



Patriotically Incorrect

If you consider the Bush administration a success, then how do you define failure?

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Friday, January 28, 2005

Not-So-Fun House

America is not as conservative as the character of our government would seem to suggest. Our government has been skewed to the right on many fronts that tend to reinforce each other, making our government an ugly, funhouse version of the American people. The front I'm examining today has to do with the conservative demographic distortion created by our harsh sentencing laws and booming rural prison industry.

Mandatory sentencing guidelines (now under review, thankfully -- we'll see where that leads...), "three strikes" rules and disproportionately harsh penalties for non-violent drug offences have caused an explosion of our prison population, nearly doubling it in the '90s. Cecil Adams over at The Straight Dope [confirms](#) that "The only countries [China and North Korea] that *might* put away more of their own people than we do are both notorious authoritarian states."

Scared Democrats are to blame for this just as much as "Law and Order" Republicans. They fear being labled "soft on crime" or "soft on drugs" so at election time they often try to out-tough the Republican on law and order issues. The resulting prison boom of the '90s has begun to wreak its long-term havok on the spineless Democrats who collaborated with bullet-head Republicans on the fatally flawed War on Drugs.

Here's how this travesty works:

- Harsh, inflexible sentencing guidelines and pitiless sentences for minor drug offences swell the prison population with mostly urban, mostly minority inmates.
- New prisons are built, usually in rural, mostly white counties.
- These counties' populations suddenly spike, and their average income plummets, due to the warm bodies they've just imported who make little to no money as prisoners.
- The poor rural counties now have more (relatively) high-paying jobs, more federal assistance (since it's pegged to population size and average income), more political representation per capita, all without dealing with the problems actually associated with increased population growth and poverty, and without diversifying their voting demographics.
- At the same time, these people, while incarcerated, are not counted in the population for their economically struggling neighborhoods, decreasing the amount of federal assistance and political representation available to their families.
- As a final kick in the nads, in many states people convicted of felonies are never again allowed to vote. (In many other states, there is a process to regain the franchise after parole is completed, but from what I understand they do not make it easy.) Thus the segment of the population that would be most vicerally aware of the need for reform in our prison system is cut out of the decision-making process entirely.

We are encouraging the counterproductive criminalization of victimless (if dumb) acts with financial and political rewards. What this leaves us with is a system that rewards the wildly disproportional immiseration of (mostly) minority urban dwellers who have committed victimless crimes. We are setting two poor weak

owners who have committed heinous crimes. We are setting the poor weak segments of the population against each other, creating a system where the white, rural poor are encouraged to enhance their meager share of society's pie at the expense of the urban, black and hispanic poor. Divide and conquer.

The sum of these circumstances is a State which has marginalized and disenfranchised large portions of the population who would naturally exert a moderating influence on our iron fisted justice system, while financially and politically rewarding other segments of the society for encouraging their immiseration, all the while skewing our electorate farther right of our population as a whole.

More information on this subject can be found here:

- www.PrisonersOfTheCensus.org
- [Prisoners of the Census](#) by Tracy Huling at Mother Jones magazine
- [Google Search](#)

PS: This is only one of the aspects in which the face of our government is twisted into a rightist parody of the American character. There are other aspects which all reinforce each other, some of which I hope to have the time to address at some point, including

- The disqualification of pacifism from mainstream political acceptability without a corresponding disqualification of "kill 'em all and let God sort 'em out" types
- Disqualification of jurors who are not "death qualified" from any criminal trial which might involve the death penalty, thus removing a moderating influence from the guilt phase of trials as well as the penalty phase

But those are topics (maybe) for another day.

8:36:42 AM # [Put your John Hancock right here!](#)

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