January 30, 2016

Dear fellow citizens,

It is my hope that you have never set foot inside a jail while under the control of law enforcement. But if you have, you are not alone. Statistically, The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the free world. Yes, in the “Land of the Free” we have more inmates than any other nation. How can this be? We are inclusive, tolerant, and education is available to all citizens. We are a nation of opportunity and justice. With all of these qualities, how did we get to this place? Our nation is home to 4.4% of the world’s population, yet we house 22% of the world’s prisoners. Something is wrong in our culture and we must bring about change.

Many will say that we are doing something right by keeping so many criminals off the streets. I disagree. There is no doubt that violent offenders should be incarcerated subject to the laws of the land and the justice system. However, this class of criminal is a small percentage. A recent study found that 90% of American prisoners are held for non-violent offenses. One out of 10 Americans has been arrested due to a drug offense.

Although there are other countries that send more people to prison each year, the fact that the United States incarcerates their prisoners for longer periods causes the total rate to become higher. For example, the average burglary sentence in the
U.S. is 16 months, compared to 5 months in Canada and 7 months in the United Kingdom. Why do we send people away longer? I don't believe a person will achieve greater rehabilitation by spending more time behind bars.

Reasons for imprisonment in this country will further clarify why the incarceration rate and length of sentences are higher than in other nations. Imposing more lengthy prison sentences on repeat offenders is common in many countries. However, America’s “three-strikes” laws in some states with mandatory 25 year imprisonment which mandate state courts to impose sentences on habitual offenders who commit a third offense. The offenses may be minor and non-violent, but courts are compelled to impose sentences which are often unreasonable and not a proper distribution of justice.

Drug sentencing laws have become increasingly stringent and in many cases, unfair. Children are stripped of their parents when these mothers and fathers are apprehended with recreational quantities of cannabis or a few pills. This ripping apart of families creates economic hardships which often can never be overcome in a lifetime. Children without a parent or two in the home suffer academically, socially, and are robbed of opportunities to grow and prosper.

Then there is the concept of the prison privatization, also known as the prison-industrial complex. For-profit companies have emerged to fill the role of housing inmates. Due to contracts with municipalities, many such prisons require a certain number of beds to be occupied. Local governments will pay whether those beds are filled or not. It is easy to spot the problem here. Local courts will send people away for minor offenses to avoid economic waste. The result is that people are locked up for minor offenses causing economic ripples throughout the community. Taxpayers must fund the incarceration of people that don’t need to be there. Those who are incarcerated
can no longer earn an income, pay taxes, and contribute to the local economy. They are more likely to lose their homes and their family members may be plunged into poverty, thus requiring government assistance to survive. The financial drain on the American economy is tremendous.

It is time for all Americans to become educated about the flaws of our system. This is the system that protects us and simultaneously drains our economy, culture and our communities. The scales of justice must be rebalanced.

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