

# 'Big house' ethic gone from prisons

## Prof. Pitts comments:

# Prisoners take help—on their own terms

(Continued from page 9A)

we must understand their limitations. Presumably prisons deter many free citizens from committing crimes, yet our selection process for prison actually reduces their deterrent value. Fewer than 10 per cent of the persons charged with a felony are sent to prison. By and large, these are the poorer and less deterrable criminals, not necessarily the most serious.

Consequently, many citizens accurately conclude that they will not be sent to prison even if they commit crimes and are caught.

Prisons punish people. But "heaping" punishment upon the few sent to prison embitters and damages them. They perceive that they are carrying the entire punishment burden, and they break or rebel under the strain.

I believe that prisoners should be allowed to form organizations that would unify their warring factions. These organizations would have to have some real responsibility in running the prison so prisoners would actually participate in them.

They should also have access to outside grievance mechanisms so that many practices which unnecessarily degrade, injure and embitter prisoners would be discouraged. It is likely these measures would reduce the turmoil greatly.

However, such changes would not make prisons into "country clubs." Prisons are inherently unpleasant and are intended to be.

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By JESSE PITTS  
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It is interesting to note that the humanitarianism of the 1960s has the intended effect of keeping down the number of prisoners. But humanitarianism's unintended effect was to sharply lower "the quality of life" in prison.

Because professional thieves found it easier to "beat the rap," their numbers in the prison decreased to the point where their culture seems to have been greatly weakened.

Yet until the early 1960s, it was thief culture and thieves as role models who were the mainstays of law and order in prison.

Thieves were replaced by young hoodlums, often drug addicts, usually sentenced for crimes of violence or crimes against property with unnecessary violence. Rapists used to be at the bottom of the prison prestige scale, along with child molesters.

During the 1960s, rape became a frequent accompaniment of burglary or robbery, and ceased to degrade a prisoner, unless he was an obvious "ding" (mental case).

GIVEN THE growing surge of health and rehabilitation programs—they account for a quarter of the prison operating costs—the opportunities for the "politician" prisoners, who usually staff these programs, have grown commensurably.

Politicians are masters at manipulating inexperienced professionals against the "reactionary" custodial staff. They create all sorts of frictions which they can use for their own ends. Politicians do not promote the virtues of loyalty and doing your time quietly, but short-run hedonism and rackets.

Politicians make their best life-adjustment in prison. Since they know how to work the system—the psychologist will report to the parole board that they have gained "insight"—they get back on the streets and find themselves with white-collar skills not usually demanded in legitimate business.

Often they "mess up" with the unconscious goal of getting back in prison. At least in prison they have power and the capacity to transform that power into commissary goodies and drugs brought in by corrupt guards or other inmates working in or near the prison pharmacy.

THE INCREASE in "prisoner rights" has not promoted more humanitarianism between inmate and inmate, or inmate and guard, but rather more suspicion and uncertainty, more reliance on raw violence. You can still do your own time in prison, but it has become more difficult. The land mines are everywhere.

Perhaps the new "career criminal" programs, which aim at making sure that professional thieves do not beat the rap any more, will have as an unintended consequence the re-creation of the thief culture in our prisons. It will make life more endurable for both guards and inmates.

There are minimum security camps from which inmates can go to jobs in the city, returning at night to all sorts of recreational and therapeutic programs. I interviewed a camp director a few years ago who said that the failure rate of his camp was about the same as that of maximum security prisons.

I spoke to an inmate who said that time at a camp was harder than in Jackson because at the camp there were too many temptations.

AT A PRESTIGIOUS midwestern university, a program was tried several years ago which aimed to offer convicted felons a college education, as "a community-based alternative to imprisonment."

A disaffected fraternity house was taken over, and the young inmate students were offered the best of counseling. Pretty coeds did not turn up their noses at these victims of society. It was rather hip to date them.

Result: None of these inmate-college boys ever graduated. They all dropped out and went back into "the life."

In my classes a few years ago, I had as speakers two convicts who were promoting a "self-help" program where cons were supposed to secure jobs on the outside, so that they could be released earlier into a life of responsibility and law-abidingness. They gave my students the usual spiel: "victims of society," "give us a break," "prison is a school for crime," "this program is great."

One speaker had been a thief since the age of 12. He was now 35 and thought he had committed at least 5,000 robberies. It was the first time he had not been able to beat the rap and found himself in Jackson for a stay planned by the state to last at least 18 months.

Within eight months, he was out peddling his program. He was placed on a job, made friends with his employers, and within two months absconded with \$1,500 of their hard-earned money.

CONCLUSION I: It is very difficult to help people. Very few people want to be truly helped, and still fewer people know how to help because there is often a component of humiliation in the helping process. Hence, the way to

recover dignity is for the con to transform the helping situation into a racket, where he does the conning.

CONCLUSION II: There are no alternatives to prisons if we want to immobilize people whose life pattern is violence against others and/or trying to get something for nothing. Since prisons are essentially run by inmates, they will never be pleasant places to live in, even if we double the operating costs.

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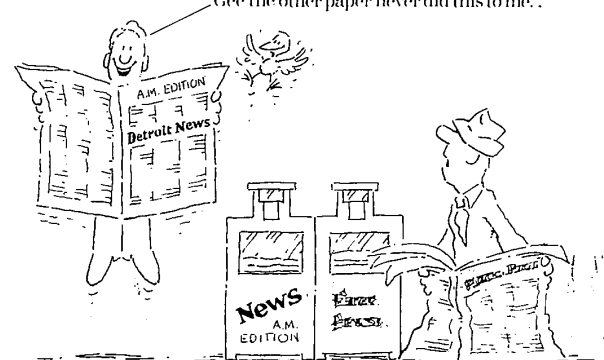


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