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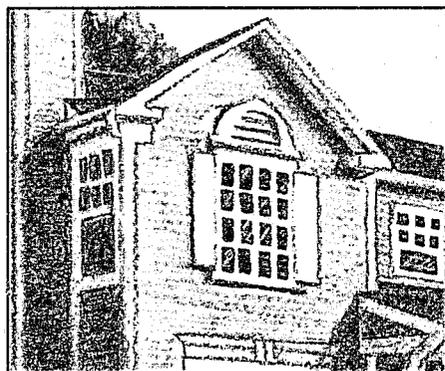
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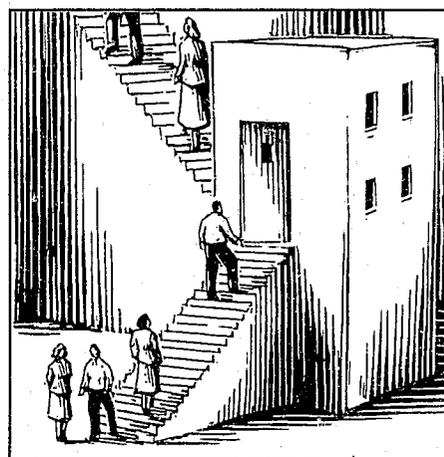
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The Sources of Excellence

Paul W. Keve

Editor's note: We asked Paul Keve, one of the Nation's leading corrections scholars and an expert on the history of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, to examine that 63-year history and give us what, in his opinion, were the agency's most important innovations—in line with the theme of this issue, reflecting sound management and leadership in the correctional field. Professor Keve's observations follow.

1. Setting a course: merit, not patronage

Leadership quality was there right at the start.

In the late 1920's, when Assistant Attorney General Mabel Walker Willebrandt was looking for a progressive administrator to head the anticipated new Bureau of Prisons, she was ready to forego her long accommodation to the political patronage system: she was eager to hire the best expert she could find and was willing to consider professional expertise ahead of party affiliation. At the time this was a substantial departure from the usual; of all the indicators of professional management, this repudiation of patronage practices was the most conspicuous for the prison system then being created.

The person Willebrandt chose to recruit for the director's job was Sanford Bates, then Commissioner of Corrections in Massachusetts, a man surprisingly averse to political selection of staff, given the fact that patronage was practically a fine art in his State.

Bates, who was not seeking the Federal post and was in fact a somewhat reluctant prospect for it, made his philosophy and concepts of corrections administration clearly known to Attorney General William D. Mitchell when being considered for the appointment. In a detailed letter he noted the importance of keeping a good relationship with Congress, but also: "I should confidently expect the backing of my superiors in withstanding that happily infrequent kind of pressure which comes sometimes from the unreasonable demands of persons whose chief aim in life is political."¹

It was a comment that must have made Attorney General Mitchell particularly thoughtful, for he certainly knew that the Federal prisons then in existence were in most cases virtual hostages of the patronage process; their wardens were only lightly subject to coordinating

supervision by the Department of Justice, while heavily committed to loyalty toward their sponsors in Congress to whom they owed their jobs. It was a condition that defeated any hope for operating the institutions as a system. In effect it guaranteed that each facility would protect its own mediocrity—being managed without vision, without progress.

No substantial improvement could be hoped for until this pattern of patronage could be broken, and fortunately Bates had the skill and resolve to tackle it immediately and forcefully. It meant having to work against strong resistance from the entrenched, independently inclined staffs, a process that took time and was not yet fully completed when Bates resigned after nearly 6 years as director. Nevertheless, he established the new professional direction so effectively during his tenure that at no time in the half century since has there been any serious attempt to restore the patronage practice. Perhaps equally significant in its pattern-establishing effect was the fact that, to everyone's relief at the time, Bates was retained in office when Democrat Roosevelt succeeded Republican Hoover in the Presidency.

2. Seeing inmates as individuals, as people

While professionalization of the prison system was the first and most significant of the thrusts that Bates pursued, he also contributed



Kevin Bapp

Photos courtesy BOP Archives



Left: The Bureau's first three directors, James V. Bennett, Sanford Bates, and Myrl E. Alexander (left to right) meet in Alexander's office c. 1965.

Right: A Federal Prison Industries factory in the U.S. Penitentiary, Atlanta, Georgia, c. 1950.

a well-defined guiding philosophy for the management of prison inmates. Though his views would seem unremarkable today, they were in contrast to the philosophical poverty of most of the wardens he inherited. Bates could be unhesitatingly assertive when resolute decisions were called for, but he also approached his responsibilities with enlightened compassion. Again, in his letter to Mitchell: "Punishment must be promptly inflicted but it must not be so severe as to defeat its own ends or degrade a community."

One brief sentence in his letter pointed to a major concern. "A complete scientific study of the individual and the causes of his crime is not inconsistent with [protection of society] but a necessary prerequisite for intelligent community action." Although he did not elaborate at that point, this was the signal that under

his direction the Bureau would promptly begin development of its prisoner classification process, something until then unknown in Federal (and most other) institutions.

3. Building a system to be emulated

One more of the many points that Bates' letter contained is important to note here, and anyone acquainted with the Bureau's present functioning can recognize how strongly Bates' philosophy took hold. "Is it not too much to hope that [the Bureau] might assume a position of actual leadership in the country? I do not mean by this that it should in any sense interfere in the work of the various States any more than other bureaus do, but it can by example, if not by precept, set standards of fine, progressive prison management which the States would do well to emulate, and perhaps act as a clearing house for information and prison statistics."

In its size and complexity the Bureau today seems to bear little similarity to the relatively simple organization that Bates left after his 6 years in the director's post. Nevertheless, he succeeded in setting the pattern for reform so solidly that subsequent administrations, despite all the enormous growth and diversification, have essentially reinforced and extended the basic management principles Bates introduced.

4. Prison industries in a world of free enterprise

Of course, one essential element ensuring the continuation of Bates' progressive beginnings was the grooming of a competent successor; his assistant director, James V. Bennett, was ready to pick up where Bates left off, and in his own 27 years as director reaffirmed the Bureau's professional character. One particularly important accomplishment by Bennett was his creation of a separate

corporation to operate prison industries. Production work by prisoners has been a provocative, controversial subject as long as there have been prisons. Both labor unions and manufacturers' associations have looked with dismay at the sale of prison-made products in competition with free labor. In 1890, when the first proposal to establish Federal prisons was being debated in Congress, this was a sore point; Congressmen who fought the proposed legislation used this fear of competition with free enterprise as one argument against the creation of Federal institutions. The controversy had been a special concern of Bennett well before he became director, for his duty as assistant director under Bates had included responsibility for industrial operations in the prisons.



It was Bennett's idea to have Congress create an independent corporation to operate the industries at all the Federal prisons and to make allies of the usual opponents by having the corporation governed by a board whose five members were to include prominent leaders from labor, management, agriculture, and the general public. The bill establishing Federal Prison Industries was passed with a minimum of opposition after President Roosevelt negotiated support for it from labor leaders. The new corporation was made effective when the President signed an executive order creating it in December 1934.²

In 1977, the vastly expanded Federal Prison Industries adopted a new logo and name, UNICOR, but the basic design of Bennett's plan is followed today, even though there is still controversy and opposition to prison products. State governments over 2 centuries have tried an array of strategies to conciliate manufacturers and unions, with usually

partial and temporary success. The strategy followed by the Federal industries corporation has never been perfect either, but has been more dependably workable than others. Its principal element has been the limitation of production of any one product to a small enough percentage of the country's output so that competition with private industry is minimized.

5. Community corrections

An important development for the corrections field appeared in St. Louis in 1959 with the opening of one of the first halfway houses. This was Dismas House, a privately operated residence that attracted much favorable attention and served to promote the rapid spread of this new type of facility. Very early the Bureau of Prisons joined the trend with its own halfway houses.

A precipitating factor was the interest of newly appointed (in 1961) Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, who advised

Director Bennett of his willingness to find funds for any innovative new approaches the Bureau might propose. Bennett and his staff quickly came up with several significant programs, including their version of the halfway house, calling these community facilities "prerelease guidance centers." Three of these were quickly started, in Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. Within another year or two there were three others, in Washington, D.C., Kansas City, and Detroit, all operating under the direction of future Bureau director Norman A. Carlson, who had started work with the Bureau in 1957.

In a very adaptable manner, the Bureau found ways to house and organize these new facilities according to the available opportunities. In New York City a local college was given a contract to operate the facility; the Chicago center operated in a leased section of the downtown Y.M.C.A. residence; in Los Angeles the Bureau leased a former Baptist church

and seminary; in Detroit, the center, which used a former church parish hall, had a cooperative contract so that it could serve inmates from both the Federal system and the State of Michigan.³ After 1965, the centers were called "community treatment centers" and were on their way to being an indispensable element in the system, as well as models for other agencies. Research eventually showed that, like other programs from which much is hoped, these residences could not prove that they were reducing recidivism. However, neither were they having a worse record in this respect than the institutions; they still were essential to maintain for their value in reducing reliance on more expensive institution beds.

6. Unit management: a major breakthrough

To pick just one of the many other areas in which Bureau leadership has been distinguished, surely that should be unit management. Anyone who has been involved at all in prison management for a few decades knows of the historically discouraging dichotomy—custody vs treatment. As it was, the two types of staff divided every prison, working against and in competition with each other, reducing the effectiveness of the treatment staff and the efficiency of custody. During the 1960's, the Federal system began to develop a management approach that would substantially reduce this problem.

In the early 1960's some inventive minds among the Bureau clinical staff began developing dynamic treatment programs in several institutions, including the National Training School for Boys in Washington, D.C. (closed when



A unit team meets with an inmate.

Morgantown, West Virginia, opened); Ashland, Kentucky; Englewood, Colorado; and El Reno, Oklahoma. Without attempting to describe here the extensive details of this history, suffice it to say that innovative and intensive treatment programming could not achieve its potential in the context of a divided staff; it was evident that there needed to be a mutual involvement of all types of staff. Everyone must understand the treatment process and its goals, and all must be united in support of the effort. What gradually resulted was the delegation of both control and treatment functions to the combined staff members in defined inmate living areas, with each such staff group including members from both custody and treatment, and, as a group, being responsible for governing all aspects of their inmate living unit.⁴

The experience with this technique was that all staff did become effectively part of the treatment effort, control and order in the institutions were enhanced, and morale improved as the staff relationships became closer and more mutually dependent. The benefits soon became evident enough that the unit management technique spread rapidly in the early 1970's to most Bureau facilities.

Sanford Bates would have reason to be particularly pleased. His hope that the Bureau could become a model for other correctional systems to emulate has been more than fulfilled in the results of the unit management idea. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, the old saying tells us, and the Bureau has much to be proud of in seeing its unit management concept imitated more and more in State correctional systems throughout the country.

These six innovations are not the only notable aspects of the Bureau's history by any means. Nevertheless, ranging from the very beginnings of the Bureau right up to the present, they demonstrate one important point: Bureau managers have always built upon the work of their predecessors. There is a clear, consistent line of development from Sanford Bates, who was born in the 19th century, through his successors—and that augurs well for the Bureau in the rapidly approaching 21st century. ■

Paul W. Keve teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, and is a long-time student of correctional history. His most recent work is Prisons and the American Conscience (Southern Illinois University Press, 1991).

Notes

1. Letter of Sanford Bates to Attorney General William D. Mitchell, March 26, 1929.
2. Bates, Sanford. *Prisons and Beyond*, Freeport, N.Y., Books for Libraries Press, 1936, 21-2.
3. Keve, Paul W. *Imaginative Programming in Probation and Parole*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1967, 224-5.
4. Lansing, Douglas, Joseph P. Bogan, and Loren Karacki, Unit Management: Implementing a Different Correctional Approach, *Federal Probation*, Vol. 41, No. 1, March 1977.