

Story Behind the Decision

-- Dramatic Prison Reform

By Tim Findley

The projected closing of San Quentin Prison in 1974 is the most dramatic decision made in 120 years of California penology, but it is only possible because the most significant reforms in state prison history are already under way.

Governor Ronald Reagan's announcement yesterday came at the apex of a three-year period of change in the California prison system high-

**Analysis
and
Opinion**

lighted by remarkable moves in only the last six months.

Much of the groundwork that has made it possible to foresee the end of the dreary institution can be credited to pressure from tireless prison reform groups, particularly in the past three years.

VIOLENCE

It was a span of time marked by unprecedented surges of violence in prison and paradoxically startling evidence of reform that included the following:

- A reduction in the state's inmate population

from a peak of nearly 29,000 to a present low of 20,080.

- This year, for the first time in history, there are more convicted offenders on parole than there are in prison.

- Eight of the state's prison institutions have been closed in the last three years.

- The inmate recidivism rate at the same time dropped to its lowest level in more than a decade.

The man directly responsible is Raymond Procunier, the affable, often criticized and seldom seen director of corrections.

The decision to close San Quentin was not made until mid-December, and when it was made it was based as much on financial considerations as on those of reform.

Even as recently as six months ago, the closing of San Quentin was virtually unthinkable to administrators of the state's huge prison system.

The old yellow bastion was expensive, costing \$10 million a year to operate. Many of its buildings had been condemned years ago, but were still in use. Its size made it dangerous and a frequent

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scene of violence. By the most rudimentary precepts of penology, San Quentin was too old, too big and too expensive.

Still, San Juentin had two crucial advantages. First, it was the only prison in the state within easy proximity of a major urban area. As a result, its hospital could be bolstered by nearby and readily available medical advice and assistance.

Similarly, urban advantages, aided programs meant to assist in rehabilitation of inmates. It was easier to place men on work furlough, for example, and easier to arrange visits from outside organizations, public figures and even entertainers.

VISITS

Perhaps most significant, the location of the prison made it easier for families of inmates to visit their men — a key factor in convict morale.

San Quentin's second important advantage was its use as a maximum facility. In terms of penal standards,

themselves outdated, California had only San Quentin, Soledad and Folsom to house the most dangerous convicts — and prison authorities were complaining with some justification that there were a larger number of dangerous convicts than ever before.

In March, of last year when Oakland criminologist Robert Keldgord first suggested that San Quentin and Folsom would both be closed within five years, even ardent reformers scoffed.

REPORTS

The proposal began to gain more credence when Keldgord and his study teams recommended closing the two "ugly, depressing" prisons in their report to the State Board of Corrections last summer.

It was not, however, a radical suggestion in a vacuum. For San Quentin and Folsom

to be closed, the report said, the population of state prisons would have to be greatly reduced and the length of time men spent in prison would have to be markedly shortened.

That was precisely what was happening even while the Keldgord report was being prepared.

Amid a tempest of insistence on immediate reform in California prisons, Procunier had been carrying on with his own patient program of reform begun when he was appointed in a surprising move by Reagan in 1967.

PAROLES

At the urgings of Procunier, the Adult Authority instituted a policy of "downstream dates" — setting a man's parole date up to a year in advance and frequently releasing him even in advance of that if he showed progress.

Short of abolishing the Adult Authority and the indeterminate sentence, steps urged by most reformers, the new policy was the most significant change in prison procedures in the state in 30 years.

In 1969, California's prison population was at an all-time high of 28,600 — straining the limits of the largest prison system in the country and one of the largest in the western world.

Today, the state's prison

population stands at 20,080 — 400 under the rated capacity of the system. A near record 9000 men were released from prison in California last year alone. At the same time, under the state's probation subsidy program, virtually all offenders convicted of non-violent crimes against property were being handled by cities and counties.

Furthermore, worries that releasing more men would result in more crime were being reduced by the evident success of the program. The rate of recidivism — the return of convicts to prison for other crimes — has been steadily dropping — from 40 per cent who returned within two years of their release a

decade ago to 25 per cent today.

Within the last two years, the steadily dropping population has allowed Procunier to begin closing prisons. The minimum security half of the California Men's Colony at San Luis Obispo was closed. The south facility at Soledad was shut down. Six minimum security camps were closed.

PROBLEM

The problem, however, was that the prison system was getting rid of its "best inmates. Men with violent records still served long terms, and prison officials said the inmate population was coming down to the "hard core."

Still by July of last year, for the first time in history, there were more men on parole in the state (22,000) than there were in prison.

In October, the Adult Authority set a record by giving parole dates to 70 per cent of the inmates who appeared before it — a figure not even imaginable a few years earlier when only about 30 per cent of the men received "dates."

With the governor's new budget being formed, Procunier and his staff had two choices — either continue to run all the institutions on a reduced level, an expensive proposition, or close another of the minimum security institutions, probably the California Conservation Center at Susanville.

GAMBIT

But in December, Procunier played a major gambit. For years, there have been proposals to build a new maximum institution to replace decrepit San Quentin.

Procunier this time proposed two new ideal institutions housing no more than 400 men each — the dream of penologists. The institutions would be built at existing sites, preferably alongside one of the mental hospitals.

To corrections officials' delight, Reagan accepted the idea.

The result is not only the future closing of San Quentin, but immediate steps of almost equal significance.

LOWEST

By July, for example, San Quentin will have its lowest population of modern times — about 1500 men. That will allow the prison to close South Block — built in about 1871, grisly, damp and containing the most brutally unpleasant maximum security prison area in the state.

In addition, the department plans to go ahead with plans for Susanville — reducing its population from 1000 men to around 600 by this summer.

Reagan's budget contains \$150,000 for planning the two new institutions. Estimated cost of their construction, which could begin in 1973, will probably be around \$15 million.

QUESTIONS

There remain questions, such as what may happen to Death Row or, for that matter, capital punishment in the state. And there remain problems. Inmates still serve a median time of 34 months in California prisons and the indeterminate sentence is still considered by many to be cruel.

The tough maximum "joints" at Soledad and Folsom are likely to remain in operation for years to come. Prison will never be a pleasant place, and the new steps guarantee no solutions to the rehabilitation problem.

But the state has made a commitment to reform that is the most dramatic move in a year of national concern over prisons and perhaps the most significant factor in the future of penology.