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# Banging the Bars Together

Dirk Pitt is fifty-four years old, doing three life sentences one day at a time. Pitt published a regular column for many years in a quarterly prison magazine, and this new essay is written with the spirit of that genre in mind.

Well fellow convicts and POW's, it's been a while since I last jotted something down—so here it is.

The last three months have been a test of patience: a whirlwind ride through the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and of course, the holdover tanks. Let me tell you! We've all been there, done that, don't want to do it again! Rumor has it that some pesky inmate, with nothing better to do, invented those black boxes the marshals lock over your handcuffs. Well, let me tell you, I'd give the powers-that-be another life sentence just to have five minutes out behind the rec yard building discussing with him why he did such a shitty deed. That alone ought to be classified as cruel and unusual punishment, don't you think? For those of you who have never suffered the privilege of black boxes, be thankful. Going to the bathroom with a pair is right next to impossible. You can't get you pants back up (down is hard enough), and I won't even comment on the toilet paper issue. It was four days before the swelling finally went down in my lower arms. Bitch of an experience.

I've spent the last nine months in the Special Housing Unit we all usually call the "HOLE" for, among other things, writing stuff the B.O.P. [Bureau of Prisons] feels is totally unnecessary. My apologies to staff. But, while recalling the First Amendment at that time, I just couldn't bring myself to whimper.

I must admit to all of you a small fetish I have developed at the expense of our prisons' transportation system: I like meeting you folks while touring in irons. God, the stories you have to tell, the heartbreaks, the humor, the crap that's happening on your side of the fence at the last place you were designated. Just about every one of them is a Pulitzer Prize winning story waiting to be written. And your sentences? They're almost all completely out of whack. I

won't even discuss those issues here, but for sure I see the prison system has gone from its original intent to expediency and convenience—processing and warehousing cattle, in other words.

I've read so much about the draconian sentences handed out nowadays, and how the law should be changed for whatever crime we've been sentenced under, but I notice less in print on the conditions within our prisons. Yes, there are stories on the atrocities that have taken place, but there should be more—lots more. When you inform the public and call for its assistance by only using one avenue instead of telling the whole continuing story, you're defeating your purpose. The whole story includes the outrageous sentencing laws (min-mandatory) and *that* story flows as smoothly as a wide river right into the state and federal prison systems. Combine it with the lousy food, hours of insanity-producing idleness, over-crowding, racial tensions, some of the Clydesdales we have for prison guards, and the slave labor by servitude at PRIDE (Florida) and UNICOR (federal prisons), and an ugly picture develops. Why does our government complain about China's prisons running sweat shops? Beats the hell out of me. Pot and Kettle?

You know the stories I'm talking about. You've lived them for years on end, some of us for decades. Tell them! Don't be afraid to pick up a pencil with a good eraser and put your experiences down—send them in to a publisher. You don't have to be a gifted writer with a degree in literature. I've heard convicts run their mouths for hours on end walking the track. Run yours on paper just like you're talking up a storm. What finally goes to print will be well edited by folks who have done this sort of thing for years. Just remember, these great editors need material. Help them.

What does this accomplish, you ask? It ties together the sentencing laws with the inhuman prison system in one big understandable picture—one terrible tragedy that is totally out of control. Definitely not what the system was originally designed to accomplish. It needs to be fixed! If the public is upset by the sentencing issues, then maybe they'll get in tune with ending the crap going on in our prisons.

I've had people on the outside tell me that they don't believe the following statement: "Some of the most decent folks I've ever met in my life are in prison." The people in the free world need to know this. You've all heard the expression, "If they're in prison for that long then they must deserve it, right?" NO! It's not always right. Not even close.

It appears we've mostly quit rioting and have become a bit more passive. Now it seems a major show of dissatisfaction is to have everyone throw their pillows on the floor and stomp on them. That'll really upset the establishment, feathers and shit all over the place.... Really, though, in lieu of rioting and pillow stomping, there is an even greater tool we have available—the power of the

PEN. Use it, people. It's won countless battles.

Come on, jump on board and give a hand. Your story, idea, or someone else's you know about might just be the "lost Florida vote" or, to use an old cliché, "the straw that breaks the camel's back." It could be the one that someone with the power-to-be reads and says, "Hmmm, maybe we should do something here. Let's look into it—too many people are complaining." Politicians love to jump on the bandwagon whether they're right or wrong. They just need to see the direction the pendulum is swinging. And for the most part, it will take politicians to revamp this atrocious system we're locked into. Are you up for it, or are you just going to lie back and let them kick your ass some more? See ya next issue.