

# Why US Prisons Should Keep the Barbells and TV (1995)

**Jess Maghan. Director of Forum for Comparative Correction**

THE No-Name-Nineties now give us Newt Gingrich and a cast of cohorts seeking to eliminate many program services to the nation's inmates. In a footnote in the Contract With America, everything from weight lifting and recreation to college education courses, drug counseling, cable TV -- even smoking and coffee -- are being eliminated as unnecessary for convicts and detainees in American jails and prisons.

This knee-jerk mentality assumes that hardening the environment will suffice to bring back punishment and penitence and to reform the repeat offender. Jimmy Cagney movies still live in the minds of those seeking change.

Yes, every state and county in the land now has fully equipped, air-conditioned, and awesomely modern correctional centers. These new architectural wonders, often juxtaposed against aging court houses and other public buildings, provide an incredible array of correctional services for inmates: law libraries, gymnasiums, counseling and education, and so on. The comparison of these modern penal facilities to the poor conditions of most public schools and public recreational facilities in these communities is stark.

That these correctional facilities and their quality-of-life programs result from 30 years of litigation and the establishment of civil rights for incarcerated persons merely whets the appetite for returning these "new generation correction centers" back to punitive environments.

The fact that the current United States correctional system has a surrogate national public health role is too abstract for a public frustrated with the tough problems of crime. Corrections are becoming viewed as an unwelcome extension of public welfare and other public dole programs.

The traditional non-uniformed correctional staff consisting of educators, chaplains, counselors, nurses, doctors, and psychologists is now joined by new staff members: law librarians, inmate grievance officers, lawyers, legal aides and paralegal clerks, substance abuse counselors, AIDS counselors, parenting counselors, recreation supervisors, nutritionists, environmental health monitors, OSHA supervisors, accreditation officers, public relations officers, lobbyists, construction and contracting officers, private sector prison liaison officers, and collective bargaining administrators.

The traditional prison is now a complex prison -- an interplay of exigencies and interests that leaves the simple relations of earlier days behind.

The intrusive surrogate and micro-operational authority within correctional agencies of federal special masters, compliance coordinators, and other oversight bodies have further cemented these changes in the correctional environment. The autonomy and authority of correctional administrators is at issue as never before. We now have several systems completing two decades of control under federal and special masters.

These situations have become counterproductive in all aspects. It is time to return these systems to the responsibility of their correctional managers. Only through ownership of the problems and solutions can any permanent change occur.

There is a crisis of control in our correctional system. In the past several months, three correctional officers (federal, state, and local) have been murdered in the line of duty. The number of prison disturbances and assaults on staff are increasing. Joan Dolby, spokeswoman

for the American Civil Liberties Union's Prison Project, said there were about 6,000 documented assaults among the roughly 1 million inmates in US prisons last year. She noted, "Not all of the facilities reported back to us, so the total would be higher."

ACLU figures showed that prisoners committed 10,743 assaults on prison staff members.

Gang warfare, turf disputes, racial tension, and institutional violence are rife. In this environment, a sudden withdrawal or change in inmate services may be disastrous. To exacerbate this situation is sheer folly. Inmate idleness is one of the most lethal factors in maintaining control. With longer sentencing (resulting from "three-strikes" laws), overcrowding and limited work programs, a return to more-restrictive prisons will cause frustrations to erupt on both sides of the bars.

The true political nature of American prisons is apparent in this dangerous situation. We need only revisit the "Willie Horton" episode to grasp it. Prisons, reporting to the executive branch of federal, state, and local government, have always been prey to the ideology of the political majority. Politicians and their cohorts should spend a tour of duty with the correctional officers in America. They would rapidly grasp the fragile importance of some form of distraction from the mind-numbing din of the daily routine in our jails and prisons. Playing to the ignorance of an uninformed public, they are putting our whole nation at risk.

Rather than wax nostalgic for what were abysmal penal practices, politicians should focus on viable labor and behavior modification programs, like boot camps. These programs can complement public sector initiatives, restore deteriorating infrastructures, and restore the legal responsibility for citizens. Prisons should do less, not more, harm for both keeper and kept.

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Jess Maghan, PhD  
Professor and Director  
Forum for Comparative Correction  
23 Old Depot Road  
Chester, CT 06412-1215  
Phone: (860) 526-4324  
Fax: (860) 526-3418

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[www.jmfcc.com](http://www.jmfcc.com)  
[jess.maghan@jmfcc.com](mailto:jess.maghan@jmfcc.com)