorities. Within the past decade, the prison system became a larger share of the state budget than higher education. The all-powerful prison guards union, after making huge contributions to virtually

everyone in state government, were awarded a contract with pay exceeding college professors, in the midst of a budgetary crunch of unprecedented proportions. Little of this was covered by television, although print media has, sporadically, tackled the subject.

Hitting on a tremendously effective strategy early in the rise of the prison-industrial complex, the major players, including politicians, corporations, and the guards union, created and funded "victims rights" groups. Standing the traditional concept of blind justice on its head and perverting the judicial system into a formalized venue for retribution, their use of a tiny, vocal group of crime victims to reshape centuries of common law was, and remains, the intellectual underpinning of the get-tough approach. The media afforded credibility to these groups through status conferral, as they became practically ubiquitous during the late '80s and early '90s.

Using the crime victim club, the new conservatives turned the prison system upside down as well. All rehabilitative programs were reduced, at least, and most were terminated. No matter the mountain of data demonstrating, conclusively, that positive programs lower

the recidivism rate, the slash and burn policies continued. The ultimate result being among the lowest rate of parolee success in America⁶, and extraordinary violence in our jails and prisons.

The media stood by, mute, during the '80s and '90s, deferring to the crime victim spokespersons demanding vengeance cloaked as a new kind of justice. No charge or assertion, no matter how outrageous, was challenged in the mainstream media. On those rare occasions a media outlet would raise a timid question, the crime victims groups would excoriate them as insensitive to their endless pain and unquenchable thirst for one-sided "justice." Sadly, it is only now, in the face of overwhelming evidence of mass violence, cost overruns, corruption and dismal, functional failure, the mainstream media has begun to look at prison policies with anything approaching honesty and courage.

I have now served more than 26 years for killing a man in a fistfight when I was 19, one terrible, drunken night in North Long Beach. During this time I have watched the mainstream media shirk its responsibility as I understand

⁶ Los Angeles Times, October 16, 2005

it. I readily acknowledge my bias, but I believe the facts support my contention: The media has failed to provide society with accurate and useful information regarding crime, prisoners and the prison system. I wish this were not so, but so it is.