FOREWORD

James Carr was murdered twenty-two years ago. In some ways it seems like only yesterday that Jimmy was killed, in other ways eons have passed; the world is a very different place.

Since Jimmy was an inmate in the late 50s and 60s, the California prison system itself has changed little. The same kinds of people serve time under the same circumstances. What has changed are the crimes that are committed today, and, just as important, society's perception of those crimes and of the criminals who perpetrate them.

In the 60s and 70s a vocal prison reform movement presented the prisons as a symptom of greater social ills, the tip of the social iceberg. The causes of crime were broadly discussed as part of the general social debate about values and institutions, even if the solutions offered were frequently simplistic. The "silent majority" of that era viewed prisoners as an irredeemable social menace.

Today there is no prison movement. "Prison reform" consists of building more prisons and extending sentences. In part, the rejection of the concept of prison as a potentially redemptive institution is a response to the increasingly violent nature of crime and of social relations in general. America perceives itself to be under siege. Across the U.S. gangs no longer do battle with home-made zip guns, shivs and brass knuckles. They slaughter each other with Green Beret quality automatic weapons. Arguments that in Jimmy's time would have been settled by a fist fight frequently turn into a fire fight. The air of impending violence seems to color nearly every passionate social encounter.

In an unending barrage of news accounts and in politicians' and experts' statements, society has been neatly divided between the violent aggressors and their innocent victims, the terrified populace. The bi-polar world of the War On Crime is strongly reminiscent of another recent conflict whose last battle was only recently fought.

The timing is more than accidental. Just about the month the Cold War was officially declared over, the War on Crime was announced. The fabled peace divided with its promised calm and prosperity never materialized. The state of fear that had been the norm for forty-five years was not allowed to dissipate one little bit.

Every social species instinctively seeks to preserve its position in the great chain of being. Politicians are no exception. They have mastered a few lessons from recent history. Frequently, when America finds itself in a relatively tranquil moment without a menacing antagonist, concerned citizens begin to focus on the excesses and the gross inefficiencies of government. Watergate followed close on the heels of the American troop withdrawal from Vietnam. The general disgust with politicians that fueled Ross Perrot's campaign surfaced shortly after the completion of the Iraq War.

At the same time new mini-antagonists such as Iraq, North Korea, the plutonium toting Russian Mafia, and the IRA generate momentary anxiety, a more permanent menace is needed to maintain social adrenaline and the need for protection that accompanies it at peak Cold War levels. The vanquished notion of a Communist hiding under the bed has largely been replaced by the more realistic image of the ski-masked armed robber laying in wait.

Crime is big business, not for the criminals, but for the federal, state and local police, government and private lawyers, bondsmen, paid experts, weapons manufacturers, private security firms, etc. Like the military-industrial complex that to this day refuses to accept its inevitable phase out, the domestic security apparatus has everything to win by the maintenance of the perception of crime as a continuous threat.

The domestic security industry doesn't necessarily create the condition in which the current crime wave flourishes or even encourages crime. Its failure is one of omission. It does not focus its real energies on addressing the underlying causes of criminal behavior any more than the national security industry spent time trying to defuse the cold war. That behavior would have been rewarded by a trip to the unemployment line.

What can any of us do to make a difference in the current hysterical climate of real and perceived violence? I believe we should look to James Carr for an example. Jimmy was a strong-willed and focused man who refused to follow the path for which he was programmed. Incarcerated in a system that tries to destroy the uniqueness of each prisoner, Jimmy stood out as an individual. Rather than allow himself to be defined as a criminal in continuous combat with the police, he opted out of that symbiotic relationship. Jimmy accepted responsibility for his crimes, a courageous and decidedly unpopular act. His direct, honest approach to his past and to that of his fellow inmates makes his autobiography one of the few reliable chronicles of a crucial period in the history of American prison life. It cost Jimmy his life. It certainly deserves our attention and our respect.

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