



Beyond the Rhetoric: Let's Shut Down the Prisons

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How did we let it get so out of hand? The number of people we have incarcerated in this nation is totally mind boggling. We are supposed to be a democracy where people are protected by the rule of law. Our rule of law is definitely impaired to the point of being like a plague on humanity. Tyrants and dictators don't enslave their people as much as we do. I believe it began when "getting tough on crooks" became a political aphrodisiac. If you research it, you will find that most get tough laws are implemented during election years.

President Reagan's "war on drugs" caused a giant leap in nonviolent criminals being locked up. The "Three Strikes" law in our most populated state, California, was like pouring gasoline on the fire. Congress and state legislatures throughout the land would start a movement known as "Overcriminalization." It's locking people up for some of the most petty of crimes. Rehabilitation and low recidivism rates became a lost art. "Lock'em up and throw away the key" started becoming more than just a saying.

President Bill Clinton decided to shift gears and incarcerate at a turbo pace. He funded money to begin building more and more federal prisons to harbor the mass of humanity going through the court system on their way to incarceration. Inspired by this, just about every governor and state legislature in the nation started to emulate the ways of D.C. by building new prisons all over our land.

More construction, more designing, more guards and massive jobs through supporting what would become the prison industrial complex. Once established, this monster needed a constant flow of "fuel" (human beings incarcerated for long terms). Thus, more laws and regulations to lock human beings behind the walls of prisons. During this period, California has built 33 prison complexes while building just one university or college. This is madness!

Yes, it was race related, too. Go downtown to criminal court and see what I am talking about. Like the great Richard Pryor would lament, "I went downtown for justice and that's just what I saw – just us!" Go see for yourself. You will wonder where White criminals go for legal troubles. Most go free in comparison to Blacks and Hispanics. This is not the ideal America. If we are to remain a great nation, we must be a good nation.

It is time to start reviewing all of these laws and mandatory sentencing. We must begin to end them by the thousands. There are a lot of organizations recognizing this, but no real action is taking place. Let's begin to start "peeling" away at this gigantic rotten "apple" that infects our families. I did a poll at our last annual conference and found that 80 percent of the conferees

have or had relatives in our prison network. My brothers and sisters, we cannot take this anymore. A continuance of this sickly state will kill our civilization.

So, let me start with “the man in the mirror.” I have committed our office to hire only ex-offenders during the next 10 years. We are encouraging our member companies to hire ex-offenders in a very aggressive but prudent way. We must not stop until most of these prisons we have built become empty and then convert them to manufacturing facilities (jobs) and schools. Let us not forget what brought us to this state of horror. Pressure must be put on our elected officials. A steady means of employment is the best cure for this social plague. The laws must be changed or dropped.

There is hope. Not only are civil rights organizations actively concerned about this dire situation but conservative groups and think tanks such as the Koch Brothers companies, The Heritage Foundation, The Cato Institute, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, etc. Republicans and Democrats are now on the same page. As you read this, our Senate and House of Representatives are starting to draft samples of legislation. The House is farther down the road. Coming from the House Judiciary Committee are three champions: Bobby Scott (D-Va.), James Sensenbrenner (R-Wisc.) and Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah). A staffer for the committee tells me that a bi-partisan bill will be ready for the president to sign by the end of 2015. Let’s hope for no “hiccups”.

They are going to delete many of the onerous laws and reduce or eliminate many sentencing guidelines. Meanwhile, a group known as the Clemency Project has a mission to free from prison inmates who have done nonviolent crimes and showed steady and good behavior while incarcerated.

I pray that all of us make this a top issue. Discuss overcriminalization everywhere you go and inject it into all important conversations. Free our people and shut down the prisons.