

## INDELIBLE

By Mike Skinner

" I have found that the best way to find the absolute truth is to first strip away all of the untruths."

Sherlock Holmes

It seems that, as a society, we have lost the ability to forgive, and, along with this, the recognition that forgiveness is what makes redemption a real possibility. Acknowledging the truth of this is acknowledging that, as a country, America suffers from a forgiveness deficit that is badly in need of a remedy. Viewpoints seem to be short sighted and extreme, to the point that we have degraded human life so far that we must leave some space for dignity to grow again.

The United States puts more people in prison than any other country in the world. It is a distinction that speaks of failure and terrible waste. Over the past four decades, the incarceration rate has increased at an alarming rate which is unprecedented in our countries history.

The land of the free has now become a country of prisons. And it is getting more and more recognition. Hopefully, this wide spread recognition leads into a turning point that can begin a change with our political leaders and the Byzantine style of logic that has been in place for far too long. History has proven time and time again that a "one size fits all" solution to the prisons has had an adverse effect on a significant portion of todays society. Fairness dictates that the wrongs of the past be corrected. I am not alone in my reasoning either, Here are three recent examples: A 36 page report from the **Human Rights Watch** concludes that the U.S. has the world's highest rate of incarceration. The report went on to say that laws requiring penalties that are far longer than necessary to meet the purpose of punishment, "have spawned widespread and well founded public doubts about the fairness of the U.S. Criminal Justice System," says Jamie Fellner, who is Senior Advisor at **Human Rights Watch** and co-author of the report.

Example number two comes from the good citizens right here in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. In February of 2014, MassINC published the results of a survey which found that 59% of the respondents believed that the Justice system is failing because too many prisoners were returning to society worse than when they entered prison. The same survey found that 67% of respondents favored reforming the system rather than building new prisons, and that 64% wanted the focus placed on prevention and rehabilitation while only 15% favored punishment as the top priority for the Criminal Justice System.

Before I get to example number three, chew on this; 1 in 100 adult Americans is in either prison or jail today; Over 70 million Americans live in this Country today with some kind of criminal record. This is five to ten times higher than any other Western Democracy in the World. Lest we forget that in a true Democracy, no one gets written off. Which leads me into example number three:

A recent report issued by the **National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers (NACDL)** notes that there are 50,000 collateral consequences on the books ranging from the inability to access public housing, or a drivers license, the loss of the right to vote, ~~to~~ being denied financial aid for education, including Pell grants, to name a few. The NACDL report concludes by calling for the elimination of collateral consequences that are keeping millions in permanent exile into underclass status. As one man recently told the NACDL, "How am I to provide for my family after paying for my mistake when my life seems to have lost meaning a long time ago." How indeed.

Many of the men and women who are returning to society have families and need some sort of foothold to get their lives back in order, but with our political leadership responsible for over 50,000 obstacles, far too many for anyone to overcome, these men and women are being placed into situations as well as circumstances to go and re-offend, thereby allowing a vicious cycle to continue. And please, do not ever, ever, forget what a huge business prison is. The absurdly high number of the incarcerated translates into a very good living for a whole bunch of people. Just not the one's serving the time, nor their families and friends.

This is a time bomb that needs to be defused fast because

the current culture is making countless lives worse by mishandling the entire process of incarceration. The stain is becoming worse and worse, . . . in other words, it's indelible.

Maybe, just maybe, it's time for some of our leadership to come to terms with the concept that we sometimes must relinquish control in order to give the masses what they want. Give them what they need. Having such an enormous asset being left to waste is yet another horrible part of our Nation's history that we can ill afford to let slide by the wayside without a fight.

Dignity is as essential to human life as air, food, and water. My feeling is that we can persuade ourselves of absolutely anything, which is how we got into this mess in the first place. Abraham Lincoln once said, "I have always found that mercy has a better effect than strict justice." Sounds like Lincoln knew then what we should know now. The facts speak for themselves, but without the groups and organizations putting this information out there, the public will remain in the dark, and uninformed as well as unaware. Perception is reality, you get treated as you're seen. Never underestimate the difficulty of changing false beliefs by facts. If you are alive, there is hope for a better day and something good to happen. But if there is nothing good left in the destiny of a person, then he or she will surely die. It's gone on for long enough. Delay is the deadliest form of denial. We are a Country whose Constitution forbids cruel and unusual punishment, so think about that for a moment, and then ask yourself if new approaches and the ensuing hard work will be worth it. So, let's see where this goes in the near future and whether or not our newly elected officials embrace the changes blowing in their direction. One of the greatest qualities of leadership is getting people to do what they don't to do. But for now, from where I stand, it remains indelible.