

America's Insanity Experiment; the Psychopathology of Prison
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What are the results of incarceration, especially long-term imprisonment? What are the typical or average outcomes for people who emerge from long prison sentences? What are the most common pathologies and dysfunctions suffered by prisoners? Are these deviant behaviors permanent? What sort of people are US prisons routinely creating?

These, and related questions have not received much attention, and few if any, answers have been obtained by scientists or other observers. This is partially due to public indifference to the fate of criminals, long and effectively demonized by the mainstream media so that felons represent a distinct underclass, nearly relegated to the status of subhumans. It is also a result of government policy, the state having a vested interest in hiding the worst of its abuses, and keeping the worst effects of its oppression out of the public eye. Nonetheless, these are important questions, involving tens of millions of people and deserving of serious thought and scrutiny.

It is not possible to understand the average US prisoner without also understanding the context of crime, policing, and prisons from which he or she has sprung. Historically, societies based on mutual aid (in the form of small mainly self-sufficient communities), police themselves. Punishments were swift and immediate, usually banishment or exile, later physical punishments and/or fines. Modern policing in America is dissented from slave catching patrols, and grew sophisticated along with growing urbanization, and the breakdown of traditional community order, and their autonomy.

Communities or cultures in which one group steals more than their fair share from the rest can get away with it only by violence, theft, and fraud. Gross social disparities in wealth rely on coercion to keep those who've been robbed(typically of resources that formerly belonged to the community as a whole, or of some other form of extortion by those in power) from taking back what's rightfully theirs. This is social history in a nutshell; the enclosure of the commons by the wealthy and powerful, the rise of elites and oppressive civilizations built on the enslavement of the masses.

People are born free, with a right to exist peacefully, and to enjoy the fruits of their labors, with no one allowed to take these things away from others. Crime is depriving people of these things.

And here's the root of the problem. Crime is a direct product of conditions of poverty and exploitation imposed by those in control. In modern societies the vast majority of crimes are nonviolent ones, committed out of the economic need. Fewer than 14% are violent, and injuries occur in fewer than 3% of crimes. The poor and working classes commit crimes due to the lack of resources available to them, with no other way to meet their needs, or out of anger and frustration at a system that is built on abuses and inequalities.

In a never ending cycle the fear of crime is used by those in power to justify repression and the incarceration of the poor. This is a rush to incarcerate the boldest and most resourceful of those at the bottom before they can demand change. This is a natural outcome of culture of control, as sociologist Ruth Gilmore aptly names it, obsessed with power the steady erosion of civil rights and liberties, and the widening gap between income and lifestyles of the rich and the poor and working-class are merely a continuation of the long-standing government policy of class exploitation. Fortunately, older cruder methods such as slavery and the genocide of Native Americans have been abandoned but the underlying strategies have not changed. These are: 1). Contain and control populations useful to those

in power (but which are a threat if they're united), and 2.). Dispose of populations of little or no profit to those in power. This mimics the classic Roman strategy of divide and rule.

Beginning with Reagan, a vast monstrous experiment has been undertaken in the US, the mass incarceration of the poor, and the criminalization of poverty. Using a carefully manufactured excuse of the war on drugs to target poor and minority communities, all the while the CIA continued his role as an illicit drug importers support friendly and usually unsavory regimes.

Along with the gutting of social programs and the destruction of the social safety net, leaving prison is the sole institution offering social services to the destitute, the US government (and its corporate masters) have re-engineered society on a hitherto unimaginable scale to benefit the elite. The results for those who must suffer from this hideous experiment are our present subject.

A complex, long-term government corporate alliance has worked to impose their agenda on the US, and on the world. In the US the police have been militarized, and under the pretext of the wars on drugs and terrorism, a virtual police state is been created. With the US government acting as the armed protector and enforcer of US corporate interests, globalization has proceeded apace. In practice, this has meant the exodus of manufacturing from the US, permanently eliminating tens of millions of living wage jobs, with new factories built in Third World countries exploiting workers forced to accept bare subsistence (slave) wages. The impoverishment of the lower classes in the US has occurred hand-in-hand with the enrichment of the wealthy, aided and abetted by government policies. Laborers have taken repeated blows (lower wages, fewer benefits, vanishing job security, and so on); permanent unemployment and underemployment have taken root, and social unrest is on the rise.

The same ugly pattern has repeated itself both here and abroad. Attempts by the poor and oppressed to peacefully organize and affect change are subverted and suppressed by the US and its allies. As in black communities in the US, racism, discrimination, poverty, and police brutality produce a toxic brew of crime and violence. These chaotic conditions are used by the government to justify armed attacks on those communities, mass incarceration, and the vilification of the powerless.

Whether used for cheap resource extraction abroad, or controlling an unwanted, disposable underclass domestically, the US military-industrial complex follows this formula, and works overtime to ensure its vision of US world domination prevails.

Within the US, the government has used two main strategies to maintain social control; the deliberate sabotage of civil rights and liberation movements, and the war on drugs (followed by the even more insidious war on terrorism). Since both of these policies have played a huge role in shaping US culture and society and of led directly to the creation of the modern prison system, they deserve a brief review here.

In documents recently released (thanks to civil rights activists filing) under the freedom of information act, the National Security Memorandum # 46 (NSC – 46), issued in 1978 is instructive of US government intent. It boldly states that its purpose is to arrange for the demise of black civil rights and other liberation movements (peaceful or not). Among the policy options this document lists include preventing the rise of genuine black leaders who could unite people in the US, and to cause splits and internal conflicts within movements in poor and minority communities. These options were proposed in the interests of national security.

NSC – 46, and documents like it, were zealously implemented. The list of government assassinations of

minority leaders is a long one – some of the better-known include Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Fred Hampton, Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, and Medgar Evers. Over 150 political leaders for the black Puerto Rican and American Indian movements remain in prison today.

Oppressed communities were robbed of leadership, and were kept confused and divided. These communities did not (and do not) understand they are under constant government attack. They are fooled into believing the government is their protector, when in fact it is their enemy. This belief is reinforced by government-supported minority leaders who sell the party line. Whole communities across the country are kept in a state of low intensity warfare, under the occupation of militarized police forces.

When the government destroyed the revolutionary groups originally started for social uplift and to defend the poor and oppressed communities, such as the Black Panther party the Puerto Rican Young Lords party, the Chicano Brown Berets, Alianza, and the Appallacian Young patriot party, these groups were replaced with the rise of gangs, devoid of revolutionary guidance and vision.

Minority youth were converted from fighting oppression to become pawns destroying their own communities. People were helpless, played against themselves, cast in the old slave mentality, fighting over turf none of them owned.

The media/propaganda machine played its part, glamorizing gangsterism, and promoting pimps and drug dealers as the new role models. Gangs spread rapidly. Today there are an estimated 1 million gang members in the US, and gangs have spread all over the globe.

In essence, the social and political roots of street gangs lies in the success of the government devastation of militant liberation movements. Of course, the government has kept these groups in an unending cycle of violence. As the 1976 Church Committee report of the U.S. Congress noted, the FBI and local police were repeatedly involved in inciting gang wars. They engaged in lawless tactics, and in fomenting violence and unrest. Naturally, the official response of these agencies is to refuse to discuss or address the social and economic problems that contribute to gang activity.

Government agents murdered Bobby Lander, leader of the OG Bloods in Watts in 1989, staging the killing to make the Crips look responsible. Similarly, they destroyed the peace treaty between the gangs in 1986 starting a vicious gang war. Incidents like these are commonplace, and could be numbered in the hundreds of thousands. A history of how police incite and escalate gang wars was written by Stanley Toookie Williams in 2004 (entitled Blue Rage, Black Redemption) before his execution in California. He was the founder of the Crips.

Closely intertwined with these actions, the War on Drugs (conducted long before its official debut in 1989) took the disruption to a new level. How specious and grotesque this supposed “war” is is revealed by the fact that vastly increased police repression and mass incarceration have not, and don't curb the drug trade in the slightest. Dealers move, turf is disturbed, vulnerable families are broken up by the millions, but demand, supply, and profits continue uninterrupted.

The CIA had been supporting allies via drug smuggling since at least the 1940s, with the supposed intent to help fight Communism and protect corporate interests. The CIA aided heroin traders in Marseilles, France, to control dockworkers there; aided heroin production among the Hmong tribesmen in Vietnam, helped Lucky Luciano build a narcotics empire, as the CIA flew heroin into the US by the planeload from Laos, Thailand and Burma, and shifted in for Marseilles and Panama, Lebanon and

Sicily.

In the 1980s, cocaine was shipped to the US by the CIA by Nicaraguan exiles, to finance the notorious Contras. They were the mercenary Army organized, trained, armed and financed by the CIA, to overthrow the communist Sandinistas. The Contras had no popular support in Nicaragua, and were infamous for their atrocities; they were purely a creature of US policy under Reagan.

The CIA funneled hundreds of tons of cocaine, starting with LA, to inner cities into the hands of Bloods and Crips. The LA transfers were handled by a local dealer named Freeway Rick Ross, who turned it into crack. At the same time Uzis and AK-47s were brought in to South-Central LA by the CIA. Reagan's Justice Department ok'd it all in 1982. Killings over the drugs skyrocketed, and gun battles over turf by gangs became regular events.

The CIA's role was first exposed by Gary Webb, a reporter for the San Jose Mercury news, August 18-20, 1996 under the heading Dark Alliance: the story behind the crack explosion. The CIA stonewalled for years, and tried to destroy Webb's credibility. The CIA finally admitted its culpability in 1998, after Congresswoman Maxine Waters (D – CA for LA) validated Webb's story.

On December 10, 2004, Webb was found dead with two gunshot wounds to his face. His death was dismissed by officials as a suicide.

The War on Drugs had a purely negative effect on the poor. By 1990 black youth unemployment in greater LA was 45%. Nationwide, a majority of black males under 25 had been in the criminal justice system, and 40% of black children were born into poverty. What drugs don't damage (in terms of communities, the ability to take action and organize), mass imprisonment will destroy. The War on Drugs doesn't stop drug use (nor was it intended to), but it does take hundreds of thousands of unemployed, angry, and rebellious young men off the streets, creating a vast prison population, and is a bonanza for law enforcement agencies.

In short, the government is fostering a lethal environment of drugs, guns, and gangs. Drug policy in general is designed to control poor people and minorities, and it has succeeded in its goals. Between the War on Drugs and Terrorism, US society has become a prison within a prison. The population is brainwashed and trained into accepting coercion as normal; people accept random urinalysis tests on the job; accept security checkpoints on the road; pat downs and intrusive searches at airports and other transportation hubs; heavy government surveillance of daily life (both via cameras in public places, police and law enforcement agency monitoring, and NSA surveillance of e-mail, telephone and other electronic communications), in short, all the apparatus of a totalitarian state.

The majority of people now accept the right of the government to kick in their doors and tear apart houses whenever they feel like it; the right to stop and search cars randomly, to enter homes secretly and rifle their contents, to kidnap people in the US and abroad, transport them to secret prisons, and torture and kill them (so long as the government pretends it's only doing this to terrorists and other “bad guys”).

Prisons are merely an extension of this system; one end of the spectrum of punishments to keep people obedient and subservient. Police agencies monitor the population to ensure conformity; those who refuse to be controlled are handed down ever more severe sanctions, until they step over that unmarked (but clearly perceived) line, the one that says: forbidden to all but the elite, after which they find themselves prison bound.

Those who are processed into the criminal justice system cannot be understood outside of this larger context. The overwhelming majority are poor and minorities. Many are functionally illiterate, poorly educated, ignorant of politics and current events, trapped by claustrophobically small worldviews and lack of skills. What little education they do receive is obedience training, learning to accept the orders of higher authority without question.

It is a population conditioned to accept state oppression, one that lacks the knowledge to challenge government propaganda, and has only the dimmest comprehension of their true plight.

By societal standards, all but a few are dysfunctional, indeed, have been arrested and incarcerated because of dysfunctional behavior. The media does all it can to amplify this message – that criminals are misfits, disturbed individuals unable to make it in society.

There is a kernel of truth, here. More than a quarter of all US prisoners are, in fact, mentally ill (though this has become a blurry category, since nearly half of all Americans will at some point in their life use psychotropic pharmaceuticals). Many more, perhaps as many as 50%, come from abusive families, have poor social skills, and have a history of alcohol and drug abuse. Thus, three quarters or more of the prison population start off their sentences with grave psychological deficits, problems that remain largely untreated, or are medicated into submission without treating the underlying condition.

With backgrounds mired in poverty; coming from communities shattered by the breakdown of the family thanks to drugs, gangs, guns, and occupation by militarized police, the past, present, and future of most prisoners is bleak.

Once the prisoners past the gauntlet of unaccountable and unchallengeable government informants, selective law enforcement, prosecutorial tricks and manipulations, grossly inadequate legal representation, and the grotesquely lengthy mandatory minimum sentencing, they are then dumped into the brutal human zoo of US prisons.

Whatever efforts may have been made in the more liberal 1960s and 70s at reforming felons are long gone. The last 30 years a steady erosion and educational programs for prisoners has occurred, until in the present day prisons have been reduced to human warehouses.

Whatever programs may be offered are typically window-dressing to reassure the public that something is being done to improve inmates. Such is the case with a law mandating that inmates in federal prisons obtain their GED (high school equivalency diploma) or face further punishments. Some that would've managed to obtain them anyway get them (to no obvious advantage, since a high school diploma in today's job market is virtually valueless, and the knowledge force-fed into GED students is utterly irrelevant to daily life or useful skills). Most suffer through the required 250 classroom hours of tedium and chaos, and move on.

In state prisons, even this pretense is abandoned, as most state governments – reeling under massive debt burdens and their tax income hammered by the 2008 recession, are unable to even adequately house and feed inmate populations. Overcrowding in prisons is endemic; medical care is grossly (often fatally) inadequate, and the system is rife with human rights abuses in crises.

In the face of all these difficulties, intractable problems, and the blatantly obvious need for reform, why is the government so intent on keeping large numbers of people in prison? The majority of prisoners are

nonviolent drug offenders (approximately 60% of federal inmates have drug-related cases), and most of the remaining minority would be far less dangerous, less likely to reoffend, and much better suited to fit into society with a few, cheap apprenticeship programs than with expensive (the average annual cost of each US prisoner equals \$25,000 per year) and wholly negative long sentences served in violent, hopeless concrete boxes. Why, then, does the government insist on a system that needlessly brutalizes and harms everyone associated with it?

Here is the heart of why prisons produce pathological behaviors like beehives produce honey. The true purpose of prison is not to reform; it is to institutionalize – which is to methodically break the spirit of the prisoner, and render him or her harmless to the powers that be.

This is accomplished by keeping prisoners fearful, and by applying ever greater levels of stress. The methods are simple, but effective. Strip the prisoner of individuality, make life as uniform and gray as possible, a form of sensory deprivation. Clothe him in ugly, ill-fitting garments. Ban anything that might give comfort or encouragement as contraband. Regularly strip search prisoners, and search their cells, leaving a mess – with the unspoken message that the prisoner controls nothing – not their body, their meager possessions, etc. Destroy or throw away prisoners property and paperwork, with multiple negative effects. Make visiting difficult and uncomfortable for prisoners and their families and friends, slowly stripping them of outside contact and support. Constantly goad the prisoner toward hostility by encouraging guards to talk abusively to them, and to impose petty rules which are arbitrarily enforced. When the prisoner reacts with aggression, use this as an excuse to increase security measures, and make the prison environment still more barren, intrusive, and cruel. These are all standard daily occurrences for prisoners. Lashing out in response is met with harsher punishments; attempting to gain redress through the prison grievance process or the courts is almost always futile.

In addition to these simple tricks, prison authorities are also adept at playing one group of prisoners off against another, to keep tensions high, encouraging inmate on inmate violence, and making certain inmate hostilities directed inward rather than uniting against prison staff. Changing the racial makeup of prisons, changing the mix of rival gangs in a prison, increasing the number of violent prisoners in a lower security prison, these and many similar strategies are used to guarantee prisoners suffer high levels of stress, feelings of insecurity, and are rendered incapable of effective resistance to the authorities.

The mentality and dynamic of those running prisons is a relentless obsession with control over the prisoners every action and thought, an attempt to control both the outer world and the inner life of the inmate. The goal is to break the prisoner, and/or drive them insane.

There are many other tools of domination available to prison authorities, and these are used depending on the whim of the jailers. Torture is routinely used, but in the US is disguised as indifference or carelessness. To be housed in a cell that is freezing cold with one small thin (and wholly inadequate) blanket, or kept in a swelteringly hot cell without ventilation is a frequent, low-level torture commonly used in US prisons. Another is the use of long-term solitary confinement, as such isolation induces insanity, and works to break the more stubborn sort of rebellious inmate. Providing inedible or repulsive food, to starve a prisoner into submission. Denial of medical care for painful conditions is yet another common torture very frequently employed. There are many such tactics, effortless to impose and impossible to be proven as torture.

The active sort of torture formerly favored only by Third World countries (and now a part of the secret US prison system run by the CIA) – electric shocks, waterboarding, beatings, and the like, are too

much trouble for US prison workers to use. Such tortures have a very bad effect on guards morale (as many authoritarian regimes have discovered), and has a potentially explosive effect if made public, and serves no real purpose. Occasionally a prisoner will be beaten by guards if they threaten or harm a prison staff member, or if they harshly insult a guards dignity – the two unforgivable sins. But physical violence between staff and inmates is too fraught with danger to be regularly employed. It's too likely to remind prisoners of the true prison dynamic – us (inmates) versus them (guards); too likely to result in injury to staff, and so in general is discouraged. The exceptions to this rule are those institutions where violence is out of control, and terrorization of prisoners is the norm, such as with Pelican Bay prison in California, where the most desperate, hopeless prisoners are kept for life.

But torture is merely the most obvious kind of inmate control. Other tools of domination include sedating prisoners with psychotropic drugs; placing inmates in SHU's (special housing units, a euphemism for a jail within a jail, where prisoners are stripped of all but the most basic possessions, and are locked down for 23 hours a day, seven days a week, and are denied the small privileges granted to other prisoners); cutting prisoners communications with the outside world, typically by eliminating phone access, and limiting the number of letters inmate can send or receive; controlling what publications a prisoner can read, what TV programs they can watch, and so on. The array of tools available to jailers to play with prisoners lives is too vast to do more than hint at here. It is an extensive list, from coercive techniques to subtle manipulations. All disempower and harm prisoners to one degree or another, and are the source of the pathologies afflicting prisoners psyches.

This brings us to the original questions raised here – what are the most common pathologies and dysfunctions of prisoners? What are the effects of long-term imprisonment? What sort of people are US prisons routinely creating?

The first question is the easiest to answer.

Based on observations made over more than 17 years incarceration in both foreign and US prisons, I can say there are roughly 10 reactions to long-term imprisonment (and thus ten types of personalities). From most to least common, these are: 1). Those who become aggressive, angry, and vengeful; 2.) those who vegetate; 3.). Those who become mentally ill; 4.). Those who become bitter and hateful; 5). Those who feel at home and enjoy it; 6). Those who become victims (i.e. punks, drug addicts, etc.); 7). The percentage who are predators/psychopaths; 8). Rebels; 9). Those who despair; and 10). The small minority who transcend the experience and transform it into something beneficial.

This is the most to least common list for a medium security prison; other prison environments will create more of some types and fewer of others depending on circumstances. For example, the easy availability of drugs in Thai prisons made the category of victims (in this case, drug addicts) the most common type. Similarly, in super Max prisons, the percentage of predators is much higher, and so on.

Another factor affecting reactions(that is, pathologies) is the length of the sentence, and the amount of time a prisoner has served. The more years spent in prison, the greater the incidence of pathology. A simple formula could be calculated, where the number and severity of pathologies in prisoners is in direct proportion to the amount of time they've spent incarcerated, and the level of security of the institutions in which they've served their time. The higher the security level of the prison, the more restrictions there are, the more intense the coercion, the greater the stress from predatory prisoners and aggressive and hostile guards and staff. The longer the time spent in these environments means the greater the chances the prisoner's personality will suffer distortion and undergo negative changes.

Bearing in mind the fact that the average prisoner still carries all the emotional baggage and dysfunctional behaviors that lead to him or her being put in prison in the first place; that the typical prisoner has poor self-control, has poorer than average social skills, and has in general been brutalized by life and therefore responds with greater brutality to threats and insecurity, these pathologies are unsurprising responses to unbearable levels of fear and stress, applied for years, and often, decades.

The most common response on average (this is not clinical research. It's rough approximation based on years of observation at maximum and medium security prisons) by prisoners is to become aggressive, angry, and vengeful. Like the vast majority of mental disorders – mild or severe, experienced by prisoners, machismo and aggressiveness are the results of deep feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. The feeling that one has no control over one's fate, and that lack of control will harm or possibly kill oneself creates an internal tension that must be alleviated regardless of the consequences. Most prison pathologies spring directly from this attempt to regain some sort of control over one's environment.

Perhaps the reason displays of anger and threatening behavior are so common is they serve a dual function. Not only do they relieve the stress of insecurity (by substituting a – possibly unconscious – mantra of “I am strong ! I am the aggressor here !”), they also deter other prisoners from attacking them, and with luck, get the individual labeled as dangerous. This provides the illusion of power even when one is in fact, powerless.

Additionally anger and aggressiveness are legitimate responses to the all-encompassing, unending hostility and coercion of prison life. It is natural to react to captivity with anger and the desire to lash out at your captors, as anyone who's captured wild animals or been to a zoo will testify. There are few impulses as universal as the desire to be free, and to become hostile when that freedom is threatened.

Again, the intensity of the coercion, stress, and fear determine how aggressive people will become. In maximum security institutions, coercion is taken to its logical extreme, controlling prisoners down to the most minor details of life. This imposes a regime that produces savagery, as a prisoner – unable to make any choices or have any say over their environment, is forced to interact with prison staff who repeatedly taunt and threaten them, and cannot escape the company of other prisoners who are themselves perpetually on the edge of exploding with fury, and behave accordingly. It is unsurprising that beatings and stabbings are daily occurrences in prisons, and killings are all too frequent.

Very similar reactions on a lesser scale come from the overcrowding and living with constant disrespect and humiliation. Many prisoners become rude, obnoxious, and selfish – a crude way of exerting at least some influence over others (even if only as signals to tell people to back off). This is also the source of the very common tendency among prisoners to blame others for their problems, and the refusal to take responsibility for their actions (psychological literature is full of studies on external versus internal locus of control – i.e. whether one is controlled by or controls one's world). In prison this dynamic is turned on its head. When one truly is controlled externally, what is the sane or healthy worldview?

The long-term effects of this kind of anger and violence, especially since it is an effective strategy for dealing with prison life, and is thus reinforced at every turn, create unstable, dangerous individuals. Lack of tolerance and self-control are rewarded by this prison dynamic – it pays to react suddenly and violently to minor threats, with unfortunate consequences for the people have to live with these inmates once they're released from prison.

The second most frequent response to prison (in an average sense – taking the entire population of

those in prison into consideration) is to give in, accept one's subservient childlike role, and vegetate. The prison authorities do everything in their power to encourage this response, as it renders prisoners easily manageable and compliant. A word on this phenomenon is in order here.

The goal of modern imprisonment is institutionalization – the methodical breaking of the spirit that leaves the prisoner an alienated, degraded, dysfunctional individual incapable of living outside of an institutional setting. The prison authorities are all too often successful in achieving this goal (as recidivism statistics prove), and so a substantial portion of the prison population – better than 60%, are either caught up in their own anger – usually acting out against other prisoners, not guards, or are content with a daily regimen and accept it without question.

Conditions of confinement are ideal for institutionalizing people. The relentless boredom and monotony of prison life, punctuated by random, unpleasant breaks in the routine, at once keeps prisoners unsettled as it induces mindlessness. Nothing changes yet nothing is wholly dependable or predictable.

The food is heavily processed, mainly fats and starches, alternately bland or badly spiced, consistently unpleasant. The clothes are nondescript, ill-fitting, designed to eliminate any possibility of displaying individuality or style. The schedule is rigid, and the least sign of defiance to it is met with fierce official reprisals. Get up early (around 6 AM), eat breakfast (or not), go to work; eat lunch (or not), go back to work; get locked in your cell for count time; eat supper (or not), have a few hours of free time, then get locked in your cell again, and the cycle is repeated, ad infinitum.

At frequent intervals, the schedule is disrupted. Sometimes a section of cells (euphemistically referred to as housing units) will be emptied, the prisoners herded onto an exercise yard, while the cells are searched. Prisoners property is frequently destroyed or wrongfully confiscated by guards as contraband during these searches and prisoners have no recourse for recovery or compensation (the US Supreme Court ruled in 2008 in *Ali vs Federal Bureau of Prisons*, that prison officials have the same immunity from prosecution for tort claims as customs officials, and therefore can destroy or discard prisoners property with impunity. Prisoners are offered only one recourse – to appeal for relief to the same authorities that destroyed or sold their property in the first place – prison staff. The administrative remedy process is a mockery of its supposed purpose as anyone who has served time in prison can attest). Cells are trashed by rookie, usually overzealous guards, and thus these searches leave inmates miserable and resentful. Other disruptions are regular occurrences – lock-downs when all prisoners are kept locked up for days or weeks at a time after an interracial stabbing or fight, a riot, when electricity is knocked out by a storm or a generator malfunctions, when high winds render motion detectors on the fence perimeter unreliable, or a half-dozen other similar events. The schedule is broken when guards miscount, a frequent event, such as when a guard in charge of announcing “movements” (brief 5 or 10 min. periods every hour when prisoners are allowed to go from one assignment to another or move locations within the prison) loses track of time and fails to call it, or delays from mass congestion at chokepoints such as metal detectors due to a guard searching inmates slowly, and so on; a host of petty annoyances, reinforced by rules that – if broken, can be used as an excuse to interfere with and harass prisoners on a whim.

The total effect on most inmates is to instill a sense of helplessness and of worthlessness. Their time is worth nothing, their lives are without value. They depend upon the prison staff for every need – for food, clothing, housing, medical care, each of which needs are often ignored or met grudgingly, with poor quality goods and services, reaffirming their subhuman status.

The process of institutionalization is furthered by the insidious use of TV's as babysitters and general time-wasters. TV is the automatic default option for "free time activities". Alternatives are scarce or nonexistent – throwing a ball around a barren field, playing board games with other prisoners, or rarely a set of weights will be available. Prison libraries are usually poorly stocked, and in any case a significant percentage of the population is functionally illiterate. That exhausts the range of legal entertainment for the majority of prisoners, leaving TV as a natural choice to turn to.

Without devolving into a long critique of television (and the mainstream media in general), and to a lesser extent radio – the other main source of entertainment for prisoners, as a whole serves the interests of the powers that be, and works against the interest of viewers. It broadcasts a pro-consumption, pro-materialist, pro-status quo message, which reduces relationships to mercenary transactions, ignores social injustice and economic inequalities, and constantly reinforces a worldview that insists wealth is the key to happiness, despite the fact this belief is false and is fraught with pernicious consequences. The unattractive and the have-nots are excluded from the magical world of TV, except where they appear as stock villains and dangerous monsters.

The negative impact of TV is made worse by prisoners viewing choices, typically (and ironically) obsessed with cop shows, prison shows, violent action dramas, and whatever sexually titillating shows can be found. Reality shows that humiliate, insult, and degrade participants are also popular. Documentaries with educational value – history, wildlife, and so on, are rarely chosen, except when graphic violence or sexual content are present. The effect is predictable – violence is glorified and is seen as the solution to life's problems; women are demeaned and treated as sexual objects, and the poor are viewed as disgusting, dangerous, and – above all – disposable.

This is the conditioning that leads to the institutionalized prisoner; a daily life robbed of unique or pleasurable experiences; a long seemingly endless procession of gray, uncomfortable and disagreeable days, frequently interrupted by hassles, annoyances, and loss. Hopes are repeatedly dashed – legal appeals are lost and dismissed with ever greater frequency, thanks to increasingly severe and conservative courts; outside resources dwindle and are stolen or vanish as years go by; family and friends drift away, offering less and less support over time; and all the while one grows older, but most often no wiser, only possessing a meager set of skills that become outdated and irrelevant in a fast-paced world.

The prisoner is vaguely aware of this steady decay, but feels helpless to do anything about it. Predictably, the average inmate bows to the inevitable, gives up the fight(which the institution makes certain to emphasize is futile), and accepts his or her status as a subhuman drudge; one small part of a system that is utterly indifferent to the prisoner's suffering or fate, except as it affects the prison budget.

Those unable to adjust to this reality are the third most numerous group - the mentally ill. Traumatically induced mental disorders can all be traced to an inability to cope with one's environment. In prison, as with other psychopathology, most of the disorders that emerge are an attempt to exert some control over one's life, even if that control is illusory or the product of disease.

By far the most common mental disorder in prison is obsessive/compulsive neurosis, where the person focuses on aspects of life they can control to an excessive degree. They may become germphobes, scrubbing the walls, floors, and crevices of their cells, washing their hands dozens or hundreds of times a day, take showers over and over, and otherwise obsess about cleanliness. These obsessions/compulsion can fix on almost anything, but in prison generally revolves around rigid, inflexible routines to give the prisoner the sense they are in control of their daily schedule. Whether it's

pacing up and down the length of the cell, walking around the track at certain times for certain periods, obsessing over the nature or quality of food, clothes, hygiene, or a hundred other aspects of prison life, obsessive/compulsives are classic control freaks driven mad by lack of having any real say over their existence.

Not quite as numerous, but still very common are schizophrenics. The medical community disagrees over the incidence of this illness, (some believe the figure is 1% of the total population, and some estimates are as high as 5%), but a large percentage suffer from schizophrenia at any given time. The vast majority of schizophrenics enter prisons as a result of their mental illness. Their behavior, when untreated, is so erratic it virtually guarantees the sufferer will commit crimes.

Schizophrenics have trouble distinguishing reality from their own delusions, and since these delusions frequently have paranoid elements, it's easy to see how things can quickly get out of hand. Paranoid schizophrenia – with its sense of being watched surreptitiously, or of being followed, of being monitored and perhaps controlled by sinister powers, is uncomfortably close to actual reality in today's heavily surveilled, antiterrorist antidrug society. Whether or not paranoia is present, the simplest tasks of daily living are fraught with danger for schizophrenics, as any interaction with others is problematic. Schizophrenia is characterized by ritualistic behavior, rigidity, and fear of change – conditions that are exacerbated by the prison environment.

Since the mass closures of mental institutions by Reagan and his minions in the 1980s and the steady, radical erosion of psychological services for the poor, prison is the last refuge of the mentally ill. Without proper care, schizophrenics find themselves living on the streets, victims of the disease in a system that funnels them towards incarceration. Stealing food, trespassing, digging in dumpsters, sleeping and relieving oneself in public, all are “crimes” (part of the criminalization of poverty), and if one has a lengthy enough criminal record for such offenses, one more serious offense – smoking weed or crack in a park, for instance, is often enough to earn a significant jail sentence. The mentally ill suffer disproportionately from this regime, as they're unable to effectively protest or protect themselves.

Schizophrenics bring their problems with them into prison, and the prison authorities are quick to medicate them, otherwise ignore them and allow them to be brutalized by their fellow prisoners (as their illness annoys others, provoking abuse and violence).

Other common mental illnesses within prison include bipolar disorder, and psychosis, though these categories may be used by prison authorities as catchall excuses to sedate unruly or disturbed prisoners who are not, technically speaking, suffering from an actual psychological disease. At bottom, the mentally ill are largely abandoned to their fate in prison, their sickness made worse by incarceration (where not directly caused by exposure to that environment – i.e. imprisonment).

The mentally ill make up anywhere from 25% to as much as 40% of the prison population, depending on how broadly you want to define psychological disorders. After long periods of imprisonment, no one is truly normal or sane; prison conditions are too profoundly deforming to the personality for that to be possible. Under the unceasing barrage of excessive noise, deceit, dishonesty, violence, coercion, alienation, and many other negative factors, the typical person cannot help but change in fundamental ways (usually unpleasant ones) that tend to foster psychological illnesses.

Volumes could be written about the correlation between mental illness and prison, suffice it to say that if one begins a long prison sentence with a mild personality disorder or neurosis, the odds are heavily in favor that one will finish the sentence with a full-blown psychiatric condition. If one has no

predisposition towards mental instability, but undergoes enough trauma, mental illness is likely to emerge.

With no way for most prisoners to channel negative emotions such as rage, helplessness, fear, despair, and so on in a manner that allows healing to occur, dysfunction and insanity are foregone conclusions. Again, as with so many other pathologies, the lack of control, the high levels of stress and fear, and the steady efforts to break spirits and dull minds by prison authorities combined to promote madness and related chaotic behavior (which in turn justifies more repressive measures by those in power).

It should be noted here that much mental illness in prison is effectively masked by medication; and symptoms can often be minor or are hidden by prisoners due to the stigma. The incidence of psychopathology in prison is far higher than is documented by prison medical staff or in the psychological literature.

The fourth most common pathology/reaction to long imprisonment is the tendency of prisoners to become bitter and hateful. This is understandable, and fairly self-explanatory. To be humiliated day after day, year after year; to be bombarded with messages both subtle and gross that you are worthless and powerless; to have one's every action manipulated; to have every source of comfort and joy smothered or curtailed, together with various other punishments and coercive restrictions often create intense bitterness in inmates psyches, and frequently hatefulness towards authority and society in general. It's not surprising for people to react this way, but it is very difficult to recover from it. The only real path to healing from hate lies in forgiveness – of self, and of others, and this is impossible to do if one is caught up in blame and hatred. The prognosis for prisoners with this type of personality is poor, unless they have someone who loves them deeply who can bring them around to accept the redemptive powers of forgiveness, a supremely demanding job.

Perhaps the fifth most common response to imprisonment is to feel at home and/or enjoy it, a reaction very similar to those who vegetate and accept prison conditions unquestioningly. This is the response of those who've lived in extreme poverty, or who've been institutionalized from repeated trips to juvenile halls, jails, and prisons. For such unfortunate individuals, a warm, relatively clean place to live, regular meals, clean linen, medical care, electricity, hot and cold running water, and other amenities far outweigh the negative aspects of prison.

A substantial percentage of prisoners have never experienced routine or stability in their lives, and find a welcome change from the unpredictable chaos of life without goals, devoid of purpose. Prison life may be mostly meaningless drudgery, but it is undemanding, predictable, and provides a stable environment with relationships that are clearly defined (if coercive), rules that are simple (if brutal), and requiring no real effort or thinking on the inmates part.

Similarly, a large minority of prisoners have failed to acquire the skills, traits, or professions that could provide a living, or otherwise lack the resources to build a decent, comfortable existence. Consequently, they lead lives of bare subsistence, needy, filled with suffering and frequent lack of necessities. By contrast, prison is not so much punishment as it is a home superior to any they've ever managed to obtain (such prisoners are very careful to hide this fact, making up elaborate lies about their lives on the street; this is so common it has spawned a prison truism: “come to prison and be whoever you want to be” – spoofing a US Army ad).

The inmate need not exert him or herself to receive the basic necessities, and a modicum of comfort can be obtained with minimal effort. Prison jobs are usually makework, mindless tasks requiring little

energy and no initiative. As long as the inmate obeys, and keeps disruptive behavior to a minimum, they will receive food, shelter, and (primitive) healthcare, along with entertainment (TV) and the occasional treat (via commissary items sold by the prison). It is a grim, pathetic shadow of a full free life, but it is often better than the life available to someone who is illiterate, uneducated, unskilled, lacks initiative, possibly suffers from alcoholism or drug addiction, and is without a support network of family and friends. As was mentioned previously, prison is the last real social service left for the poor in the US.

For the institutionalized, prison becomes home due to its social structure, to which this kind of prisoner feels a sense of belonging. In prison, one cannot be rejected, so long as one does not violate the convict code. This is the origin of convict culture, the crude mythos of prison gangs and guys that are “too hard for the yard”. Simply by being incarcerated, the inmate belongs to this club, giving a sense of identity, with all the various symbols and insider lingo designed to make each little clique feel unique. Prison tattoos are especially popular for prisoners wanting to belong, though they must be careful to earn the symbols, or occasionally face dire punishments. A teardrop by the corner of the eye, for Mexican-American inmates, represents a murder they've committed. Barb wire around an arm or wrist represents the length of a prison sentence. Gang tattoos – street names, phone area codes, and other names and numbers identify the inmate as a member of a particular group. There are thousands of variations on this theme; all of it to lend dignity to those who have no true reason to be proud of anything. They mark a person as belonging to the prison subculture, a convict who has served time, and is therefore supposedly someone deserving of respect and fear.

For those who have no direction or purpose, are trapped by a narrow, negative worldview, and consider crime as a way of life, prison provides instant social status and a place where one is accepted and treated as an equal, regardless of how offensive, ignorant, or bestial one may be.

Not quite as numerous as those who feel at home in prison (the homeless petty criminal and the gang member/professional convict) are the sixth category of prisoners – the victims. This category overlaps that of the mentally ill, as many prisoners with disabilities, mental or physical, are unable to defend themselves and are bullied or victimized by others.

Like the mentally ill, this group consists of those unable to cope with the prison environment, and fall prey to its many traps for the weak and unwary. Drug and gambling addicts, homosexuals, those with slender or weak physiques, and anyone who displays naked fear or appears to be openly vulnerable, is likely to become a victim of stronger more ruthless prisoners.

As these are the same types of personalities that become victims in society at large, this group is fairly self-explanatory. Those who run up huge debts on drugs or gambling that they're unable to pay will, inevitably, be coerced into some unsavory act (or acts) to repay the debt, or will be injured or killed. Unless they're physically strong and good fighters, homosexuals become punks, forced into sexual servitude. The physically and mentally weakened, and the fearful are vulnerable to predatory inmates, who use that weakness to rob them or manipulate them for pleasure and profit. It is a predictable pattern, and though unfortunate, is wholly unsurprising. The only unusual aspect of this predator-prey relationship is how limited it is; probably fewer than 10% - excluding the mentally ill, fall into the category of prey, surprising when one considers the prison is the repository of social losers and misfits.

Far fewer in number than victims, though their impact far exceeds these numbers, are predators. These are primarily people who – by temperament and conditioning, believe violence is the most effective way to satisfy their needs. Another type of predator, the con man, is smoother, but nearly as coercive.

Included in this category are sociopaths (formerly called psychopaths), who have no conscience or sense of empathy, and take advantage of others whenever the opportunity arises.

Again, this group is self-explanatory, and is a source of endless fascination for the general public. Their activities – in and out of prison, remain essentially the same in both settings. At one extreme are the mass murderers/serial killers who occupy such a large portion of the public imagination and are a staple of the popular media (crime and horror novels, movies, etc.). These are the casually brutal – who beat down anyone who denies them what they want, or use threats to gain the same ends. At the other end of the spectrum are tricksters who use cunning to trap people into untenable situations, then offer them an expensive way out, or run scams using people's emotions – usually fear and greed, against themselves.

Though predators make up a small percentage of the prison population, they are extremely dangerous, and are those who most deserve to be incarcerated. Predators are more common the higher the security level of the prison, with high or maximum-security prisons having the largest concentration of them. Their segregation is a natural process; as the number of complaints from the victims of a given predator increase over time, the predators are pushed into more and more punitive, restrictive prisons (due to the number of disciplinary reports filed against them), until there is nowhere left to put them, except among their peers in maximum-security units.

The majority of these people are eventually set loose in society. Though it's difficult to envision a safe way of re-integrating sociopaths into unsuspecting communities, anything would be better than the current system of kicking inmates out of prison without resources or skills to fend for themselves.

Predatory prisoners learn one thing from the dynamics of prison (which is often perceived by the powerless as the dynamics of power itself, mistakenly so) is that the fearful and ignorant resort to force when their arguments don't hold up to scrutiny – which is always! This action/reaction of challenge met with coercion and force is the foundation of all interactions in prison. No one questions the arguments themselves, or questions this dynamic, they only react against it (the exception to this rule is the role of outsiders, who find prison dynamics odious, but their ability to change the system is rather limited).

This is the stance of the rebel – perpetual challenger of the status quo. Representing only a fraction of the number of predators, rebels still exert a wide influence on others. They fight against the system for many reasons.

Most commonly, it is an ethnic grievance that ignites and goads rebels, as the majority of revolutionary literature that makes it into prison libraries is of this sort. Accounts and biographies like the American Indian movement, the civil rights struggle, and figures such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. are typical. Gangs like to portray themselves and somewhat delusionally, believe themselves to be rebels, but in reality they're pawns in the deadly game of state power, furthering the interests of the elite without any understanding of their true role (which is that of terrorizing communities, a source of fear and hysteria, justifying greater police oppression).

Depending on the educational level of the rebel, there is some overlap here with those who transcend the prison experience. The better educated the prisoner, the greater the likelihood that the search for truth and justice will be undertaken, and once taken will lead to personal transformation.

However, bitterness and racial hatred are strong forces in prison society, as is peer pressure, and the rebel – unless very strong-willed and open-minded, will have great difficulty resisting prejudice.

If rebels take a whole-systems view of prison oppression, such as do anarchists and political prisoners, they may or may not transcend the experience. Usually, prison reinforces existing beliefs and encourages the desire for revenge (of course, the opposite is true of those anarchists and activists who don't become rebels in prison; those prisoners learn their lesson and abandon the fight, or at least pretend to do so).

Given proper motivation in a worthy cause, rebels are capable of disrupting and even destroying a prison, and are almost always the leaders behind prison riots and strikes. Prison authorities do their best to identify potential rebels; isolate them whenever possible, and ship them off to other prisons at the slightest sign of a rebel's organizing prisoner unity. Of all prisoners, rebels inspire the greatest fear in prison staff, and rightly so. Unfortunately, they are a rare breed.

Surprisingly, even rarer than rebels are those who utterly despair. Many attempt suicide, and some succeed in committing it, but the majority of those who despair merely engage in self-destructive behavior, self mutilate, or otherwise injure themselves. Those who have truly abandoned hope may ultimately become victims, or quietly succumbed to death, an easy thing to do in prison where medical care is given only after insistent demands for it on the part of the prisoner and minor ailments can rapidly become fatal maladies. More simply, the despairing prisoner has little trouble stirring up a conflict that turns lethal, or overdoses on drugs.

The final category – prisoners who transcend the prison experience, could easily become more numerous than rebels, the hopeless, predators, and victims combined, were real programs for rehabilitation provided. The absence of such programs, rather than any innate fault of prisoners, is responsible for the present pathetic state of affairs where transcendent prisoners are the rarest type of all.

The prison experience can be like the furnace of a refinery, melting away the dross, purifying what remains. It can be a period of reflection, a kind of monastery of the damned, where the prisoner – free of distractions, and forced by circumstances to contemplate the meaning of their life and society at large, must struggle against their inner demons, and achieve some kind of tranquility or personal equilibrium.

Literature is deeply indebted to former prisoners. Don Quixote was conceived in prison by Cervantes, as were many of the works of writers like Dostoyevsky, Dickens (whose early life was spent in a juvenile workhouse, a prison for children), Marco Polo, Casanova, Viktor Frankel, and a host of others. The fields of philosophy, politics, the arts, all have been profoundly influenced and shaped by the contributions of former prisoners, whose insights came at the high cost of incarceration.

Why do some few gain wisdom where almost all the rest are degraded and dehumanized? The conservative or reactionary would say that it is some innate quality in the prisoner, a latent genius that, forced to the forefront, allows the individual to survive with their humanity intact, or are even improved. There is some truth in this, in that talents vary greatly, and immortal works are the products of those who ask universal questions – with an obsessive curiosity many label genius.

But transcending the human hell of prison does not necessarily require greatness of mind, innate talent, or intense curiosity. It depends rather on whether or not a prisoner is able to discover within a *raison d'être*, a purpose, something greater than themselves that demands fulfillment or creation. This brings forth the best in a person; selfless dedication to a higher cause, the origin of most personal transformations both in and out of prison.

In many ways, this mirrors the journey of the mystical or spiritual seeker, who must endure the dark night of the soul, after which enlightenment may come. Strangely enough this was the precise intent of the Puritan creators of the first penitentiaries; to make prisoners penitent by harsh conditions of confinement, hoping they would then undergo spiritual transformation.

Would that it were so. Without attractive alternatives that offer real hope of achieving a better future, motivation for prisoners to work for lasting personal change is lacking, and won't occur.

There are many, many programs that have proven highly effective at transforming prisoners lives. Programs where prisoners live with and train dogs to aid the blind and disabled; gardening programs where prisoners have contact with growing things, and gardeners from the local community; guided imagery and meditation programs; writing programs with teachers and authors who encourage prisoners to express themselves and publish their work; college degree and trade apprenticeship programs. These, and other programs like them, share two common factors: first, they teach a prisoner that they are capable of achieving something positive, and second, they show the prisoner they are still worthy of affection and love. Which of the two is more redemptive is debatable, though I would argue for the power of the latter to change hearts and minds.

Sadly, public opinion in the US is uneasy with prisoner rehabilitation programs, uncertain as to their efficacy, and easily swayed by the propaganda of reactionary authorities who argue this is coddling prisoners, or making prison too soft. Politicians and those in power manipulate public opinion by promoting hysteria over crime and terrorism, and this creates support for ever-greater military spending, more police powers domestically, and an expansion of the US gulag archipelago. Spending money to reform prisoners is not on the agenda.

This approach, of course runs exactly counter to the interests of the average person, who desires a safer, saner, and healthier society. Such a society requires less military spending (preferably none), less police repression, fewer (or no) prisons, and an expansion of social services so that crime and terrorism are dramatically reduced.

Remove our troops from places where we are an army of occupation, and terrorists then lack a reason for new recruits and funding. Increase spending on schools, parks, libraries, children's programs, and services for the poor, the mentally ill, the disabled and the elderly, and you have a more just, friendlier, and happier society.

But these simple facts are ignored by the ruling elite, who pay lip service to the ideals of freedom, justice, and equality, but their daily actions reveal their contempt for those concepts. The elite are devoted to a power structure that maintains their way of life, the rest of humanity be damned.

As anyone who's had contact with US prisons can testify, the prison system is an abject failure from the perspective of inmates, their families, friends, and communities, and of all who must bear the brunt of dealing with the products and after-effects of prisons (i.e. former prisoners). Prisons don't reform anyone, nor do they make society safer in the long run. They may keep dangerous prisoners off the streets for a while, but over 97% of them are eventually released onto the streets again, more embittered and angry than when they went in.

Prisoners emerge, very frequently from long periods of imprisonment, into a world hostile to ex-felons. Felons are barred from many occupations and licenses – real estate agent, teacher, barber/cosmetician,

working with children or the mentally ill, just to name a few; the list of prohibited jobs is a long one. There are restrictions on where ex-felons can live, on their civil rights (no voting or bearing arms in most states), and many others. More insidious is the widespread prejudice against former prisoners, and an animus that makes life precarious for ex-offenders.

Prisoners get out without skills or trades (programs for job training are all but nonexistent today in prison), without money – typically, a prisoner may get out with a gratuity of \$50-\$100, and a bus ticket to their destination, without contacts or support. Most family members and friends lose touch with prisoners serving more than 10 years. With these handicaps and more, broke, alone, with no skills, what else but failure is to be expected? The system is designed to leave people powerless, resourceless, homeless, and broken. It is self-perpetuating, providing job security for the vast apparatus of law enforcement – courts, cops, and prisons, the means of control over the populace for the elite, and misery for everyone else.

To summarize, somewhere around two thirds of prisoners released from prison are either aggressive and angry, institutionalized, or are mentally ill (to varying degrees). All but a tiny minority of the rest are individuals who've been significantly damaged by the prison experience – addicts, gang members, and so on. All still suffer from the dysfunctions and disturbing behaviors that landed them in prison originally, except those behaviors are made worse by their absorbing years worth of hostility and abuse, both mental and physical. Additionally, they are branded as social pariahs, and are automatically assumed to be dishonest and untrustworthy until proven otherwise.

Such a burden is too heavy for the vast majority of ex-felons to carry. Instead, they slip into the immense, amorphous underclass, leading lives shorn of dignity and dogged by poverty; permanent second-class citizens. Alternatively, they become a drain on society, clogging up what little remains of the mental health system, or re-offending and filling the prisons and jails.

Meanwhile society grows ever-more repressive and mean-spirited, the power structure less tolerant, more militant, and the only growth sector of the economy is a military-prison-industrial complex, and the banks that profit off of them.

The solution to the problems posed by prison, and the pathologies it generates in prisoners, is simple. We must cease to project our fears and hatreds onto criminals, and see them for what they really are; family, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances who've made mistakes, and become tangled with the machinery of government, long a law unto itself.

Many, perhaps most, need serious help in order to change, and to rearrange things to give such help will require a deep, fundamental alteration of the way prisons are presently run.

If such an effort at radical reform is not made, the breakdown of the system as it currently exists is inevitable. No system can produce tens of millions of walking wounded, permanently injured people, without ultimately destroying the society that creates them. The gargantuan, monstrous experiment begun during the Reagan years with mass incarceration of the poor and powerless has nearly reached its apogee. Tens of millions have passed through the criminal justice system, and been injured by it. Another 10 million or so suffer its torments today, with over 2.5 million in prisons and jails and another 7.5 million on probation or parole.

How many people must be tortured by the state before the system is swept away by waves of rage and disgust? Unless we as a society decide to start treating prisoners like human beings, and offering them a

chance at redemption, we will soon find out.