



Department of Justice

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REMARKS

BY

ATTORNEY GENERAL RAMSEY CLARK

At the dedication of

THE ROBERT F. KENNEDY YOUTH CENTER

MORGANTOWN, WEST VIRGINIA

December 9, 1968

In the years to come thousands of boys from throughout the United States will be confined here. They will be the youngest offenders in the federal system. If they are like those who have come before, they will be representative of the American boy in trouble. They will come from poor families, from broken homes. They will be school dropouts. Most will never have a visitor, either relative or friend.

If we permit history to repeat itself, most will commit crimes after they are released. Many will live lives of crime: some to kill and some to die in its commission.

We believe the reported increase in crime these last turbulent decades was committed by minors. We believe four of five felonies were committed by repeaters convicted of crime before: first, nearly always, a minor crime as a kid. Here then will be the opportunity and the risk of working with the agents of crime that is controllable.

As a people we have no greater chance to control crime than by effective corrections. No activity of a people so evidences their humanity, their character, their capacity

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for charity in its most generous sense, as the treatment they accord those who have offended them.

If we know anything, we know corrections can rehabilitate. We know the younger the offender the better his and society's chance. Let us begin with the young. We know when we fail, it is all who suffer because most crime has always been by the few who follow lives of crime. No society has ever protected itself by the permanent banishment of more than a handful. America, a gentle nation with skills that promise rehabilitation, will not be the first.

For the Puritan conscience, penitence may have been a powerful regimen. In our mass culture it is rarely relevant. A century ago, Russia's Siberian prison camps, indelibly named the House of the Dead, showed how cruelly and stupidly we can torture ourselves with penology. Through history, society, in treating those who have violated its standards, has turned more minds irremediably to crime than it has rehabilitated.

From his prison experiences Dostoevski defined man as "a creature who can become accustomed to anything." How many prisoners, finally overcome by man's inhumanity to man put aside forever all compassion to rely ever after on cunning.

To give every boy his chance for fulfillment, we must recognize that as with us, nothing human is alien to him. All of our learning, our skills, and our energies carefully and continuously tailored to fit his individual needs can give most that chance. Physical and mental health, all the education he can absorb, vocational skills for the highest purposes to which a boy is susceptible, a calm and orderly environment away from anxiety, violence and turbulence, to be among people who care, who love; thus can a boy begin again. The clear direction is back to the community as a stable person, sensitive to the feelings of others, incapable of purposely injuring anyone. This means doing those things that will give a reverence for life, a sense of security, a self assurance midst all the pressures of modern community

life. That sense cannot be developed in a laboratory. It must be developed in the community itself: first this community and finally the community in which the individual must make his way by himself.

The knowledge of a great University, the wisdom of its faculties, the enthusiasm and good will of its students, the faith of the quiet city of Morgantown and its concern coupled with the experience and dedication of the Federal Bureau of Prisons offer much. But more is needed. Here we must bring the most advanced research and best practice wherever they are found, providing the resources to implement both. From here we must assure resources and skills to help a boy when he may need it most, on the hard return home. Comprehensive community services will be essential if we are to succeed.

Knowing the price of past failures, we must seek a newer world. We must have the courage to experiment, to think anew and act anew. We must spare no effort. Will we now resolve that ten years hence whenever anyone anywhere is concerned about youth crime and its cures, he will think first of Morgantown. Can we strive for a day when leaders in penology from over the world will come here to see how young boys are rehabilitated? Dare we be the best? From here we can build a fire that will truly light the world.

What nobler work could involve us than to save one boy from the horror, for himself and all who sense his empty heart, of a life of crime? Do we really care?

This can be another manufacturer of crime. It can be just another place to hold bad boys: out of sight, out of mind. Better that we tear it down now than that we let that happen. Better far that we never give a great name to a petty cause or to a failure.

We enlist Bob Kennedy in this effort not to honor him. That is beyond our power. We need his help again. If we can bring his spirit to this place, boys will leave here with a sense of character, strong and brave, determined to help, not hurt, their fellow man. We seek his inspiration;

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the strength of his rough, gentle hand; the force of his relentless heart, determined to make a difference; the humaneness of his spirit; his ennobling joy and sorrow.

The spirit of Bob Kennedy can bring forth the best in each of the boys who comes here as it did in so many who knew him in life. Through this center for the correction of youth we can help make the whole world the sepulcher of the brave man whose spirit we would enshrine in this place and in the hearts of the young who pass here.