

Beyond the Rhetoric: An inside look at our rotten prison system

Written by Harry C. Alford NNPA Columnist
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In the interest of full disclosure, I have a bachelor's degree in Correctional Administration from the University of Wisconsin. During the summer of 1969, I did my required internship at the Wisconsin School for Girls in Oregon, Wis. These were underage offenders who were found guilty of petty crimes or "bad behavior." My ambition was to change bad human behavior into honorable behavior. The curriculum I was reading promoted the best models of rehabilitation. I was so pumped but the internship showed me the reality of our system of corrections.

None of the girls in the reform school were evil or bad. They all had a messed up family life. The overwhelming majority had no fathers in the home and their mothers lacked a work ethic and were welfare dependent. Role models were nowhere to be found. For those three months, I basically became their father (for Whites, Hispanics and Blacks alike). The supervisors were elated as the girls quickly started changing from bad girls to nice girls with ambition. I enjoyed them and even named my oldest daughter after one of them. My lament was that they would eventually go back to those environments. I would go to Milwaukee and Chicago and visit their households. It was so depressing and showed that their progress would be short-lived. My ambition started to move towards a career in business.

Another reality was that the correctional industry, in comparison with my text books, had no ambition to rehabilitate anyone. Incarceration was a business and mass imprisonment meant business was good. What I didn't know was that "business" was about to take off northward at an exponential rate. Various drugs were imported into poverty stricken communities. The epitome was the crack invasion. Drugs cause addiction and addiction leads to criminal behavior along with the trafficking of the drugs themselves. Prisons started to fill and recidivism was rising at a hopeless rate. Rehabilitation had become a thing of the past.

It appears that the whole thing was a conspiracy. Prison guards unionized and the unions started lobbying for more prisons, stiffer sentencing and anything to grow the prison population. Some entrepreneurs saw a great opportunity and lobbied elected officials. Then President Ronald Reagan did a very awful thing. He announced the "War on Drugs." As David Simon, the writer of HBO's *The Wire* stated, "In effect this was a war on Blacks that evolved into a war on both Blacks and Hispanics." This brought on a new form of slavery.

The first privately managed prison was established in Hamilton County, Tenn. in 1984. The contract went to Corrections Corporation of America. CCA currently owns 65 facilities all over the nation. It is the largest prison management company and is traded on the New York Stock Exchange (CXW) with revenue and assets totaling more than \$1 billion. The industry continues to grow at a rapid rate and has much power in lobbying. Things like "three strikes and out," more funding for new prisons and the courting of judges who seem to be issuing longer

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sentences. The longer the sentence, the more the money for private prison companies. Obviously the crack invasion was a financial boon for all of these private prisons.

With new, fast and big cash comes corruption. An example is Pennsylvania Judge Mark Ciavarella Jr. He and his partner, Judge Michael Conahan, received millions of dollars from a private prison management firm for their "Kids for Cash" sentencing. More than 5,000 youths received extreme sentences and were sent to a private prison in exchange for cash from the executives of the company. Judge Ciavarella sent a 10-year-old to two years incarceration for accidentally causing minor damage to his mother's car. This was typical of these two judges.

Judge Ciavarella has been sentenced to 28 years. Judge Conahan has pled guilty and will be sentenced shortly. But for 5,000 children, their lives will never be the same. These victims were sent to PA Child Care and Western PA Child Care detention centers. The company or companies have kept their names out of the press, which shows you how sophisticated their crisis management firm is. This example is one of many and I am certain much corruption is taking place at all levels and in all geographies.

Their lobbying firms are powerful, too. They got Congress in 1997 to dictate that the Department of Justice should do a test on privately-run prisons. The new federal prison was located in Taft, Calif.. The contract went to Wackenhut (now called The GEO Group, Inc). The test was declared "successful" and federal prisons started becoming privatized ever since.

We have a rotten prison system. If we would legalize drugs, perhaps the prison population (predominantly Black and Hispanic) would start to fade away and private prisons will be a thing of a horrible and ugly past.