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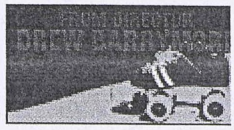

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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Recession Behind Bars

By KENNETH E. HARTMAN

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EVERY weekday morning the prison's not on lockdown, the yard holds its collective breath waiting for the pale-orange package cart to appear through multiple layers of chain-link and razor-wire fences. For most prisoners, this lumbering vessel is their only tangible, physical connection back to the free world. The last couple of years the cart has arrived less often and with visibly lighter loads.

We get broadcast television, so the state of the economy outside is no secret. Our families and friends tend to come from the segments of society that are the worst off in the best of times, and worse off still in times like these. Our mothers and fathers, wives and children, those to whom the ties that bind haven't been unbound by the course of our lives, tell us how hard it is out there.

The first inkling of financial difficulties in here surfaced in the chow hall. All of a sudden prison officials became concerned about our overeating. In the last couple of years, our brown plastic trays have started to look and feel a lot emptier. Even the old staples, beans and rice, shrank into bite-sized portions. Luxury items like frosted cake and meat cut from the carcass of a once-living thing vanished. The new menus, chock full of potatoes and meat substitutes, seem right out of a Spartan's cookbook.

Prison is a world reflected in a looking glass, however. The past 25 years were generally prosperous for California; the economy boomed and fortunes were made in the sunny San Fernando Valley. But during this time, the lives of prisoners became much drearier. We were forced into demeaning uniforms, with neon orange letters spelling out "prisoner," and lost most of the positive programs like conjugal visits and college education that we had had since the '70s. Money was flowing outside the prison walls, but new "get tough" policies against criminals were causing our population, and our costs, to soar.

It is a quirk of California politics that it is among the bluest of states but has some of the reddest of laws. No politician here ever lost an election for being too tough on crime or prisoners. Consequently, all through the '80s and '90s billions of dollars were poured into a historic prison-building boom. Private airplane pilots tell me it's easy to navigate at night from San Diego to Los Angeles and on up the Central Valley to Sacramento by simply following the prisons' glowing lights. Good times in the free world meant, in here, ever-longer sentences, meaner regulations and ever-decreasing interest in rehabilitation. "Costs be damned; lock 'em up and be done with it" became the unofficial motto of the Department of Corrections.

The last time I received a visit from my family, in early July, the air-conditioning in the visiting room had been broken for more than a month. This matters because my prison is in the high desert north of Los Angeles. Temperatures here in the summer commonly rise above 100 dusty, windy degrees. Pack 150 people into an airless room and you've got the makings for human meltdown. Two industrial-sized fans only made a hot situation noisy, too.

The next day I asked one of the administrators what could be done to get the air-conditioning fixed, and he told me an amazing story. The free-world contractor who services the prison's air-conditioning systems had refused to come out to replace the part that was broken, because the state owed the company tens of thousands of dollars in back fees and could pay only in i.o.u.'s. There would be no cool air until the state's budget negotiations were concluded.

Now that the economy is suffering, there is talk of reforming the prisons, of reviving the discredited concept of rehabilitation, of letting some prisoners out early. Some people have even mentioned doing away with the death penalty because of the exorbitant cost to the state of guaranteed appeals. For those of us who have endured a generation of policies intended explicitly to inflict pain, this has a surreal quality to it. After all, it was only a year ago that the state authorities were planning the next phase of prison expansion. Obviously, all the passionate arguments that have been made about the moral wrongs of mass incarceration, of disproportionately affected communities, of abysmal treatment and civil rights violations were just so much hot air. Only when society ran out of ready cash did prison reform become worthy of serious consideration. What this says about the free world is unclear to me, but it doesn't feel like a good thing.

The talk in here contains an element of schadenfreude. When the TV shows legislators complaining about how deep in the hole the state budget is, laughter fills the day room. Our

captor turns out to be simply inept.

From the four-inch-wide window in the back of my cell, I watched, for seven years, the construction of a housing tract across the street — a subdivision we call Prison View Estates. We marvel at the hubris of building chockablock stucco mini-mansions within shouting distance of a maximum-security prison. Today, a year after the gaudy balloons from the grand opening deflated, the row of houses directly across from my window looks to be unoccupied.

From my cell I can also observe the inner roadway on which prison vehicles pass. A fleet of new, shining-white super-security transportation vans still drives by daily. Leviathan hasn't quite adjusted to the Golden State's diminished firmament.

Kenneth E. Hartman, the author of the forthcoming "Mother California: A Story of Redemption Behind Bars," was sentenced in 1980 to life without parole for murder.