

A New Approach Towards Abolishing Prisons.

By
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“Every man condemns the slave trade in general, but it requires the exhibition of particular instances of the enormity of the commerce, to induce those to become active in the matter, who wish well to the cause upon the whole.”

Abolitionist Thomas Cooper of Manchester, England, (1787)

The comments by Thomas Cooper, along with my 30 plus years of incarceration in an American prison and years of reading and learning about the accounts of the slave trade and comparing the slave trade to the present day incarceration of women, men and children, the majority being people of color, I became a life-long advocate for the abolition of prisons. Despite the daunting task of abolishing prisons, I strongly believe it is possible.

To appropriately change the present prison system, the first major step is to choose the correct “can’t be bought leaders” It is much more important to vote for the right leaders than to pursue so-called reform measures, since leaders write the rules, set the standards and offer incentives that drive social and political behavior across county, state and the country. When leaders change rules, you get a sea change across the whole criminal justice system.

When it comes to health, safety and crime issues, government should be setting workable and acceptable standards. What is needed are leaders who are willing to push for standards that are in society’s long-term interest. And this encourages leaders to seek even higher standards.

This is an election year in the United States of America. Yet none of the candidates are calling for the nation to renounce its decades-old imperial posture or to end the prison-industrial complex or to acknowledge the “war on drugs” has been a moral and strategic failure.

The fundamental obstacle facing abolitionists is a basic political one: never having the public squarely on our side. I strongly believe that we can stand firm in our principles while still reaching out to those who might not always agree with us. Obstacles are also opportunities.

Change may be the present-day mantra, but continuity is the undertow. Though not in concrete matters such as prison sentencing, most Americans believe in the possibility of a new script and throwing the old one away. But like the slaves, the ball and chain of history is clamped to most every ankle.

We have to first understand and make clear this is not about us personally. It is about what we are trying to do for our country. We must execute our objective. We must think it, say it over and over again and most importantly, get the job done. Never give up!

So if we are serious and want to abolish prisons, we must not fool ourselves. A quick glance at the past 200 plus years will clearly show most reform programs have not worked to reduce the high rates of recidivism. There are 2.2 million women and men incarcerated in America. If we do not change political and social leaders, present day reform measures can not halt the out-of-control juggernaut of the criminal justice system and the prison industrial complex.

Profound changes in policy rarely, if ever, occur without intervention by a large impassioned public movement, e.g. the Civil Rights and Anti-Vietnam War movements. We must make clear whose concerns will be the center piece of our message. We must also make clear what is presenting a clear and forceful answer to the need for new leadership. Whether that means one preponderant leader or host of specialized leaders. As soon as such leaders are found let us move swiftly to support and protect them. Reaching the unengaged person requires we be persuasive and impressive.

We must assemble a broad and committed decentralized coalition and we must go where the people are by building our own apolitical internet terrain. We should use technology that will reach and mobilize people to become involved. We can use the popular social networking site Facebook for targeting and organizing. Other great sites are MySpace and BlackPlanet. We must build our own social and political networking portal to connect and empower people. The site MyBO, invites users to network, blog and promote grassroots events. We must make clear that our organization trusts members to post whatever they want, from fundraising ideas to blog commentaries. We need incisive, cutting-edge political bloggers. They key is to decentralize. This kind of self-starting activism is crucial. The traditional old-style top-down centralized organization structure no longer works.

We are at a pivotal moment in time. We face huge odds, yet I continue to strongly believe that people who are dedicated can bring major change in the criminal justice system and help bring about the abolition of prisons. What finally matters is not the company one keeps but the cause one champions. Let us move from vision to action.

Thank You.