

### "Granddaddy, Come Home"

There is a dichotomy in America that pits our much-ballyhooed "love of freedom" against our disdain for it. In the past, it was people of color--African-American slaves, Native Americans forced onto reservations, Japanese-Americans forced into internment camps--who suffered the indignities of this split personality. Today, it is the families of America's prisoners.

For 250 years, this American nation imprisoned an entire race of people--called them "slaves", and declared that they had no rights white men were bound to respect. Then, they proceeded to build a southern economy--the plantation system--upon the backs of these hapless men, women, and children. These southerners spoke of "God" and of "honor" while inflicting endless abuses upon their captives. They fortified this system of slavery with laws and institutions so that it would last.

When President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, it had a visceral effect upon the South. One southerner called Lincoln's plan "despicable". It would take the deaths of 600,000 men in America's Civil War to convince the South to let its captives go.

Today, Americans speak of themselves as a "forgiving people"--a people who believe in "second chances". These Americans are no more sincere than the men of the antebellum South who spoke of "honor" even as they castrated black men, raped black women, and sold black children.

Slavery was one big prison cell that stretched from Maryland to Texas. After the Union dismantled slavery, America revisited its zeal for imprisoning people with the internment of Japanese-Americans during WWII. Entire families and communities had their lives ripped away for no other reason than America had the power to do so. There was no guilt in those imprisoned Japanese-Americans. They were loyal, honorable American citizens. The guilt was founded in the DNA of people who feel empowered when they imprison.

One hundred and fifty years after slavery, America still boasts the most elaborate system of prisons on Earth. And for many Americans--even today--to speak of freeing someone from one of America's many prison facilities is hateful.

In 2012, Mississippi governor, Haley Barbour, came under fire for pardoning prisoners his last days in office. Incredulous Americans asked, "What's wrong with him?" Real Americans should have been incredulous at those same Americans' incredulity, and asked, "What's wrong with them?"

Proponents of victims' rights were the first to speak out against Barbour. (Their thirst for vengeance is becoming legend.) When they want to accent their fears of a released prisoner, they often speak of a "chilling effect"--a scare tactic, similar to how slaveholders would stoke the nation's fear of emancipation by offering up images of freed black men "roaming the countryside".

These Americans think nothing of a prisoner who is eligible to go home, spending another five years, another ten years in bondage. If you were to ask one of them: "What about the child who longs for her imprisoned granddad to take her fishing?", many of them are



likely to respond, "What about me?" They know nothing of prison, nor of what it does to the families of prisoners.

Be assured: Prison is a kicking. Prisoners are kicked, and kicked, and kicked. It is a figurative kicking, unlike slavery which was a literal kicking. But, it ~~is~~<sup>is</sup> a "kicking" all the same. And, you are not just kicking prisoners, America. You are kicking children and elderly parents. You are kicking the life out of them.

The parallels between prison and slavery are fair. Slavery was about denying a people their rights to a pursuit of happiness. Prison in America--after a while--becomes a matter of denying families of prisoners those same rights.

Of course, punishment is necessary when people commit crimes. But, when that punishment becomes gratuitous; when it drags on and on--when a nation wreaks endless suffering upon one segment of its own people--the soul of that nation despairs.

The institution of slavery was a sick enterprise. There, the slavemaster despised his slave so that he heaped endless indignities upon him. Yet, he seemed to love his slave so that he was willing to see the entire house burn down rather than let his slave go.

Prison is not slavery. But, as long as indignities are heaped upon prisoners as though they are hated, yet they are kept endlessly as though they are loved, we must begin to wonder if the State knows the difference.

Six years ago, I stopped wondering. On the 18th of May, 2013, I embarked upon a hunger strike to protest the treatment of prisoners and their families in America. (For 77 of those days I was locked in a Level V cell within Duane Waters Hospital in Jackson, Michigan. Coming in at 180 pounds, I walked out at 130.) I suffered plenty. Such was my resolve to challenge a system that holds me and my family, and thousands of others, far beyond our release dates.

During my hunger strike--what I call "My days in the wilderness"--I received letters from people around the country, many imploring me to eat, lest I die. Many more tried to assure me, saying, "You will be going home one day." They assume that I, and many other prisoners, will be going home; they assure without an understanding of America's nature when it comes to imprisonments. Maybe I will be going home one day, but "one day" is not good enough.

America's slaves would talk of "One day." They would say to one another, "One day we will be free." They kept on saying that for 250 years. "One day" is not justice. "One day" is what you say when there is no justice.

I ended my hunger strike on the 15th of August, 2013. My fight goes on. There is justice to be had in America. There are babies out there who want to go fishing. I have great limitations. But, if it is the last thing I ever do, I will be trying to help those babies get their granddaddies home.

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