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Opinion

## The disaster before the disaster at Chino

**The prison was once a model for a new era of enlightened criminal justice, but Californians' refusal to meet their fiscal and social responsibilities ruined that vision.**

By Volker Janssen

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For corrections experts, the riot at the California Institution for Men in Chino last weekend, which injured 175 prisoners and damaged or destroyed six dormitories, was a disaster that could have been predicted. In a state prison system bursting at the seams and teeming with racial tensions, such violence would seem to be inevitable.

But in the case of Chino, this riot marks not just one more point in a seemingly endless history of prison violence; it is a sad contrast to the high expectations this prison invited at its opening in 1941.

As the first minimum-security prison for men in the state, Chino was supposed to launch California into a new era of enlightened criminal justice. San Quentin and Folsom had been built in the previous century and were notorious for their violence and overcrowding. San Quentin, with more than 4,000 prisoners stuffed into its old cells, had the largest convict population in the nation at the time. A Times reporter, writing in 1930, described the place as a "seething caldron of rebellion, a volcano ready to burst into eruption at any moment."

After dramatic food riots at San Quentin, Gov. Culbert Olson replaced the corrupt board of prison directors in 1940 and brought in reform-minded administrators who halted the construction of gun towers and a wall at the new prison in Chino. The only fence at the "prison without walls" was a barbed-wire one.

In Chino, things were going to be different.

To manage the facility, the state hired a penologist of national reputation, Kenyon J. Scudder, who had as much experience in vocational training as in psychology and public administration. When the first prisoners arrived from Northern California in a chartered Greyhound bus without handcuffs, leg irons or a lock on the bus door, the superintendent -- he did not want to be called "warden" -- took his new prisoners to the barbed-wire fence and showed them how to scale it without cutting themselves. Escape from Chino was easy, he told them. But if they did, "many more years will be added to your sentence, and you can never come back to Chino."

This strategy worked, for the most part. And at the time, Chino was considered one of the best prisons in the nation. Starting with a population of only a few hundred, prisoners were soon busy in the fields and workshops, and in forest camps where they worked in reforestation and fire prevention. During World War II, prisoners actually stood in Chino's only guard tower and served as aircraft warning sentries. Racism existed, of course, but the administration explicitly rejected segregation as a policy.

The California criminal justice system was completely overhauled in 1944 with the creation of the Department of Corrections. Flush with wartime tax revenue, Gov. Earl Warren launched the expansion of the prison system. The model for the new facilities was Chino.

A whole generation of prison reformers who had started their careers under Scudder now came to occupy positions in the new prisons all over the state. Hailed as an example of an enlightened commitment to rehabilitation and proper administration, the state served as national and even international model.

But just as Chino came to serve as an example of a successful postwar welfare state committed to growth and more equal access to prosperity, so have state prisons taken the lead in the state's malfunction and ungovernability. California's prison crisis is, in fact, a few decades old, with its beginnings in the 1970s. That was when Californians launched a tax revolt and fell in love with governance through propositions.

But turning away from our fiscal responsibilities and social obligations has worked about as well as our attempt to solve the crime problem through mass incarceration. Neither the prisons nor the state can run on autopilot. We need political leaders who can offer both a vision and the art of political compromise, not just administrators who can occasionally put out a fire. Or contain a riot.

The recent violence is just one more example of how much of the California dream we have lost.

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