

ARTICLES.

■ A PRISON-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

Hell Factories In the Field

MIKE DAVIS

Los Angeles

The road from Mecca follows the Southern Pacific tracks past Bombay Beach to Niland, then turns due south through a green maze of marshes and irrigated fields. The bad future of California rises, with little melodrama, in the middle distance between the skeleton of last year's cotton crop and the aerial bombing range in the Chocolate Mountains. From a mile away, the slate-gray structures resemble warehouses or perhaps a factory. An unassuming road sign announces Calipatria State Prison.

California has the third-largest penal system in the world, following China and the United States as a whole: 125,842 prisoners at last official count. Over the past decade, the state has built Calipatria, located 220 miles southeast of L.A., and fifteen other new prisons—at a cost of \$10 billion (interest included). An emergent “prison-industrial complex” increasingly rivals agribusiness as the dominant force in the life of rural California and competes with land developers as the chief seducer of legislators in Sacramento. It has become a monster that threatens to overpower and devour its creators, and its uncontrollable growth ought to rattle a national consciousness now complacent at the thought of a permanent prison class.

Last year's state version of “three strikes” legislation—an even more Draconian variant of Clinton's crime bill—may add as many as 300,000 new inmates to an already grotesquely overcrowded and hyperviolent system. To keep even the most rudimentary shackles on this huge population, the state will have to loot its higher education budget for dozens of new prisons. In addition, there will be irresistible political pressures to reduce the cost of this human storage through a variety of technological and marketplace innovations. In this regard, Calipatria, which opened in 1992, is a particularly resonant example of how the Department of Corrections is already coping with the contradictions of its enormous success.

The Death Fence

Calipatria is a “level-4” maximum-security prison for men that currently houses 10 percent (1,200) of California's convicted murderers. Yet the guard booth at the main gate is unmanned, as are ten of its twelve perimeter gun towers. As Daniel Paramo, the prison's energetic “community resources manager,” explains: “The warden doesn't trust the human-error factor in the gun towers; he puts his faith, instead, in Southern California Edison.”

Mike Davis is writing a book on Southern California's recent trial by riot, fire and earthquake.

Paramo is standing in front of an ominous thirteen-foot electric fence, sandwiched between two ordinary chain-link models. Each of the middle fence's fifteen individual strands of wire bristles with 5,000 volts, 500 amperes of Parker Dam power—about ten times the recognized lethal dosage. The electrical contractors guarantee instant death. An admiring guard in the background mutters: “Yeah, toast. . . .”

The bill authorizing this “escape-proof” fence sailed through the state legislature with barely a murmur. Cost-conscious politicians had few scruples about an electric bill that saved \$2 million in labor costs each year (a total of thirty sharpshooters, working three shifts per tower). And when the warden quietly threw the main switch in October 1993, there was general satisfaction that the corrections system was moving ahead toward its high-tech future. “But,” Paramo adds ruefully, “we had neglected to factor the animal-rights people into the equation.”

Rats confined in such circumstances go berserk and eat each other.

The prison is just east of the Salton Sea—a major wintering habitat for waterfowl—and the gently purring high-voltage fence immediately became an erotic beacon to the passing birds. Local bird-watchers soon found out about the body count (“a gull, two owls, a finch and a scissor-tailed flycatcher . . .”) and alerted the Audubon Society. By January of last year, the “death fence” had become an international environmental scandal. After a CNN crew pulled into the prison parking lot, the Department of Corrections threw in the towel and hired an ornithologist to help it redesign the fence.

The result is the world's only birdproof, ecologically sensitive death fence. Paramo has some difficulty maintaining a straight face as he points out \$150,000 of innovations: “a warning wire for curious rodents, anti-perching deflectors for wildfowl and tiny passageways for burrowing owls.” Calipatria has also built an attractive pond for visiting geese and ducks.

Although the prison system is now at peace with bird lovers, the imbroglio aroused the powerful California Correctional Peace Officers' Association (C.C.P.O.A.) to challenge the comparative ease with which management was going about “automating” the jobs of sharpshooters. To proceed with his plans to electrify all the state's medium- and maximum-security prisons (at least twenty facilities) over the next few years, Director of Corrections James Gomez may have to negotiate a compromise that preserves more of the “featherbed” gun-tower jobs.

Calipatria's 3,844 inmates, needless to say, shed few tears for either the ducks or the sharpshooters. Their lives are entirely absorbed in the daily struggle to survive. Like the rest of the state prison system, Calipatria operates at almost

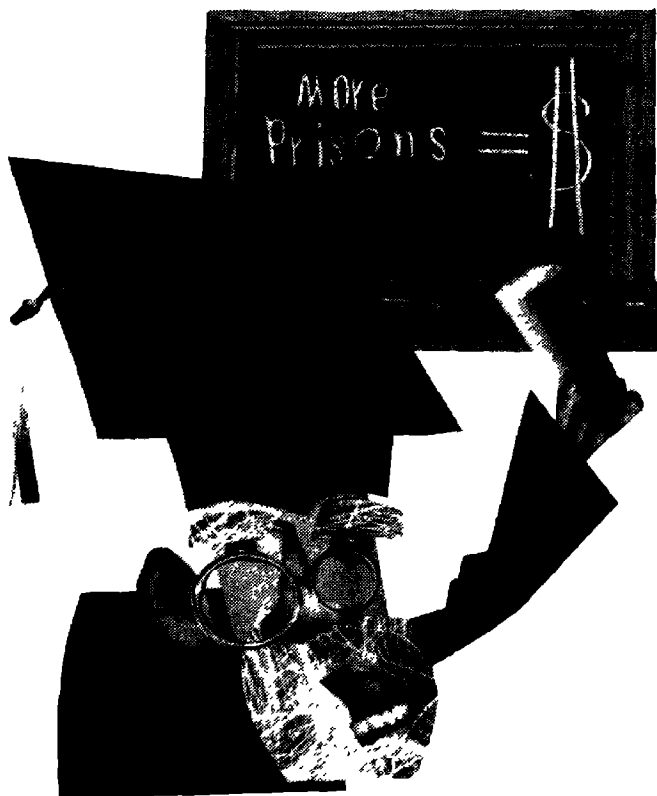
double its designed capacity. In county jails and medium-security facilities, squalid tiers of bunk beds have been crowded into converted auditoriums and day rooms. In "upscale" institutions like Calipatria, however, a second inmate has been shoehorned into each tiny six-by-ten-foot cell.

When "double-celling" was first introduced into the system a decade ago, it fueled a new wave of inmate violence and suicide. Civil liberties advocates denounced the practice as "cruel and unusual punishment," but a federal judge upheld its constitutionality. Now inmates can routinely expect to spend decades or even whole lifetimes (34 percent of Calipatria's population are lifers) locked in unnatural, and often unbearable, intimacy with another person. The psychological stress is amplified by the drastic shortage of work for prisoners, condemning nearly half the inmate population to serve their sentences idly in their cells watching infinities of television. As behavioral psychologists have testified in court, rats confined in such circumstances invariably go berserk and eat each other.

The War Is On

The radical abolition of privacy is an explicit objective of so-called new-generation prisons like Calipatria. Each of its twenty housing units is designed like a two-story horseshoe with a guard station opposite. Yet another variation on Jeremy Bentham's celebrated nineteenth-century "panopticon," this "270 plan" (so named for the extent of the guards' field of vision) is intended to insure continuous surveillance of all inmate behavior. Official blurbs boast of a "more safe and humane incarceration" and an end to the "fear-hate syndrome" associated with prisons that tolerate zones of unsupervised inmate interaction.

Even if that were true, panopticonism has been compromised by construction shortcuts and chronic understaffing.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY STEPHEN KRONINGER

Although toilets sit nakedly in the middle of recreation yards as symbols of institutional omniscience, there are still plenty of blind spots—behind stairs or in kitchen areas—where inmates can take revenge on staff or one another. As Paramo warns visitors when they sign the grim waiver acknowledging California's policy of refusing to negotiate for hostages, "the war is on."

For a quarter of a century, California prisons have institutionalized episodic violence between inmate guerrilla armies. Today there are more diverse gangs—including rising Asian and Central American factions—but the carnage is centralized in a merciless struggle for power between blacks and the East L.A.-based Mexican Mafia (or E.M.E.).

In part, this reflects the recent dramatic shift in the ethnic composition of California's prison yards. In 1988, new admissions were 35 percent black and 30 percent Latino; five years later, the proportions were 41 percent Latino and 25 percent black. As a result, the entire system now has a slight Latino plurality (although blacks remain the largest group in Calipatria). E.M.E. reportedly has used this new clout to attack the black monopoly on the sale of crack cocaine both inside and outside the walls. Calipatria's gang-intelligence officer claims that the recent death of Joe Morgan, the E.M.E.'s legendary founder and sometime prison statesman, cleared the way for a younger, more ruthless leadership.

In Calipatria, the last riot between blacks and Latinos occurred in July, when thirteen inmates were stabbed. As one guard described the melee—which apparently started in the central kitchen and spread to the housing units—"E.M.E. blindsided the Crips." As a result, the prison was locked down for four months, and the day rooms have been abandoned as too dangerous for mixed use. Paramo keeps a display of some of the captured weapons in his office; they include what looks like an obsidian dagger but is actually a "shank" made from melted black garbage bags.

To deal with such explosions of violence, California's highest-level prisons have introduced extreme sanctions. Each institution now has its own "SERT" squad—a kind of internal SWAT team capable of countering outbreaks with staggering amounts of firepower. These paramilitary units have been widely praised for preventing inmate holocausts like the terrible butchery that took place in the New Mexico State Penitentiary in 1980. California does, however, tolerate extraordinary levels of official violence. Over the past decade, trigger-happy guards here have killed thirty-six inmates (including one in Calipatria)—more than triple the number killed in federal penitentiaries and the six other biggest incarceration states combined.

Where sheer force fails to deter prison gangs, the Department of Corrections has another option: a gulag of deprivation along the Redwood coast known as Pelican Bay State Prison. Although its infamous Security Housing Unit, or SHU—a total-isolation bloc described by prison historian Eric Cummins as a "place of pure psychological destruction"—was recently criticized by a federal judge, it remains a popular model for other states, as well as for the U.S. Bureau of Prisons' new "high-tech Alcatraz" in Florence, Colorado. "The necessary evil of the SHU," as Daniel Paramo sees it, "is that,

for the first time, we can truly isolate the ringleaders and instigators from our general population."

Yet, as Paramo also concedes, putting the godfathers in the deep freeze has had a negligible impact on the growth of prison-gang membership. Indeed, as an off-duty guard points out, "Removing the veteran leadership merely opens the way for wilder and more violent youngsters—who have none of the common sense of traditional convict culture—to take charge." As a result, he predicts an even more violent road ahead. "We will never defeat prison gangs. They come with the turf, and like it or not, they grow and prosper with the system."

The White Flies

Margaret Hatfield doesn't fret much about prison violence or the thousands of felons who live down the road. The "death fence" is a reassurance, and, besides, as city clerk of the tiny municipality of Calipatria (population 3,356), she has far more serious things to worry about, like the white fly epidemic.

Like an Old Testament plague, the white flies threaten the very foundation of the Imperial Valley's latifundian social order. In late summer, dense clouds of the tiny insects can sometimes be seen from planes approaching L.A. They are omnivorous and avidly attack all the local cash crops. Because of the flies, the melon crop, a mainstay of the local economy, wasn't even planted in 1993. Growers are losing \$100 million every year and the valley is nearly bankrupt. The resultant layoffs have raised the local unemployment rate to nearly 40 percent.

So Hatfield and other local leaders "thank God for the California Department of Corrections." Besides bringing 1,100 jobs to Calipatria in 1993, the C.D.C. has opened another, 4,000-inmate facility in the town of Seeley, making prisons the largest employer in Imperial County. (The corollary: One out of every twelve county residents is now a prisoner.) The department, moreover, is talking about adding a third prison, possibly for women, on the 2,000 acres of land it owns in Calipatria.

Calipatria is a loyal member of the Association of California Cities Allied with Prisons, and Hatfield is proud of the micro-renaissance that the prison has brought to the town. She points out the new grocery and video stores on a main street that otherwise looks like the forlorn set of *The Last Picture Show*, and wonders aloud if the city could have afforded to light the Little League field without tax revenue from the cornucopia of prison wages. Still, she concedes, "there have been a few problems."

Although the C.D.C. has committed itself to an eventual goal of 40 percent local hires, most of the high-wage guard and management positions have gone to outsiders. As these people have moved into the area (fifty-eight new homes since 1993), property values have increased by as much as two-thirds. This has been good for landowners, but bad for younger and poorer local families who do not have prison jobs. The population boom, in addition, has led to serious overcrowding in the schools, and since prisons are exempt from paying local taxes there is no offsetting revenue big enough for expansion of services.

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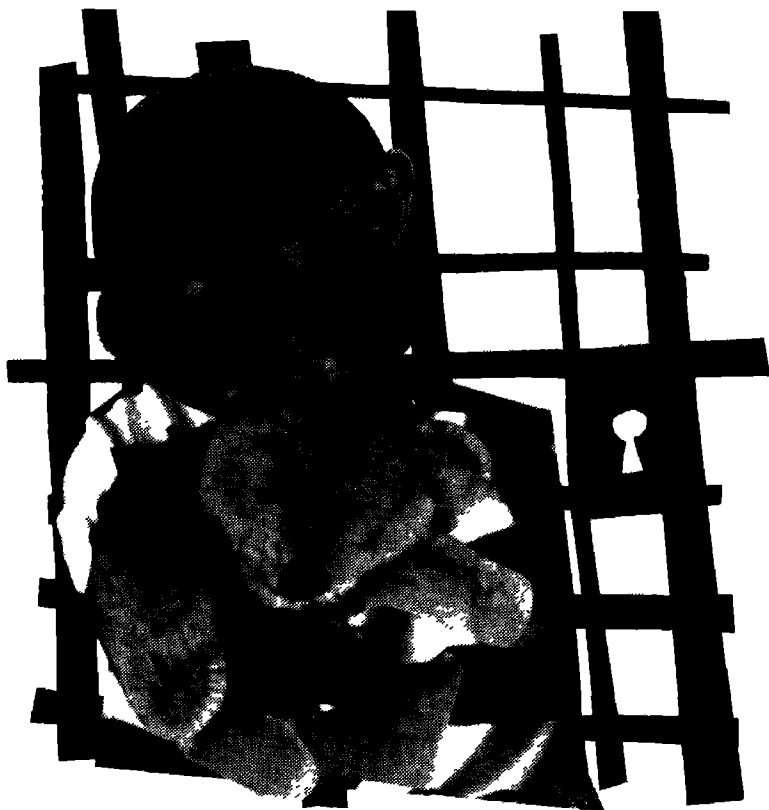
Most troubling to Hatfield, however, are the prisoners' families—largely from the inner-city neighborhoods of Los Angeles, five hours away—who descend on Calipatria every weekend. Unlike their husbands and fathers, who are only abstractions to the locals, the families are tangible embodiments of urban disorder. Their misdemeanors, from sleeping in their cars to smoking pot in public, fill town gossip with new apprehensions. In Hatfield's words, "they erode our image of safety."

It is hard to know how accurately Hatfield reflects public sentiment. Although Calipatria is 75 percent Mexican, there is only one Spanish surname in city government. Imperial County, with five Anglo supervisors ruling an overwhelmingly Mexican population, has long been nicknamed "California's Mississippi" for its exclusionary politics and oppressive labor relations. A similar pattern of electoral imbalance is found in the other depressed farm towns of the Colorado River and Central valleys that have welcomed medium- and maximum-security facilities in the past decade: Avenal, Blythe, Corcoran, Delano and Wasco.

The prison boom is having a complex, and perhaps unpredictable, impact on agricultural caste society. On the one hand, local Anglo elites are being integrated into the spoils system operated by the Department of Corrections. There is considerable evidence, for example, of sweetheart deals involving land acquisition and construction. On the other hand, prison employment is producing a new Latino middle class in valley towns. Those gray fortresses, after all, are the first large, unionized employers that most of rural California has ever seen.

The Politics of Super-Incarceration

The prison staff at Calipatria speaks with measured awe



of Don Novey, the former Folsom guard who, as president of the C.C.P.O.A., has made the correctional officers the most powerful union in the state. Under his leadership the C.C.P.O.A. has been transformed from a small, reactive craft union into the major player shaping criminal justice legislation and thereby the future of the California penal system. Part of the secret of Novey's success has been his willingness to pay the highest price for political allies. In 1990, for example, Novey contributed almost \$1 million to Pete Wilson's gubernatorial campaign. The C.C.P.O.A. now operates the second-most-generous PAC in Sacramento.

Novey has also leveraged the union's influence through his sponsorship of the so-called victims' rights movement. Crime Victims United is a satellite PAC, receiving 95 percent of its funds from the C.C.P.O.A. Through such high-profile front groups, and in alliance with other law-enforcement lobbies, Novey has been able to keep Sacramento in a permanent state of law-and-order hysteria. Legislators of both parties trample one another in the rush to put their names at the top of tough new "anti-crime" measures, while ignoring their impact on prison capacity.

This cynical bidding war has had staggering consequences. Joan Petersilia, a researcher at the RAND Corporation, found that more than 1,000 bills toughening sentencing under felony and misdemeanor statutes had been enacted by the legislature between 1984 and 1992. In aggregate, they are utterly incoherent as criminal justice policy, but wonderful as a stimulus to the kind of carceral Keynesianism that has tripled both the membership of the C.C.P.O.A. and the average salary of prison workers since 1980. From the beginning of the prison boom, at the end of Jerry Brown's administration in 1982, a host of critics have tried to wean the legislature away from its reckless gulagism. They have produced study after study showing that super-incarceration has had a negligible impact on the overall crime rate (which, in any event, has not significantly increased); and that a majority of new inmates are either nonviolent drug offenders (including parolees flunking mandatory urinalysis) or the mentally ill (a staggering 28,000 by official estimate). They have also repeatedly warned that a day of reckoning would come when the state would have to trade higher education, literally brick by brick, to continue to build prisons.

That day, indeed, has come. While California's colleges and universities were shedding 8,000 jobs between 1984 and 1994, the Department of Corrections hired 26,000 employees to guard 112,000 new inmates. But instead of hitting the brakes, the legislature went full throttle. Last spring's "three strikes" law doubles sentences for second felonies and mandates twenty-five years to life for "three-time losers." To make the law constitutionally invulnerable to reform (except by an almost impossible two-thirds majority), it was also presented to voters as Proposition 184 in November. Proponents of the measure—led by the C.C.P.O.A. and Michael Huffington—outspent opponents (primarily the California Teachers' Association) 48 to 1 (\$1.2 million versus \$25,000). Moreover, since most Democratic candidates, including Kathleen Brown and Dianne Feinstein, supported the measure or were silent, voters had little opportunity to hear opposing arguments

or weigh the epochal consequences of the law. The proposition passed easily.

It's a measure of their complicity that prior to the election the Democrats refused to publicize the damning official estimates about the impact Proposition 184 would have on prison capacity. These were issued last March by the C.D.C.'s Planning and Construction Division. Simply to house the projected 1999 inmate population at the already intolerable 185 percent occupancy level, the state will have to build twenty-three new prisons (beyond the twelve already authorized). "This would require construction of more than four and one-half prisons per year in each of the next five fiscal years," the planners wrote. Within ten years, they predict, the penal population will increase 262 percent, to 341,420 inmates (compared with 22,500 in 1980).

Commenting on these projections, a spokesman for Governor Wilson simply shrugged his shoulders: "If these additional costs have to be absorbed, I guess we'll have to reduce other services. We'll have to change our priorities." Which "priorities" were clarified in October, when researchers at RAND published an exhaustive fiscal analysis that concluded: "To support implementation of the law, total spending for higher education and other government services would have to fall by more than 40 percent over the next eight years. . . . If the three strikes law remains in place by 2002, the state government will be spending more money keeping people in prison than putting people through college."

It is sobering to recall that the C.D.C., with twenty-nine major "campuses," is already more expensive than the University of California system, and that young black men in Los Angeles or Oakland are twice as likely to end up in a prison as in college. Proposition 184, moreover, promises a dramatic escalation in racial disparities. In the first six months of prosecutions under the new law, African-Americans (10 percent of the population) made up 57 percent of the "three strikes" filings in L.A. County. This is seventeen times the rate for whites, say public defenders here, although other studies have shown that white men commit at least 60 percent of all the rapes, robberies and assaults in the state.

For State Senator Tom Hayden, who vigorously opposed Prop 184, California is sinking into a "moral quagmire" reminiscent of Vietnam: "State politics has been handcuffed by the law-enforcement lobby. Voters have no real idea of what they are getting into. They have not been told the truth

about the trade-off between schools and prisons, or the economic disaster that will inevitably result. We dehumanize criminals and the poor in exactly the same way we did with so-called 'gooks' in Vietnam. We just put them in hell and turn up the heat."

Back at Calipatria, meanwhile, the administration is already tinkering with the thermostat. Daniel Paramo cheerfully acknowledges that, faced with the Proposition 184 population explosion, the C.D.C. is considering putting a third inmate in each mad-rat cell. "We'll simply pack in as many inmates as the state orders. And, if the courts finally impose a limit, I guess we'll just build some new prisons." □

■ NO FAMILY VALUES HERE

The Women Get Chains . . .

TERESA ALBOR

The bleeding had started four hours earlier. Frightened, confused and in pain, 27-year-old Angela Banks, Michigan prison inmate No. 199612, thought she would deliver her baby right there in the ambulance, as the siren wailed into the night. Racked by contractions, she tried to shift her position, but her hands were cuffed to a chain around her waist and her feet were shackled.

In prison, when the contractions had started, her roommate had sprinted back and forth between the cell and the central desk eleven times, begging the staff to call the clinic. When Angela finally arrived at the clinic, the nurse, mistaking her distress for belligerence, ordered her back to her cell. The male guard assigned to escort her refused, saying he could see she was in labor. More time was lost as the staff searched for handcuffs and shackles.

Angela Banks is one of some 90,000 female prisoners who serve their sentences in an array of overcrowded institutions that take away their privacy, their relationships with their children, their very identities as women and mothers. They are predominantly poor minority women who have been inadequately educated and badly served in terms of health care. They have the highest rates of HIV infection and their children have the highest infant mortality rates. Many have been physically or sexually abused. Most are single parents, the sole breadwinners of their families; 65 percent have drug or alcohol problems.

More women are now sent to prison than at any other time in the nation's history—the result, largely, of mandatory sentencing minimums and other strict federal sentencing guidelines. According to the Women in Prison Project of the National Women's Law Center, between 1983 and 1992 the number of incarcerated women tripled. That's twice the rate of growth of the male prison population.

Teresa Albor, a writer and television producer living in London, recently completed a Michigan Journalism Fellowship.

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