

U.S. Unveils 'Magna Carta of Prison Reform'

By Nancy Scannell

Washington Post Staff Writer

WILLIAMSBURG, Va., Dec. 6—U.S. Attorney General John N. Mitchell announced today a prison reform program involving intensive education programs, minority hiring, and the replacement of trials with community-oriented correctional programs.

Mitchell outlined the program to more than 350 delegates—judges, prison officials, lawyers and congressmen—at the nation's first Conference on Corrections. The proposals, he said, were part of the Nixon administration's "Magna Carta of prison reform," an effort to move away from the "old concepts of restraint and deterrence."

In a taped message to the conference, President Nixon described prisons as colleges of crime. The task, said the President, is to offer the prisoner "the keys of education, of rehabilitation, of useful training, of hope—the keys he must have to open the gates to a life of freedom and dignity."

The delegates mixed skepticisms with hope in their reactions to the program described by the Attorney General. "I've heard a lot of this before," said federal public defender James F. Hewitt of San Francisco, "but it's good to get the official recognition of the chief law enforcement officer in the country."

Noted trial lawyer F. Lee Bailey, a convention delegate, commented: "I think he's sincere . . . (and) there's enough heat on this topic (prison reform) that I think we will see some progress."

Prisons in several parts of the country have experienced inmate uprising recently, and national outcries for prison reform have grown out of incidents such as the bloodshed in the prisoner rebellion at Attica, N.Y.

Mitchell's speech keynoted the three-day conference being held in this historic town where one of the nation's first prisons, the "Public's Gaol," was built in 1704 to punish common misdemeanors

and the crew of Blackbeard the Pirate.

At a press conference following his speech, Mitchell said it is "unhealthy for judges to direct the administrative process" of the prison system, but it is "healthy to the point they're trying to protect the constitutional rights" of prisoners.

Federal and local judges in Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia have been critical of the prisons in those jurisdictions lately and have handed down orders requiring changes in the administrative and punishment procedures.

In his speech, Mitchell announced:

- Creation of a National Corrections Academy, patterned after the FBI Academy, that would concentrate on

learning, research and training for federal state and local corrections personnel. The academy will set common performance standards.

- Establishment of two separate national clearinghouses, one charged with devising academic and vocational programs for inmates; and the other, to be set up at the University of Illinois, to help states put advances in prison building architecture to work with modern correctional methods.

- Ordering all 28 federal prisons to "work toward the goal of hiring one-third of their employees from minority groups. The Justice Department, said Mitchell, will provide aid to other correctional systems in attaining that quota.

- Authorize a feasibility study of making available to adults a juvenile court system whereby a prosecutor may waive trial for certain offend-

ers who volunteer to enter a community-oriented correctional program.

Under such a program, a first offender would be as-

signed to a probation officer and could continue to live and work in the community under an approved rehabilitation program.

"Let us ask whether in every case we need to achieve 'the object so sublime' of the Mikado's Lord High executioner—'To make the punishment fit the crime,'" said Mitchell, who quoted from Mark Twain, Gilbert and Sullivan, Winston Churchill and Dostoyevsky during his 20-minute speech.

He also noted that many of the prison reforms recommended by a convention held 100 years ago in Cincinnati have yet to be implemented throughout the country's penal system.

The Attorney General also told the delegates that the "appalling resistance to hiring ex-offenders, even by many governmental agencies," should be ended.

He indicated at his press conference that he would favor, but not request, repeal of laws in individual states that prohibit the hiring of ex-convicts in government. Mitchell did not know if the Justice Department had hired any ex-offenders but said he was "sure there are some (in the agency)."

He also said he was receptive to allowing certain prisoners to have conjugal visiting rights as a means of "bringing them closer to their families . . . and stimulating their desire to go back" into society.



Associated Press
U.S. Attorney General John N. Mitchell is flanked by Linwood Holton as Mitchell arrives to speak at nation's first Conference on Corrections at Williamsburg, Va. Sen. Charles McC. Mathias Jr. (R-Md.), left, and Va. Gov.