

AMERICA THE PUNISHER, AMERICA THE PUNISHED

BY KENNETH EDWARD HARTMAN

So, where do we go from here? Our prisons are filled to capacity and the building sites for more are springing up like weeds of despair all over. The local news sounds more and more like a crime report, a scorecard of the dead, the wounded and the imprisoned. Scenes of grieving families, weeping mothers with clinging children, abound on the 10 o'clock news, while the newsreader intones the stats of the day's killings. To the rest of the world we must appear to be mad, in the worst sense of the word.

The punishment goes on with no apparent end or reason. Politicians, lacking the courage of their convictions—lacking convictions at all—pander to fear and hatred in a *danse macabre* with the media's lust for the profitable program. News is a relatively cheap form of programming: The players are the young black and brown men dressed in stylish sports clothes; the ubiquitous cop in his tightly tailored blue or khaki uniform, highly accessorized with gleaming weaponry and phallic

objets d'art, and, of course, the wounded in a variety of colors and sizes, genuinely bedazzled and hurt by it all.

The genuineness of it all is what attracts us to the scene of the crime. Real pain has a quality that is unmatched for affecting the viewers' emotions and the programmers have seized on this, creating a world ripe for exploitation, preparing itself for it. All the baser instincts of the human animal are on display: fear, anger, hatred, greed and lust, sometimes in remarkable combinations.

The viewers sit in front of their window to the world with bated breath, occasionally glancing out the curtained aperture to the less-interesting world in front of their homes, seeking out that dark-skinned hood being subdued by the cop in the well-groomed uniform. Looking back into that ersatz reality, they have become hypnotized and lulled into a state of hyperperception, wherein all of it assumes the cloak of reality.

The punished languish in the punisher's new cement-and-razor-wire compounds in the

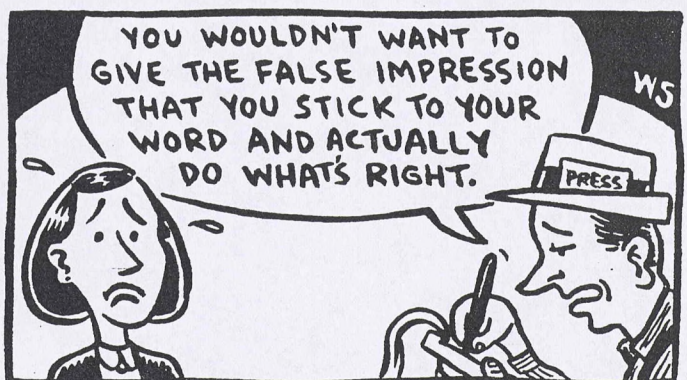
hinterlands of nowhere. The walls throb with the accumulated pains of generations of failure and sadness and scars. The punishers, with their soft-drink-selling, "new and improved"-pitching co-conspirators, fail to see the damage being done, safe in their guarded communities.

And where do we go from here? It seems as though the path is laid out in front of us in a clear and convincing fashion: a path towards a slow decay into selfishness and anarchy. Fueled by the desire to accumulate and acquire and consume, we are devolving into warring tribes of havers and wanters with little in between. Only if a clarion call to rationality and decency and morality without vengeance is heard will we save ourselves from this self-created fate.

Somewhere, in soiled city streets, the lesson is taking root, but it may be too late, too close to the pinnacle of depravity we're rapidly closing in on. One can only hope this America, this potentially best hope for mankind, has not punished herself to death. ✱

Kenneth Hartman is serving time in a California prison for a drug-offense.

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