Alabama keeps fighting against human rights

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Written by
Vanzetta McPherson

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Opinion
Civil War

Why does Alabama insist on perpetuating its image as a racially backward place? Just think of the exemplars: Nestling the Ku Klux Klan; applauding stand-in-the-door enforcement of segregation; closing swimming pools and libraries; hitching prisoners to posts for hours in the sun; and barring interracial couples from high school proms.

Recently, state lawmakers have touted the enactment of the "toughest" immigration law in the country, resulting in added cost in a bankrupt system to education and law enforcement and a reduced workforce for already struggling farmers. Why does Alabama behave in ways that compel federal court intervention to secure basic rights?

It seems at times that the state's officials genuinely look for ways to generate racial controversy and to engender negative attention nationally to our state. In one of the latest of such "compulsions," the Alabama Department of Corrections has banned a Pulitzer Prize-winning book from its institutions.

Recognizing "excellence in journalism and the arts," Columbia University awarded the prize in 2009 for general non-fiction to Douglas A. Blackmon, the author of "Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II." The book is a well-researched history of the laws passed in the late 19th century to re-create de facto slavery via forced labor in Alabama and elsewhere.

Notwithstanding the indisputable link between criminal conduct on the one hand, and education and intelligence on the other, the ADOC has banned Blackmon's award-winning book because it poses a vaguely defined, unproven "security threat." The department claims that the book violates its policy prohibiting material that incites violence (including racial violence).

In the meantime, inmates are readily permitted to read any of the arguably incendiary volumes published by John Grisham. For example, in "A Time to Kill," "The Chamber" and "The Last Juror,"

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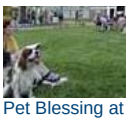
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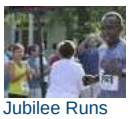
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Grisham blatantly and disapprovingly exposes the racial prejudice exhibited by white antagonists toward blacks. His texts include acts of violence and expressions of hatred, distrust, anger and defeatism.

Page 1 2 Next

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Tom Clancy, no shrinking violet himself, also freely enters the ADOC's literary portals. With volumes that include the detailed exploits of murderers and terrorists, Clancy provides an encyclopedic manual for mayhem — one of his books explains a formula for building an advanced bomb!

Indeed, the master of violence ad nauseam, Mario Puzo, enjoys a standing invitation to the ADOC's libraries. His "Godfather," a glorification of mob life, is a 448-page pedagogy on criminal motivation, vengeance, contempt for law enforcement, and consequence-free illegalities.

From Puzo, inmates learn that there is a direct — and positive — correlation between violence and manhood; that violence is the method of choice for redressing grievances, no matter how small; that a pattern of violent conduct is an acceptable legacy for a man to pass on to his sons, and that gang-inspired affiliations add status to an otherwise uninspired existence (after all, the mob is the capital of gangland).

How on earth is "Slavery by Another Name" any more of a security threat than the offerings of these three popular writers? How does the absorption of social and political history jeopardize the elusive peaceful tranquility of prison life any more than the voyeuristic consumption of successful criminal exploits?

How does the study of the history of one's home state — whose focus is the impact of injustice — imbue the penal environment with any more significant pall than volumes designed specifically to excite passions through fictional chaos? The answers are: It isn't and it doesn't.

Rather, it seems that the human threads governing the ADOC are so interwoven in the fabric of Alabama's perennial denial of its past realities and (ironically) its resistance to real change that they perpetuate two mindsets regarding prison inmates, one general and the other specific.

The general mindset is that inmates are not worthy of redemption, an unintelligent thought given the inevitable re-integration of most inmates into our midsts. The second is that education is anathema to imprisonment, and therefore efforts to bring knowledge and understanding to inmates about their extended environments are futile.

Those attitudes exist in a sea of backward ideas that continue to fuel too many of our state's imperatives. The big problem is that our engines are stuck in reverse.

Vanzetta Penn McPherson is a retired U.S. magistrate judge for the Middle District of Alabama.