

America's Prisons: "Create Spartan Conditions; Get Gladiators!"

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In its November 1995 issue, [The Atlantic Monthly](#) reported on McKean, a model federal prison in Bradford, PA. The focus of the article was a mild-mannered warden by the name of Dennis Luther, then about to retire. In the golden age of the Corrections growth industry, Warden Luther was considered by the Bureau of Prisons senior management to be a maverick who flagrantly violated bureau policy.

Bureau policy had adopted the "tough on crime" ethic of the Reagan Administration and the "Take Back Our Streets" initiative of the 1994 crime bill under the Contract with America. Yet, overcrowded McKean, housing its share of violent criminals, boasted a record of no escapes, no homicides, no sexual assaults and no suicides – all this for \$6,000 a year less per inmate than the federal average and 2/3 the cost at state prisons.

Fast forward to 2009, the Council of Prison Locals, representing federal correctional officers, [came out swinging](#) at the dangers in understaffing and underfunding of McKean as the result of a riot involving more than 250 inmates. They were asking Congress to issue stab-resistant vests and to fully staff the prison.



Apparently, the new prison culture that had shoved aside such effective administrators as Warden Luther had successfully put into place a no-frills incarceration program, toughening discipline with hard labor and stripping weight rooms, TV's and computers. Educational and substance abuse treatment programs were drastically cut. While prison

population increased from 100,000 to 500,000 in the 60 years from 1920 to 1980, the population exploded to 2.3M in the 26 years from 1980 to 2006 under the jurisdiction of the "tough on crime" politicians in Washington. The new ethic's success is measured by a 70% recidivism rate.

What did Warden Luther do that was so revolutionary? He simply showed respect: "If you want people to behave responsibly and treat *you* with respect, then you treat other people that way." While other prisons honor staff longevity, McKean's walls were decorated with plaques reminding both staff and prisoners of their responsibilities to each other. His 28 beliefs posted throughout the prison included these:

1. Inmates are sent to prison *as* punishment and not *for* punishment...
2. Inmates are entitled to a safe and humane environment while in prison...
3. You must believe in a man's capacity to change his behavior...

To Luther, American prisons were unnecessarily brutal. He believed that common business practices that valued and encouraged human dignity would work, and they did.

Prison Reform, Corrections, McKean Prison, Reagan Revolution, Contract with America, American-Prisons: "Create-Spartan-Condition;-Get-Gladiators, Stan Moody, Maine State Prison, Department of Corrections, www.moodyreport.wordpress.com

We are left today with a system so devoid of human dignity for either staff or prisoners that it defies change without a drastic overhaul from the top down. Managers do not know how to manage, and guards have been taught to regard prisoners as subhuman and treat them accordingly. It is impossible to impress on staff at any level that fair and consistent discipline leads to higher standards and fewer incidents of violence.

To think that there has been an entire generation of prison managers since the “Tough-on-Crime” revolution of the 1980’s, who treat people not according to their future potential but according to their past! It is idiotic, sophomoric and a colossal waste of resources and intellect.

Those who profess belief in Jesus Christ would do well to take instruction from the actions of Warden Luther:

- “For I will forgive their evil deeds and will remember their sins no more” (Heb. 8:12).
- “Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering” (Heb. 13:3).
- “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:17).