

Prison Violence: How Society Can Profit From Videotaping Attacks Behind the Walls

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Since rehabilitation has been completely abandoned in New York State penitentiaries, and the sole purpose for prison expansion seems to be a means to garner votes by pumping billions of dollars into the economy, I have come up with an idea. After endless nights tossing and turning in my bunk, and countless days contemplating various options, I decided to draw up this proposal for you, Commissioner Goord. Hopefully society will profit from its execution.

Although I am a prisoner and you may at first be somewhat skeptical of my intentions, I hope you will put your feelings aside for a moment and weigh the possibilities I offer. For your information – and I assume you presently do not have my folder in front of you to evaluate my credibility – I have twenty years experience behind the walls. Who is more familiar with the treacheries of life in the penitentiary? That is why I feel confident the deal I am about to share with you and your colleagues will make you reassess current policies and implement new ones. I am particularly concerned that New York State officials – you, Senator Nozzolio, Governor Pataki – receive my recommendations (and perhaps you can help me regain parole in return), but I think my plan could benefit corrections systems everywhere.

Before I begin, let me stress that I do not anticipate you having financial difficulties, especially considering Governor Pataki's popularity among his constituents and recent program cuts in corrections. As a matter of fact, cutbacks undoubtedly make available funds necessary to make this project possible. And once it is underway, education, drug addiction counselling, job skills, or the need to worry about prisoners' transitions back to the street will all be irrelevant. Of course, there are other areas in the Department of Corrections that can be scaled back if more money is needed. So I shall address those issues to the best of my ability. As for funds and your associates, let me say this.

If you wonder where you will find the initial cash to begin this operation, perhaps the State can appropriate a portion of the 25 million dollars a year it generates from prisoner phone calls. If so, I predict you will be able to repay the loan in the course of a year. In addition I suggest you abolish pay wages for prison jobs; convicts will be more than happy to work for free to get out of their cells for a few hours. You could also jack up the prices in the vending

machines in the visiting rooms, increase penalties for misbehaviour reports from five dollars to ten, and make prisoners pay the State for room and board.

My suggestion will ultimately accumulate more cash in one day than prison industries do in a whole year. I am not one given to bragging or making exaggerated claims. So I urge you to evaluate my recommendations carefully, and to grant them the same attention you would officers' concerns. Rest assured I make these assertions with a certain degree of confidence after conducting several studies that back them up. Primarily, I consulted with a team of financial analysts at Cornell's business school, and particularly with a friend of mine there who happens to be the chief economist – and, I might add, who advised me to sink every dollar I own into this venture.

As part of my analysis I conducted a "Monte Carlo Simulation," a study that predicts how much the endeavour is expected to earn over a given time period. The report predicted earned annual growth rates of 350 percent – quite enough to stir public interest and appeal to savvy investors. So I submit to you with all honesty, Mr. Goord; this project will unquestionably pay for itself.

As I mentioned earlier, costs do have to be considered at the outset. And after discussing this at great length with my mentor at Cornell, I was assured start up expenses would be just over 12 million dollars. I realize this might seem a bit high, but I am convinced – and the figures I have enclosed demonstrate – that projected profits for the first month of operations will be ten times greater than the outlay for the entire production. Financial gains aside, my game plan not only has numerous advantages for society, but also for its participants. Incidentally, you will probably have to contend with prison activists who will object to my scheme. Frankly, I welcome criticisms. They allow me to formulate new strategies and improve my agenda (although I have taken great pains to calculate a multitude of variables already.) Still, I am confident once you air the first telecast – that is right, I am talking about the most spectacular program in the history of television – the event will be so successful the cries of your detractors will be drowned out by the cheers of your supporters.

Before I continue, let me digress for a moment. Perhaps it is presumptuous of me to assume all your associates know precisely what goes on in our penal institutions. Allow me to enlighten them on the bitter reality of prison life.

Every day COs (corrections officers) risk their lives when they enter correctional facilities. If a riot breaks out, they are the first to be raped or

killed. They can surely attest to how dangerous jails are, and how often prisoners brutalize each other. It is this that makes a program like mine necessary.

Today the widespread availability of heroin in our penitentiaries and the increasing use of myriad drugs are not only an explosive mixture with potentially deadly consequences, but also the source of most, if not all, violent episodes. There seems to be no end to the number of men who are victimized by drug dealers they cannot afford to pay. Besides attacks related to narcotics consumption – and I remind you the unusual incident reports included here support my contentions – petty differences escalate into unbelievable acts of brutality.

One reason for this is that men are forced to house together in double bunk cells. Case in point: two prisoners at the special housing unit in Upstate Prison clashed in their cell in May. Not surprisingly the battle was over something as meaningless as a fluorescent light. The Associated Press reported that one prisoner liked to sleep late and stay up at night to read, while the other was an early riser who liked to go to sleep early. The dispute ended when the larger and stronger combatant used his hands and feet to pummel his cellmate to death. This illustration supports my position perfectly. So for your consideration, here is my proposal.

On any given day in New York State, convicts are being killed, assaulted, burned with hot cooking oil, stabbed, bludgeoned, disfigured, raped, and slashed to ribbons. Few, if any, of these battles are recorded. If hidden video cameras had been installed at Upstate, do you suppose it would have been interesting to watch this from the comfort of your living room? I do. That is why I urge you to videotape all assaults and market them worldwide.

The inspiration for this occurred to me one night after skimming through an old *Gallery* magazine. Inside was a story about Ultimate Fighting Championships (UFC) in New York. Several photos depicted wide-eyed, muscle-bound contestants, squared off hand-to-hand in blood splattered octagonal cages. The bouts were described as “The hottest pay-per-view sport on television.” According to the article, men fight in no-holds-barred matches until one either gives up or is knocked out.

I immediately saw striking similarities between UFC competitions and the combats in our facilities. Soon I realized that people all over the world are interested in seeing this type of entertainment. The popularity of shows like Jerry Springer and reality TV support this. So I thought, why not provide the public with authentic, gory, gladiatorial contests? The Romans packed stadiums

with thousands of fans eager to see Christians devoured by wild beasts and slaves hacked to pieces.

As you see by the incident at Upstate, penitentiaries breed hostility. On an average day, hundreds of prisoners are ripped with razors, and even more are victimized by one of the several unpleasant methods I described earlier. Of course since security is woefully inadequate, and video cameras are not in place, disturbances like these are neither documented nor taken advantage of. So for that purpose, and considering UFC's success, I contacted a man who could tell me how to turn the prison carnage into dollars.

Mr. John Markowitz, the president of New York-based Spartacus Entertainment, found my idea fascinating. He said: "It has the potential to be immensely profitable ..." Mr. Markowitz explained: "Tough man competitions in N. Y. and Europe have been sensational ... customers paid fifty dollars and up for tickets and they were always sold out." He emphasized that UFC subscriptions jumped from 90,000 to 350,000 in two years, and added: "There's a lot of money to be made in this business; however, there are obstacles you will have to overcome. Particularly, opponents who will seek to ban your events the same way they outlawed the UFCs."

Chief among the pointed accusations hurled at Mr. Markowitz and the UFC was that his affairs were nothing more than "Human cockfights ... savage, barbaric skirmishes that unraveled the moral fiber of humanity." The most vociferous critic was a Senator named John Goodman (R-Manhattan), who stated: "This sport has no place in civilized society and I will do everything in my power to ensure it is banned forever." Mr. Markowitz hinted the Senator was motivated by political interest because later, in response to "community leaders' concerns" (it was election year), Goodman wrote several articles for the *Daily News* condemning the UFC. In one dated October 28, 1985, he said: "New York cannot and will not become a haven for this type of bloodthirsty activity."

Political considerations aside, I believe Mr. Goodman is out of touch with reality. The fact is that countless acts of uncivilized cruelties occur every day in the corrections facilities of Mr. Goodman's home state that make tough-man competitions look like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. My intention is to showcase these incidents, and use them to aid society.

Regardless of how citizens view violence, it still flourishes in our institutions. Remember Corcoran State in California? Officers there pitted black and Latino gang members against each other and wagered on the outcome. The fights

were aptly described in the *Los Angeles Times* as “Blood Sports.” The special report said several men at the jail were allowed to knife their enemies to death and were then, themselves, shot and killed by marksmen in gun towers. Amazingly, every one of the triumphant combatants had received a single bullet wound to the head. After the FBI had received complaints from prisoners about human rights violations at Corcoran, questions surfaced and investigators demanded to know why warning shots had not been fired first. Soon after the Feds got involved several officers were arrested, and ultimately convicted in Federal Court. One, a captain suspected of being the mastermind of the brutalities, committed suicide before he was scheduled to go on trial.

The lessons of Corcoran and the UFC were not lost on me and I incorporated them into my strategy. During my research I dissected the mayhem and assessed the feasibility of capitalizing on prison attacks. I felt certain my idea’s time had come. If citizens enjoyed seeing prisoners battle each other, imagine how much more thrilled they would be watching snipers gun them down. I decided “Blood Sport” entertainments were precisely what the public wants and needs. I could think of no better way to satisfy society’s primal urge for revenge, while simultaneously performing a great service to humanity by eliminating its human waste. Here was a way, I realized, to make good use of criminals; a way to make their cruelties work for us; a way the savages could redeem themselves by titillating millions of viewers’ passions worldwide.

After consulting with several electronic specialists I determined that setting up this project would require some changes in DOCs’ current system. Video cameras with zoom lenses would have to be positioned in strategic locations everywhere, especially in Special Housing Units – not to detect and prevent barbarity, but to exploit it. Obviously if prisoners continue to kill each other in double-bunk cells, and my arrangement is approved, videotaping assaults will enable officials to charge assailants with new crimes. Toss in a bunch of gangs, lax security, incompetent personnel, lots of narcotics, plenty of weapons, and you have the whole recipe. The prisoners will take care of the rest.

Imagine the entertainment value. I am convinced the average citizen wants to see bloodshed. It is satisfying to sit at home, turn on the television, and watch real life-and-death drama unfold before your eyes. Instead of opening with a catchy tune called “Bad Boyz,” Prison Television (PTV) would begin with the sound of slamming steel gates, the squelching of walkie-talkies, the echoes of raw hateful profanities reverberating through cell blocks, and images

of hard-eyed convicts, peering through cell bars with mirrors, or hanging on gates, glaring at officers during mandatory counts.

The appeal of PTV would stem from its ability to capture unadulterated film footage of gang attacks, stabbings, slashings, assaults, and murders. The public has no idea about what goes on in our prisons. This type of program will satiate their curiosity. I am positive viewers will be gripped by a sense of fascination as they watch the events in living colour.

For instance: a camera pans the yard and concentrates on a group of prisoners huddled around a television. All eyes are focused on a basketball game. The Lakers and Knicks are tied and there are five minutes left on the clock. The crowd is mesmerized, cheering their team, unaware of what is about to happen. Several men in hoods are paying close attention to a man at the rear of the pack. They nod to each other and disperse. Two advance like Ninjas; silently they creep closer to their target. The audience at home knows that something is wrong. They can tell the thugs who have approached the cluster are up to no good. Their body language has betrayed their intentions. The pair slide up on the unsuspecting victim from the left, one circles to his right. The designated hit man turns and aims a glance at an officer in his guard booth. His chin is resting on his hand, he is staring off in the distance, preoccupied with who knows what, oblivious to what is about to occur.

The three men nod to each other, each drawing courage from his cohorts. Instantly, spurred on by their solidarity, they act as a single unit with ruthless, military precision. One bumps his prey; it is a diversionary tactic. The mark turns left and looks at the man who bumped him. Suddenly, in a flash of blinding cold steel a hand shoots out from the right and rakes a razor across his face. Blood pours from his wound and the crowd sways and rolls in panic. All eyes are wide and scanning the perimeter now. Shock and terror are etched on the expression of the man gripping his torn, flapping cheek. His assailants have scattered in several directions. The officer in the wooden shack realizes something is wrong now; the cluster of prisoners is not watching the game. He eyes the mob and spots a man bleeding profusely from his face and summons help. A swarm of cops arrive and toss several men on the wall and rush the injured man to the hospital. Real life in the penitentiary brought to you by PTV.

Of course there are some disadvantages to consider. Even prisoners who are dumb as nails know getting more time for killing is bad business. So sooner or later the incessant brutalities will cease and the opportunity to increase prisoners' existing sentences will be lost. Yes, convict populations will shrink

and become less violent, but packs of young thugs weaned on “Gangsta Rap,” eager to become TV stars, will burst through penitentiary gates to take up the slack.

First and foremost my primary concern is, and always has been, society and its victims. That is why I suggest we use a portion of the profits from PTV for both law enforcement and the crime victims association. Our police could use these funds to improve the quality of investigative techniques and put more cops on the street. The police could also offer handsome rewards to snitches for information regarding crimes. This would diminish the number of undesirables in our communities, and fill our prisons with new, prospective combatants culled from the underclass.

Eventually PTV will serve the public by ridding it of its monsters, burying those killed during incidents (at a cost to their families), and preserving the futures of those lucky enough to be scared straight. As a result, New York State will eventually become crime free and a much safer place to live.

As Mr. Markowitz said, I realize we will have to overcome massive protests, that liberal-minded bleeding hearts will say this is insane . . . But I am convinced if prisoners are given the choice between dying and doing life, they will choose death every time.

Sceptics may question the logic of my premise, but the fact is that for some prisoners the sorrow, pain, loss of freedom, and separation from loved ones, is unbearable. I can attest to that having been behind bars for the better part of twenty years, and especially after having been present in the visiting room last week and observing the following scene.

A young man rose from his table after his visit ended, kissed his teary-eyed wife goodbye, and struggled to pry his tiny daughter’s pink fingers from his shirt as she cried: “Daddy, Daddy, please don’t go!”

The psychological strain of doing hard time with absolutely no chance of ever going home, as opposed to the freedom of dying, seems, if not understandable, at least preferable. No one wants to spend his life living in fear, or suffer the interminable pain and heartache associated with being incarcerated forever. So, I assure you, PTV will improve society and help prisoners as well.

Theoretically, crime must decrease considerably within the first five years of PTV’s inception. Indeed, security officials will regain control of their prisons, and bedlam should all but cease. And for most of the elderly prisoners like myself who live within the rules? We will undoubtedly live out the remainder

of our time, and die peacefully at a ripe old age of natural causes. So whether or not you help me make parole, I will still reap the rewards of this program the same way society and its good citizens will.

For all the reasons listed herein I trust you will find my proposal worthy of realization, and let the games begin.

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