

During the 3 decades I've been a political prisoner i've witnessed the exponential growth in the number of prisoners, the boom in prison construction, the accelerated deterioration of conditions and the elimination or reduction of programs and services for prisoners. These changes have created a prison environment that is more toxic, inhumane and hostile and has elevated alienation to the highest level among prison population nationwide. Historically, the u.s. prison system has prioritized punishment over rehabilitation, but up to not long ago, it still offered a modicum of programs and services that kept alive the notion that prisoners could be rehabilitated before being released to their communities. Unfortunately most of those programs and services in the area of education, vocational training, health and recreation have been cut or reduced. Even the jobs in UNICOR, that helped prisoners earn money to meet some of their most basic needs, have been reduced and the pay has been lowered. The end result has been more and more idleness and more and more alienation.

It's important to understand that these changes aren't the byproduct of happenstance, but rather of well calculated government plans initiated and implemented by the Richard Nixon Administration (RNA). Using the law and order slogan as a cloak and the recommendations of the Kerner Commission on Crime, the RNA put together the infrastructure needed to carry out its nefarious plans. It created the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), the Law Enforcement Administration Agency (LEAA), and enacted draconian anti-drugs laws and the RICO Act. After that, the alleged War on Drugs was on. But the real war was against the ghettos, targeting primarily the African American, the Latino and the Native American communities. What the war on drugs did was to commodify drugs making them a lucrative business for banks and drug kingpins. What the real war did was to criminalize poverty, filling the prisons with mostly young African Americans, Latinos, Native American and other minorities and creating the conditions for the explosion of the population and prison construction, the exponential growth in the number of prisoners and the creation of the Prison Industrial Complex.

The state governments began replicating the Nixon plans. In states like New York, under the governorship of Nelson Rockefeller, and California, under the governorship of Ronald Reagan, draconian anti-drug laws were enacted and more and more prisons were built and filled with African Americans, Latinos and other minorities. Most of these prisoners had been convicted of small drug related crimes, and /or were addicts or nickel and dime drug sellers.

Reagan created the mythical "Welfare Queen" - his big racist card-, who lived royally by defrauding the government in order to kick start the Nixonian model of a war on crime and the alleged War on Drugs. Because Reagan had experience with the prison construction explosion, he just accelerated it once he was in Washington by enacting more draconian anti-crime and anti-drug laws. Under his administration, the construction of federal prisons started booming, and more and more African Americans, Latinos and other minorities filled them. And just like the RNA had done with the CIA's Operation Phoenix during the war against Vietnam, using heroin to fund it, Reagan's CIA used cocaine to fund the CONTRAS in order to defeat the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. And the cocaine, just like the heroin a decade earlier, served to fuel the commodification of drugs and the criminalization of poverty. It was the cocaine to fund the CONTRAS that inundated the ghettos, started the crack epidemic and exponentially augmented the number of young African American and Latinos in the Prison Industrial Complex. A decade later, the Reagan and Bush administrations picked up Richard Nixon's baton and started their own alleged anti-crime and war on drugs campaign.

The Bush Administration continued on the same path. Bush invented the image of Willie Horton -another racist calling card- to push his tough on crime agenda, and to engrave it in the minds of the majority of the American public. While the prison population grew more and more, the alleged war on drugs was filling the coffers of the banking industry and of the real drug kingpins. Who can forget the \$100 million deposit Raúl Salinas de Gortari made just in one day in Citibank? While Raúl was sent to prison, no one in Citibank was ever indicted for money laundering. And who owns Citibank? Who can forget Continental Bank in Florida and its drug money laundering operation? And what about major multi-national corporations profiting from the criminalization and commodification of poverty? The prison construction boom was so great that both Reagan and Bush made a big push for the privatization of prisons. Major multi-national corporations started the prison for profit business and commodified and criminalized poverty even further, earning big profits for doing it.

Many states started emulating the federal model of Super Max Penitentiary and across the nation many of them were constructed. Because I spent over 12 years in such prisons I know how deleterious they are. Amnesty International had called them a "legal crime." But they really are torture chambers that can destroy the mind and the spirit of any prisoner. And what makes these prisons more toxic and inhumane is that many mentally ill prisoners end up in there. Once the state mental hospitals were closed across the nation, many mentally ill persons were, and still are being, convicted and sent to prison. And some of them ended up in the Super-Max or the solitary confinement penitentiaries.

Clinton's and Bush Jr.'s continued criminalizing poverty furthering the expansion of prisons and prisoners. Almost 2 and a half million prisoners are being warehoused in the Prison Industrial Complex. What awaits these prisoners, who for years have lived under such inhumane, toxic and hostile conditions? What does society expect of them when they are released back to their communities? How can the government justify what is happening inside its Prison Industrial Complex? Can the commodification and criminalization of poverty be brought to an end? Let's dare to struggle to eradicate the ogre that has become the Prison Industrial Complex.

To end what I have written, I would like to do it with a bit of good news, Richard Nixon and Otto Kerner left their offices in disgrace, a good example of the hypocrisy of the campaigns to promote law and order.