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A PRISONERS' APOLOGY

by John Apple

"Understanding is the best thing in the world."
- penitentiary proverb

I have been reading Philip Weinberg's Legislative Analysis giving his negative thoughts on the effects to the general public of House Bill 585. By way of response, I feel compelled to ask for equal time & space in order to give my insights on the subject. I grew-up as a child living in North Jackson, but when people ask me where I'm from, I tell them I'm from Parchman. I was arrested in the year of our Lord 1975, and I have spent the better-part of my life in prison. For this reason, I have a unique perspective on many issues currently facing today's society. I believe it was Dr. Maya Angelou who first said that the reason a caged bird sings is because it has a song!

In its 1976 session, the Mississippi legislature enacted Sections 47-5-1, et sequitur, Miss. Code Ann. (Supp. 1976). This bill ~~was~~^{is} known as the Corrections Act of 1976. The Solons were acting in response to a federal lawsuit brought by a prisoner named Nazaretha Gates. The case of Gates v. Collier outlined some very disturbing conditions which were ongoing at Parchman in the time-periods prior

to the early 1970s. I do not want to offend our national conscience, but suffice it to say that some pretty horrible things were being done to farachman prisoners in the 1940s, '50s, '60s & '70s.

In the late 1970s, my father was a member of an advocacy group for prisoners known by the acronym MOVE: Mississippi Offenders Volunteer Effect. MOVE was composed of judges, prosecutors, attorneys & business people who responded to criminal justice issues. Dad would attend MOVE meetings, and when he drove to farachman for our monthly visits, the following is the way he explained things to me. Let us first rewind to the early 1900s.

My grandfather was in the U.S. Military during World War I. The United States and our Allies defeated the nation of Germany. After the Great War, our foreign policy towards Germany was to treat them harshly. (We were mean to them!) This harsh treatment allowed Adolf Hitler to unite the German people against us; so my father & my uncles were in the U.S. military during World War II.

After World War II, we did something different. Instead of exacting retribution in the form of reparations, harsh treatment & humiliation, the U.S. government invested money & manpower into rebuilding the Axis nations. We showed kindness to our former enemies, and made them our friends. Our mercy &

Compassion yielded tangible positive results! Today, the natives of Germany, Italy & Japan are also our allies.
¶ The Marshall Plan worked so well that, in the 1970s, the leaders of our country decided to try a similar approach with "the criminals," or, more accurately, the convicted felons. An institution known as a "department of corrections" came into being for the first time in human history. (Deuteronomy 8:5; Job 5:17; Proverbs 3:11-12; Psalm 94:12; I Corinthians 11:32; Hebrews 12:5-11 & Revelation 3:19).

I would like to insert a reference to the oft-quoted saying of humorist Mark Twain about "lies, damned lies & statistics." I strongly disagree with the argument that two-percent of the people commit ninety-eight percent of the crimes. Saint Paul says that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23 ESV).

The Corrections Act of 1976 was significantly Christian legislation. Basically, in so many words, this is what the Mississippi Legislature told us prisoners ^{way back} in 1976.

You people are in prison because, in one or more areas of your lives, you were disadvantaged. Therefore, the people of Mississippi are going to give you a metaphorical leg-up.

If you never got an education, we will get you into literacy or a GED class. If you

don't have any job skills, we will teach you a trade. If you have a besetting addiction or a substance-abuse problem, we will get you into a 12-step program. If you are psychologically disturbed, we will send you to counseling sessions at the psychiatry department.

If you never have had a job, we will give you a job on-the-farm in order to teach you a work ethic. If you never did get any religious instruction, we will give you a Bible or a Quran and build you a Spiritual Life Center.

You are going to be locked-up for a while, so plant gardens & marry wives (Jeremiah 29:5-7). One day, we will give you a second (or a third) chance and, at that time, we expect you to contribute to society by putting all-we-teach-you into practice.

When you get out of prison, we want you to work at a job & stop living off the government. We expect you to support your families and to pay your taxes. We want you to get-in where you fit-in. And we will help you do all of these things!

Please keep in mind the fact that, in 1976, Parchman was the only penitentiary in the State; and it only housed approximately 1,800 men & women.

prisoners. Today, there are about 26,000 convicts-in-custody in numerous different state, private & joint-county prisons. Compared with overall population figures, there has been a disproportionate increase in the numbers of inmates who make-up the prison population. In my humble opinion, the reason for this exponential growth is that the field of Corrections has become "big-business." (That, in itself, is another subject that I won't even go into.)

Mr. Weinberg complains that the motive behind House Bill 585 is to save money. He overlooks the fact that the original motive behind the explosive growth beginning in the early 1980s of the prison population was that, for every prisoner in MDOC custody, the State of Mississippi receives 30-may dollars in federal money to house us. Convicted felons have become high-commodity budget items.

The good news is that these tax dollars have not been wasted! The MDOC is full of highly cultured, actualized & savvy prisoners who want to go legit!

We are sick & tired of being sick & tired; we are starvin' like Marvin to give our bosses & boss ladies an honest day's work for an honest day's pay; we are ready like Freddie to give back something good to Society!

Many prisoners have young teenagers & grandchildren who are at-risk to commit serious crimes. These grandfathers & grandmothers, Dads & Moms want for their children what every parent wants: we want our sons & daughters to have better lives than we have had.

Instead of publishing Mr. Weinberg's negative expectations of us, (which in the penitentiary vernacular is known as "burning bread,") I want you to tell the public that, upon our release, we plan to have a stabilizing effect on our at-risk children. This is primarily for our own sakes, but it will also benefit society as a whole.

- There comes a time in the life of every people when we have to let-go of our negative emotions, (no matter how justified we think these emotions may be).

Generosity begets generosity; hostility begets hostility; compassion begets compassion; magnanimity begets magnanimity! In the stage-play "Julius Caesar," Shakespeare writes:

There is a tide in the affairs of men,
which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.
Omitted, all the voyage of this life
Is bound in shallows.

It is a statistical & economic reality that House Bill 585 will indeed have the effect of releasing

Large numbers of prisoners back into Society.
The good-citizens of Mississippi Now have a
choice about how All y'all All receive these ex-
prisoners. It my hope & fervent prayer that
you will greet us with tolerance & compassion &
forbearance. Forgiveness is Always timely And
Always appropriate. Matthew 6:14

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love
of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be
with you all." II Corinthians 13:14 (ESV)

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John Apple (MDOC #30021; I Timothy 1:15) was
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