

Republican Perspective

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by John Littig

Prison Chaser

Under cover of describing my luncheon with General William Westmoreland, my April 15 column introduced "prison chaser" detail.

For those whose misfortunes extend to having missed the earlier column, prison chasers supplemented the Military Police who ran Fort Campbell's stockade. Prison chasers guarded military inmates who were temporarily outside the stockade---usually for a work detail or for a medical or dental appointment.

Prison chaser was a dreaded detail. Detailees were armed with shotguns or .45 caliber pistols---of course with live ammunition. They guarded fellow soldiers who had been convicted at court martial and sentenced to a term of confinement. The thought of having to shoot a fleeing prisoner was an ugly prospect. In addition, the chance of being attacked and disarmed by a group of prisoners was a constant source of unease.

There was a system in place to reduce the chance of escape attempts. Prison chasers were told that if a prisoner escaped the responsible prison chaser would have to serve the remainder of the escapee's sentence.

Now let's just assume that was true. Maybe it was, maybe not. Nevertheless, the prison chasers believed it, and that surely provided plenty of incentive for the prison chasers not to lose any prisoners.

In addition, the inmates also believed it. That in turn created an incentive for them not to run---believing that the prison chasers would be quick to shoot a fleeing inmate.

So it really didn't matter whether the rule was real or just a barracks fabrication. It was widely taken as gospel, and that was what made it effective. Setting aside the uncertainty, how might the concept be applied in our criminal justice system? Let's consider.

Judges typically don't "throw the book" at the convicted. They hand down lesser sentences. What would they do if they knew they personally would have to complete the full sentence in the event the convict re-offended after serving the lesser sentence?

How about parole boards? Wouldn't they be slower to approve early release if

they would be in personal jeopardy in the event the parolee re-offended?

Well, you get the idea. Having some "skin in the game" surely would focus the attention of those with authority over incarceration decisions. Those affected by stricter decisions would of course be those most likely to offend---since they had already done so.

Would a system discouraging lighter sentences and early releases be fair? Certainly not from the perspective of the offender. But it would remove from the streets those most likely to commit crimes---those with a criminal history. From the perspective of crime victims, that might seem quite appropriate. So the fairness question would likely be answered differently by prey and predator.

Don't get too worked up over this. It's not a proposal---just a speculation. And the underlying system may be factual or may be just a barracks fiction or exaggeration.

But it's an interesting speculation, nonetheless. It was effective at Fort Campbell.