

The American Dream: Free Enterprise

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The prison industry is booming. New institutions are being built like crazy, incarceration costs are increasing, and prison guard unions are gaining political clout. The overwhelming attitude is ‘lock them up and throw away the key’. If this trend continues, one day you might either work in a prison or reside in one. Currently more than 1.8 million people are locked up in the United States, and I am one of them.

“Hey, is your mom here?”

“No way, dude. She won’t be home ‘til 4 p.m.”

“OK. Wait here,” I say as I run out to my beat-up Subaru and grab my duffel bag. Paranoia creeps into my mind as I sling the bag over my shoulder and enter the split-level home my friend’s family resides in. The house is nestled comfortably in the heart of suburbia. What a perfect cover, I think. Reconvening in my partner’s room, I unzip the duffel bag and remove the contents.

“Damn, dude. How much you got?” he asks.

“Twenty pounds, man. Now get the triple-beam and the bong. We have to break this up before your mom gets home.” We weigh the marijuana out in ounces, then place the measures in ziplock sandwich bags from the kitchen for easy transfer to sell to our friends, and their friends.

“Hey, call up Chris and John. Tell them to come over.” As my partner-in-crime dials the phone, I fill up the water bong and hit it hard, anticipating the money coming my way. A few minutes later the doorbell rings and Chris shuffles up the stairs.

“What’s up, man?” he inquires with a smile. As smoke slowly slips from my mouth, I say, “Free enterprise, dude.”

At 6:27 in the morning of October 2, 1993, the cops bust into my hotel room, Berretta nine millimetre pointed at my face. I was scared-past scared. I was in shock. I was handcuffed and taken to Jail. I WAS GOING TO JAIL.

I could not believe it. I was in a county Jail. I was from the suburbs. What was I doing in jail with a plastic mattress, no pillow, no sheets, no nothing? I was in an orange jumpsuit with K-Mart special slip-on shoes. I lay on the plastic mattress and stared at the stainless steel toilet and sink. The walls of my cell closed in.

I remember crying in disbelief, in frustration. How could they put me here? I am not a criminal. I just sold marijuana. I am a businessman. Free enterprise, right! I WAS IN JAIL.

To the guards I was not even a person, was not even human. I was just another number. They did not care that I did not like the food. They did not care that I did not have any sheets or toilet paper, or that I only had one pair of underwear and no socks, or that I wanted to take a shower. They did not want to hear it. But this was only the beginning.

“You don’t think that cop saw the joint.”

“I don’t know? Just keep driving,” I tell my girlfriend as I look back towards the police cruiser we passed on the entrance ramp.

“Just drive real safe-like real legal-like,” I say. She puts the joint in the ashtray and moves to the slow lane, keeping the car moving at a steady, 65.

“What’s the speed limit here? 55 or what? I’m doing 65.”

“I don’t know. He’s right behind us. Just be cool. We’re OK.” The cop flashes his lights and momentarily we are gripped with panic, but the cruiser switches to the fast lane and rockets past us.

“Damn,” my girlfriend says as she grabs the joint out of the ashtray and lights it.

“Give me that,” I say, snatching it and taking a long, hard toke. I look at the bag in the back seat which has 25 pounds of pot in it and say to myself, “That was close, too close.”

I was brought before the judge. My chubby lawyer asked me if I felt lucky. What does luck have to do with it, I thought? The prosecutor went on and on about how I was a machine-gun toting, skinhead, LSD - marijuana freak, who corrupted society and deserved to go to prison for life.

My lawyer told the judge how I was a drug-addicted, mixed up kid who fell in with the wrong crowd, but really was a good person at heart who wanted to change for the better. Neither the prosecutor nor my lawyer was right, but at this point I do not think it really mattered.

The judge listened to all this while trying not to fall asleep. Finally he says, "304 months." Three hundred and four months, I think, that is not bad. Wait. How long is 304 months? It clicked, 25 years, for selling pot and LSD? I could not believe it. I WAS GOING TO PRISON.

They handcuffed me and put me in leg irons. They pointed Mossberg 12 gauge riot guns at my face and put me on a bus with other similarly shackled prisoners. I noticed there were not many white people and no one struck me as a suburbanite.

The bus went to an airport that was surrounded by a fence with razor wire; nothing as simple as barbed wire here. They put me on a DC-8 plane waving M-16 rifles in my face to make sure I did not get out of line (in my leg irons and handcuffs). The plane took off. I was at 40,000 feet in a DC-8 with handcuffs and leg irons - welcome to Con-Air. "What happens if the plane crashes", I thought? "What happens if I have to go to the bathroom?" No emergency exits were marked. There were no oxygen masks, flotation devices. or barf bags, and the guard-flight attendants were not serving drinks.

If this was not enough, I got special treatment: the Black Box. This apparatus fits between your wrists holding the handcuffs in place so no movement is possible. A chain is wrapped around your waist and secured to the black box and your handcuffs. It was very uncomfortable. Try to eat in this set-up. I did, but not very successfully. We were graced with the Con-Air meal, a cheese sandwich, which the guard-flight attendant threw at us.

We finally set down and they loaded on prisoners from the prison before they took us new recruits off. I had only been in county jail up to this point and I was not impressed with the occupants, but these guys from the prison were another story. Huge, mean-looking blacks, muscle-bound, tattoo-imprinted latinos, and white guys that looked like Thor. The lot getting on the plane were what I envisioned prisoners looking like -- and me, a 22-year-old-kid from the suburbs was being taken to live with these Charles Manson wanna-be's.

“Come here.”

“Where?”

“Back here to my room.”

“Why?” she asks. “Are you trying to get me alone?”

“Yes,” I respond as I lead her into my room and lock the door.

“Why’d you lock the door? I’m not having sex with you, yet. I mean, I hardly know you.” I laugh nervously and tilt my head at her, smiling.

“What’s the most money you have ever seen?”

“What does that matter? I mean, I don’t even know,” she replies as she looks at me quizzically. I open my closet and get out a shoebox and throw it to her.

“Open it up. Go ahead.”

She glances at me furtively and opens the shoebox. Astonished, she looks up and asks, “How much is it?”

“Sixteen grand last time I counted. Let’s count it again.”

We count out the money, placing the 20s, 50s, and 100s in their appropriate piles in bunches of \$1,000. She handles the money like a banker.

“Where’d you get this?” she asks. I tell her it does not matter as I push the money aside and kiss her.

Federal Correctional Institution. My new home for the next 20 years. I had a lot to learn. I had mucho to adjust to. Talk about culture shock. I was a spoiled rich kid. This was hell. I WAS IN HELL.

Imagine living in your bathroom. except that there is no tub or shower. There is a bunkbed instead. A metal bunkbed with a dinky mattress and, if you are lucky, a pillow. All your belongings fit in a 3 inch by 2 inch foot locker. You can go to the store once a week to buy what you need. Only once a week. The store does not offer much. Junk food, gray sweatsuits, toothpaste. No pizza, no slurpees, no big macs, no nintendo, no CDS, no nothing.

You can buy a radio, but you are in the middle of nowhere, so no radio stations. The guards treat you like cattle, not human beings. They justify taking the cookie from you that you brought from the chow hall by saying they are just doing their job. You cannot accomplish anything

productive because policy dictates this and policy dictates that. If you have a problem you better deal with it yourself because the prison officials will say they are here to help you, but when you ask for help, they will direct you to so and so, who will direct you to so and so, whose policy is not to help.

When I lay in my cell at night listening to my cellie snore, I wonder to myself, "What was I thinking?! What have I done to myself?"

"Look dude, this has all been great. I mean free drugs, money, and the like, but it can't last forever. Anyhow, I gotta go back to school in the Fall. So, like, what are you gonna do?"

"I don't know, man," I say, "maybe move a couple more loads or something, you know?"

"Check it out dude, you should get a real job for awhile. Everybody knows about you. You're high profile, dude. You've been moving a lot of weed and acid. Chill out for a while man."

"No way, dude, this is like my life, man. I'm pursuing the American Dream. Free Enterprise, you know? I'm a businessman, dude."

"I know, dude, but look. You could get busted or something. You gotta stop, chill out for at least a little bit. Buy a new car or something. Take a vacation, If you keep going, you're gonna get caught."

"No chance, dude. A couple more times and I'm out. Only stupid people get busted anyhow; I'll never get caught."

I was trying to pursue the American Dream. I thought I could set my own rules. Thomas Jefferson did. Jerry Garcia did. Why couldn't I? I was a businessman. Free enterprise, capitalism, you know? Buy a product, sell it, and count the money all the way to the bank.

But it is not like that. The politicians have enacted strict drug laws to save the country from itself. When I was growing up, I thought America was the land of opportunity, the land of the free. But it is not. You play by the rules or you do not play at all for long.