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OPINION

## Transforming America's prison culture

Reform is best way to stop the cycle of violence, recidivism in nation's penitentiaries

By Marc H. Morial

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What happens behind bars in the jails and prisons of this nation doesn't stay there. It trickles out into the community. Every year, 13.5 million people — a disproportionate number of them African-American — pass through our nation's prisons and jails, with a vast majority — 95 percent — eventually re-entering society.

Some leave their periods of incarceration as hardened criminals anxious to return to a life of crime. Others do not. In the 1990s, harsher punishments for drug crimes fueled the current prison population boom. And in light of the FBI's recent announcement that violent crime was up 2.5 percent in 2005, the problem isn't likely to go away anytime soon.

In our nation's efforts to "get tough on crime," we've lost some of our compassion for our fellow man. We've let cynicism undermine our hope that rehabilitation is possible for all people — no matter how dastardly their deeds.

All human beings deserve a modicum of respect and dignity. But in our nation's prisons, you really have to wonder if that standard is being upheld. Inhumane conditions — driven by overcrowding, financial woes and understaffing — have pushed some prisons to the boiling point. They're not places where prisoners have a decent chance at rehabilitation. They are places where criminals become better and more violent criminals.

Mind you, corrections is a tough profession, and a poorly understood one. Corrections officers often work long shifts in tense, overcrowded facilities without enough backup, support or training. Many wardens run aging and understaffed facilities and deal with a workforce in which experienced officers are likely to leave the profession for better-paying, less-stressful jobs just when they're ready to become good mentors for new recruits.

These pressures cause stress, injury, and illness among the prison workforce, and contribute to a dangerous culture inside. The tension is further exacerbated by racial and cultural differences.

Because the exercise of power is an important part of a corrections officer's job, it's natural that in situations where staff who are under stress, inexperienced, and lack training are more likely to abuse their power.

In prisons where the culture has devolved, rules aren't enforced, prisoner-on-prisoner violence is tolerated, and antagonistic relationships can erupt into overt hostility and physical violence.

In the 1960s in my home state of Louisiana, the maximum security state penitentiary in Angola had a reputation for being "America's bloodiest prison."

I don't know what prison carries that distinction today, but I can say with some confidence that it is no longer Angola. While reforms began decades ago, the most dramatic changes occurred over the past 10 years as the prison's fundamental institutional culture was profoundly transformed.

Prisoners at Angola are treated with dignity and respect by everyone who works there, and prisoners are expected to reciprocate that treatment. Prisoners have been given hope through education and morally based programming, and responsibility through meaningful employment. The fair and reliable enforcement of the rules by staff and prisoners means less violence.

For the past 15 months, I have served as part of the 20-member bipartisan Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons. We have visited prisons all over the nation and listened to experts — in search of ways to make prisons safer not only for staff but also inmates — and in turn — our society at large.

We recently released a report, called "Confronting Confinement" that highlights a wide array of dangerous conditions surrounding incarceration — the violence, poor health care, inappropriate segregation, lack of political support for labor and management, weak oversight of correctional facilities and lack of reliable data on violence and abuse rates.

Of 30 practical reforms recommended, we called for expanding the capacity of the National Institute of Corrections to effect positive institutional culture change. The NIC already has a very promising program in place — the Institutional Culture Initiative that provides tools and training to prison staff change the culture of their institutions. The program helps them learn to resolve conflict through communication — particularly across cultural and racial differences — rather than violence.

In an era when everyone and their uncle seems to want to "get tough on crime," I realize that institutional "culture change" sounds like a soft approach. But our commission heard overwhelmingly that when one changes the culture one changes the entire institution.

Prisons that add punishment on top of the sentence will be violent places. Prisons that treat prisoners with basic human dignity and respect are more likely to be places where violence and abuse are the rare exception and not the rule. Let Angola serve as a positive role model for prison reform. If profound culture change is possible in Angola, it is possible anywhere.

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## Beyond the Voting Rights Act

Civil rights leaders are correctly focusing on the hijacking of proposals to renew the Voting Rights Act by a hand-



GEORGE E. CURRY

ful of Southern Dixiecrats posing as Republicans. This is especially egregious considering President Bush, Republican leaders in the House and Senate as well as a clear majority of the members, both Democrats and Republicans, have expressed support for renewal of the landmark legislation. Allowing the Democrat-turned-Republican minority to hold the legislation hostage, even temporarily, represents a failure of leadership on both sides of the aisle.

But there is something even more sinister than Dixiecrats acting like they're still fighting the Civil War — the deliberate campaign to nullify ballots cast by African-Americans. After all of the voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives, if this scheme is not taken on, it won't matter whether African-Americans vote in national elections or enjoy the protection of the Voting Rights Act.

This point was brought home by Greg Palast, an investigative reporter for BBC Television and the Guardian newspapers, at the

recent Rainbow/PUSH national convention in Chicago. In both his public speeches and his latest book, *Armed Madhouse*, published by Dutton, Palast recounts in excruciating detail how disqualified ballots, most of them cast by African-Americans, were enough to have easily defeated Bush had they been counted.

In his book, Palast notes that CNN's 2004 exit polls broadcast after midnight Election Day, showed John Kerry defeating Bush among women voters by 53 percent to 47 percent. Among men, Kerry defeated Bush 51 percent to 49 percent.

"So here's your question, class. What third sex put George Bush over the top in Ohio and gave him the White House?" Palast explains it this way: "The nasty little secret of American democracy is that, in every national election, ballots cast are simply thrown in the garbage — millions of them. Most are called 'spoiled,' supposedly unreadable, damaged, invalid. They just don't get counted."

And the consequences are disastrous. "In Ohio, there were 153,237 ballots simply thrown away, more than the Bush victory margin," Palast writes. "In New Mexico the uncounted vote was five times the Bush alleged victory margin of 5,988. In Iowa, Bush's triumph of 13,498 was

overshadowed by 36,811 votes rejected."

Officially, 1.8 million uncounted votes were reported to the federal Election's Assistance Commission. That would be bad enough, but Palast reports that those are only partial numbers and the final figure exceeds 3 million. This massive political disenfranchisement is carried out in four basic ways:

1) Provisional ballots — allowing voters to cast votes that are to be counted later, provided that they can be verified. "Republicans won by the rejection of provisional ballots that were cast in Democratic precincts." The author says 1,090,279 provisional ballots were tossed out.

2) Spoiled ballots — created when writing is too light to be read or the card is not punched hard enough, sometimes creating "hanging chads." Discarded votes: 1,389,231.

3) Uncounted absentee ballots — 526,420 in 2004.

4) Barred voters — "There's the purge of 'felon' voters whose only crime is VAWB, Voting While Black," Palast writes.

To see how these denials changes the margin of victory — or defeat — we only need to look at the 2000 Florida results.

"Black folk cast 54 percent of the 179,855 ballots 'spoiled' in Florida in that election," Palast observes. "Given the nearly unanimous support for Democrats among those

black voters, candidate Al Gore undoubtedly was the choice of the vast majority of those votes thrown in the spoilage bin. Indeed, if we can calculate, with high-accuracy, that Gore's total vote in the state would have been higher by 77,000 if all spoiled votes had been tallied — in a race officially giving the presidency to Mr. Bush by 537 votes."

In 2004, it was the same story but a different state, this time Ohio. The uncounted votes in the Buckeye state came to 239,127. Bush's margin of victory was 118,599. In both Florida and Ohio, the secretary of state — the person responsible for overseeing the election — was co-chair of Bush's presidential campaign, representing a clear conflict-of-interest.

During the last presidential campaign, Palast got a hold of a GOP purge or challenge list used to depress the black vote. The list was compiled from predominantly black zip codes and the would-be voters were guilty of one thing, as Palast pointed out — voting while black.

Yes, it's crucial that we renew the Voting Rights Act. But our work must not stop there. We must make sure that once we do vote, it counts and is not used as part of a scheme to rig the election.

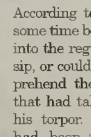
GEORGE E. CURRY is editor-in-chief of the National Newspaper Publishers Association News Service and BlackPressUSA.com.

## What would Rip Van Winkle think?

Play a game with me. Let's play "North Carolina-Rip Van Winkle."

If the game has a familiar ring, it is because North Carolina has been called the "Rip Van Winkle State," probably because the state once had a backward reputation.

Van Winkle, you remember, fell asleep before the American Revolution began when he woke up 20 years later. George Washington was President of the United States.



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According to Irving, "It was some time before he could get into the regular track of gossip, or could be made to comprehend the strange events that had taken place during his torpor. How that there had been a revolutionary war that the country had thrown off the yoke of old England and that, instead of being a subject of his Majesty, George III, he was now a free citizen of the United States."

In our game we will pretend that one of our parents (or grandparents) fell asleep in 1957 and woke up today. What are the things here in North Carolina that would surprise them the most and would be the hardest for

Consumer technology, women in leadership move North Carolina ahead

them to understand and deal with?

In 1957, North Carolina's economy was largely driven by agriculture and traditional manufacturing. The University of North Carolina won the national collegiate basketball championship with an all-white team. The schools and public facilities of the state were almost entirely segregated. The Research Triangle Park was hardly more than a gleam in Governor Luther Hodges' eye.

If our parents had gone to sleep back then, what would be most shocking if he or she woke up just now?

Of course, our North Carolina Rip Van Winkle (let's call him "NC Rip") would be awed by the consumer technology the computers, the email, I-pods, the World Wide Web, the cell phones, digital cameras. NC Rip would be amazed at the labor saving and convenient machines that make life in our homes so easy. High definition color TV would knock him off his feet.

But I don't think it would take NC Rip very long to get used to these things. Usually,

even the most dramatic new consumer devices quickly, instantly, become necessities.

The changes that might not be so easy for NC Rip to believe and accept might more likely be in the areas of race, women's roles, business procedures, and religion.

If NC Rip attended a "mainline" protestant church on the first Sunday after he woke up, he might find an ordained woman in the pulpit or serving communion. He might even hear people in church talking about how "backward" it was that some other church groups had not yet ordained women.

Whatever NC Rip's religion, his ideas about women in leadership positions would be challenged. Do you think he would believe that the most recent presidents or chancellors at UNC (System), North Carolina State, and Duke were women? Could he accept this change?

Coming from a time when there were strong lingering prejudices against Catholics, would he understand that our governor and the former president of UNC are Catholics and nobody ever

thought to make an issue of it?

Would he believe that he could not light up a cigarette in most buildings in North Carolina?

Or that, while its 1957 team was all white, UNC's 2005 UNC national championship basketball team's starting team was all black? Or that the state has three major league professional sports teams? That one of them is owned by a successful black businessman? That another played this week for the world's championship? Or that a woman is the editor of the state's largest newspaper, and a black is the publisher of the second largest?

Now it's your turn. What else would sweep our N.C. Rip off his feet?

After a period of adjustment, Washington Irving wrote that the original Rip "now resumed his old walks and habits; he soon found many of his former cronies, though all rather the worse for the wear and tear of time, and preferred making friends among the rising generation, with whom he soon grew into great favor."

I wonder if our NC Rip would also be able to adjust so well. What do you think?

D.G. MARTIN is the host of UNC-TV's "North Carolina Bookwatch," which airs on Sundays at 5 p.m.