

BLOWING SMOKE

Monday

July 20, 2015

On July 17th, there was an OpEd in the Sacramento Bee titled "Obama tackles worthy cause in criminal justice reform," written by the Editorial Board. The OpEd begins by saying that "[i]n words and deeds, Barack Obama is ramping up his crusade for criminal justice reform, a worthy undertaking for the final two years of his presidency." The OpEd continues, pointing to several things he did and said throughout the course of the week, from giving a speech to the NAACP in which he "made the case that we need a more just criminal justice system as an issue of civil rights and racial equality[.]" visiting the El Reno Federal Correctional Institution in Oklahoma and commuting the sentences of 46 nonviolent drug offenders, "doubling the number during his presidency and surpassing the total of his four predecessors combined." As the OpEd continues on, it points out a number of facts and figures, all of which seem designed to support the president's various actions, and highlighting his "special authority" on the subject as our "first black president[.]" After reading the article, I realized that someone had, once again, figured out a way to take a square peg and fit it into a round hole.

Despite having only about 4% of the world's population, the United States prison population represents 20% of the world's prisoners, with a population in federal, state and local facilities skyrocketing from approximately 500,000 as recently as 1980 to more than 2.2 million today. A large part of this increase is the direct result of the "War on Drugs." The OpEd says that the "president is clear that violent criminals and drug kingpins need to be in prison[, b]ut far too many Americans have been locked up too long for minor drug offenses[.]" a statement that I can find no facts to dispute, even if I wanted to. So tell me, why is it that President Obama, one of the most powerful men in the world, failed to do anything more than take a symbolic step in the right direction to actually doing something to fix the problems he's complaining about? And why is it that no one's bothering to call him on it?

As the President of the United States, Obama's power is, in theory, guarded by a complex system of checks and balances. As a result, he's not supposed to be able to rewrite, or create new laws, although if you look at his record since taking office, that's exactly what he's done. He can, however, use his considerable power to commute, or even pardon, those convicted of various felonies, as he chose to do earlier this week when he commuted the sentences of 46 nonviolent offenders. So why is it that, if the issue he's presented is so important, he hasn't taken steps to do something that truly leaves a measurable impact? Why hasn't he convened a special committee to find all of the nonviolent drug offenders who deserve to have their sentences commuted, and taken action accordingly? Why is it that he's only taken action on an almost immeasurable fraction of the offenders he's expressed so much concern over?

The world has enough windbags running around polluting the environment with their hot air and obnoxious gases, perhaps what you need to do is put your money where your mouth is. If you believe so strongly that nonviolent drug offenders deserve to be let out of prison early, then use the power of your pen to let them out. Otherwise, all you're doing is blowing smoke.

While I certainly agree that there are a number of nonviolent drug offenders in prison who don't deserve such excessive sentences, in talking about them all the time, we seem to be overlooking the violent offenders, most of which will eventually be released to the streets. We continuously talk about our desire to rehabilitate the system as a whole, yet no one seems willing, or capable, of finding out, from us, what we need to rehabilitate ourselves, what it's going to take to get us out, and keep us out, not because we're smart enough to avoid getting caught again, but because we sincerely have no desire to violate anyone again. These are questions I would dearly love to answer, but either the people who are in a position to act on that information have no desire to do so, or they want to change it around so much as to render it absolutely meaningless.

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