



Department of Justice

REMARKS

BY

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AT THE

BUREAU OF PRISONS'
CONFERENCE ON
THE HISTORY OF FEDERAL CORRECTIONS

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It is a pleasure to join all of you from the Bureau of Prisons today -- for this 100th anniversary of the founding of the Federal Prison System -- and to welcome those many Bureau retirees who have come from all over the country to attend this centennial commemoration of the Three Prisons Act.

Some might blink at the very idea of commemorating what a former director of the Bureau of Prisons called "the unhappy task of punishing people," but I take a different view. That task comes from a major public responsibility you have honorably shouldered -- the Government's duty to insure public security and domestic tranquility through the safe, humane confinement of criminal offenders. And we know what confinement of criminals does to increase security and tranquility -- for example, that the higher the rate of incarceration, the lower the rate of violent crime.

We relearned that important truth during the recent Crime Summit when Dr. Steve Dillingham, Director of our Bureau of Justice Statistics, reviewed the pattern of violent crime over the past three decades. He demonstrated an inescapable, inverse ratio between imprisonment and violent crime.

* During the 60s, the country indulged in a largely permissive attitude toward crime. Rates of incarceration fell 17 percent, and the violent crime rate more than doubled.

* During the 70s, we started getting tougher on crime. Rates of imprisonment rose almost 40 percent, and that rampant increase in violent crime was cut almost in half. That's according to the Uniform Crime Report. The National Crime Survey reported that the violent crime rate stayed almost flat -- with only a six percent increase.

* Then in the 80s, we took a real no-nonsense attitude toward criminal offenders. We doubled the imprisonment rate, and guess what followed? Violent crime rose only 11 percent, according to the Uniform Crime Report. And the National Crime Survey shows an actual decrease in violent crime during this past decade -- down by 13 percent.

Let me draw that lesson very clearly. In the 60s, closing down the prisons helped double the violent crime rate. By the 80s, we'd turned that situation around. We have now doubled imprisonment for violent criminals, and not only stopped any rise in the violent crime rate, but significantly curtailed the actual dangers out there on our mean streets.

And that protects what I call every American's first civil right -- the right to be free from fear on our streets, in our homes, and in our communities.

Of course, we know who must bear the real burden of this large improvement in security and tranquility -- those who are running our increasingly overcrowded prisons. In the case of our federal system, at 160 percent of capacity. That is a tough assignment, I know, and I compliment you on a job you are already doing. But one helpful thing about a centennial is you often find out how your former counterparts faced pretty similar problems one hundred years ago.

Take the Three Prisons Act we commemorate today -- passed by Congress in 1891, but without, please note, any appropriation. Five frugal years later, the Department of Justice had to take over the military prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to house federal prisoners. A year after that, Congress finally found the money to buy 1000 acres a few lots over for the first federal penitentiary. It only took another ten years to build Leavenworth.

That gives you a good start on a Trivial Pursuit question: name the three prisons established by the Three Prisons Act. Besides Leavenworth in 1906, the other two were the Atlanta Penitentiary, completed in 1902, and a small territorial jail on Puget Sound, taken over by the Department to become McNeil Island Penitentiary. But here is a not so trivial question: how long before Congress funded another federal penitentiary?

Answer: not until 1925. For the entire first quarter of this century, the Three Prisons were the federal prison system.

By then, overcrowding had all but overwhelmed that meager system, and the Government finally responded to the prison population pressure. You honor today by this conference many who pioneered in prison reform -- including Assistant Attorney General Mabel Walker Willebrandt, the highest ranking woman in the Federal government in 1925. General Willebrandt -- among the earliest of the FEW -- undertook an ambitious and successful prison reform program that, in 1930, established this Bureau of Prisons.

Today, this Administration is responding as ambitiously -- and forthrightly -- as they did back in the 30s, only to far greater prison population pressures. The nation is criminally caught in the throes of the drug wars, and we know the impact these hostilities have upon our criminal justice system -- and consequently, on corrections. The Bureau's inmate population is over 61,000, up from approximately 24,000 just a decade ago. When new Sentencing Guidelines were legislated in 1984 -- providing tougher sanctions, particularly against drug criminals -- the crowding rate was already 130 percent of capacity. That quickly rose to 160 percent of capacity, with the ever-growing influx of drug offenders.

Drug offenders presently exceed 54 percent of the federal prison population. The bleak prognosis is 69 percent by 1995 among a projected 98,800 inmates. There are estimates as high as 125,000 confined Federal offenders by the end of the decade. We could, of course, ease up on sanctions, but it has already been proven how much jail time does to reduce street crime. The right solution is to go forward with the construction of more prison cells, not backwards by opening more prison turnstiles.

The good news is, as of January 1, the Bureau has 36,939 new beds funded, under design, or in some stage of construction. The FY 1992 budget alone includes a request for 3,600 new beds, at a cost of \$316 million. This prison expansion program will reduce the crowding level back to a more manageable 130 percent of capacity by 1995. And I might add that asset forfeiture -- often the rich fruits of seizures from drug crimes -- has contributed almost half a billion dollars toward these new prison beds.

That is also the hard news about why many of you must, and will, continue on duty -- to insure public safety by confining criminals within our prison system. But over the chapel of one federal penitentiary -- Lewisburg in Pennsylvania -- are engraved some words that I think also suit modern corrections. They were said by another Attorney General -- long ago in England, where he held his office under King James. He was Sir Francis Bacon.

"That which is past and gone is irrevocable," Bacon's words are quoted over the Lewisburg chapel. "Wise men have enough to do with things present and to come."

And I think those words are not only the right solace for prisoners, but also sound counsel for correctional officers. I take real pride whenever I find you developing new inmate management strategies that have to do not with past offenses, but with things present and to come. Much to be admired, I believe, is the Bureau's philosophy that every staff member is a correctional officer first, and a specialist second. Security is then everybody's responsibility, and both order and safety can be maintained at a very cost-effect staff/inmate ratio.

I would single out three Bureau programs, which other prison systems might well emulate.

First, you have long recognized Education -- and its vital precursor of Literacy -- as the two best goals any confined offender can pursue in hopes for things to come. With minor exceptions, all Federal prisoners who test below the 12th grade must enroll in a basic literacy program, with the goal of obtaining a GED. All promotions in Federal Prison Industries and institution assignments beyond the entry-level grade are made contingent on successful completion of a GED program. It works.

Second, you have managed to use prison employment to combat the adverse impact of overcrowding. Federal Prison Industries (trade name UNICOR) now employs 25-30 percent of the available prison workforce. While I realize some legislators have challenged UNICOR's status in the federal marketplace, I am confident that the management value of prison industries -- and their critical importance as prison populations rise -- will be publicly understood, and heralded. Be assured this Administration opposes efforts to restrict UNICOR's opportunities.

And finally, you provide high-quality drug treatment services to offenders -- 47 percent of whom enter prison with moderate to serious drug habits. And contrary to popular opinion -- which has our prisons awash in drugs -- results of testing over the last two years reveal an approximate 2 percent positive rate for illegal substance use behind bars -- a remarkably low rate, even for most society outside prison walls.

For all these accomplishments, you are to be congratulated. Many other prison systems around this country are paying heed to your fine programs. As a society, we are rapidly approaching the moment when some iron door will slam shut behind our one-millionth prisoner. That brings us a long way from the spare populace of Three Prisons, and we need to better prepared to deal with this large a segment of former society.

So I especially commend you for the innovations you have introduced into corrections as alternatives to incarceration, such as home confinement and electronic monitoring. And I am following with keen interest your latest experiment with intermediate sanctions, an intensive rehabilitation program adapted for youthful offenders from the military boot camp model. Only along such new pathways are we going to guide our growing prison population back into our larger society -- as men and women who have recovered their freedom -- and I congratulate you, once again, for leading the way.