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IT'S A GRAY AREA: No, it's just the beginning

By JAMES P. GRAY

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Maybe some of you older types like me will remember watching the television police show "Dragnet," starring Jack Webb. Then you might also recall that, after the crime was solved, they would tell us at the very end of the show that the perpetrator was convicted and sentenced to a large number of years in state prison.

But, as my father used to say, that was not the end. In actuality, when you consider the big picture, it was really only the beginning. But in so many ways in our society, we do not look at or even consider the whole picture.

For example, in the matter of the perpetrators of those offenses, what is the rest of the story? What will happen to them while they are in prison, and what will they be like once they are eventually released? And incarceration is expensive.

Will the taxpayers get their money's worth by keeping them locked up? What will happen to the perpetrators' families and other dependents both during the time of incarceration, and afterward? Will the crime victims be better off? As we have seen in earlier columns, all of these are appropriate questions that are seldom even asked, much less answered.

That is not at all to say that people should not be put into prison, and sometimes for long periods of time. Far from it. We certainly need jails and prisons both as a deterrent and as a place for appropriate people to be removed from society for long periods of time. But we must also recognize that about 95% of the people who are sent to prison are eventually released. So we should also do our best to provide opportunities for those people to learn some skills that will reduce the chances that they will return to the antisocial conduct that put them behind bars in the first place.

In other words, in many ways we have to change our way of thinking, and we also have to change our approach.

So as a part of this shift of analysis, we must more fully consider who the people are that we are dealing with. For example, the largest mental-health facility in most counties is the local jail. Imagine the psychological damage that is daily being inflicted upon these mentally fragile people by incarcerating them for minor offenses. Fortunately, and as we will discuss in this column next week, our courts in Orange County are doing something really promising in this area.

But unfortunately, there is little political impetus in most places for the needs of the people who are incarcerated to be addressed so that they can begin to overcome or even address their problems. Wouldn't it be better for everybody if those imprisoned could be assisted, as appropriate, with drug treatment, anger management, parenting skills, job skills, accurate medical information, and a focus upon intelligent decision-making? We should take an overall approach to this issue. Why? Because the actual goal of the criminal justice system is not to punish; it is instead to reduce crime and increase safety for everyone.

We should also take the long-run approach in many other matters as well. For example, in so many ways when we throw an item into the trash, we think that is the end of the story. But, once again, it really is only the beginning, because we must consider the entirety of the issue. Putting toxic or any other materials into landfills may be a temporary fix (out of sight, out of mind), but as we are now beginning to understand, it brings on many more long-range complications. So when we put something into a Dumpster, flush something down the toilet, or throw something out of our car window, that does not end the story. It really is only the beginning, because there are costs involved with the disposal of virtually everything. And as the old effective advertisement said: "Pay

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And this has now grown to be a worldwide problem, because increasingly everything is connected. China and India are seeing this firsthand. And you may not be aware of this, but the air pollution that is generated in China is now being blown across the ocean here to California and beyond. In addition, places that used to accept our trash are no longer doing so. For example, for many years we shipped our nuclear waste to the deserts of Nevada and buried it there, but people in that state have now closed the door on that activity. And remember that barge of trash that kept being hauled from one country to another because no one would take it? Now more than ever all countries will be forced to confront their own long-run consumption, environmental, trash disposal and recycling issues.

Similarly, we need to adopt the same total approach with issues like education and healthcare. Receiving a diploma from an institution of higher learning is not the goal, it is actually just the beginning. The end goal is not the piece of paper, it is instead being able to learn and apply a skill, and also to comprehend and deal effectively with the complexities of our lives. In the same fashion, the goal of healthcare is not really to get over whatever ailment you happen to have at the moment. Instead the goal is to be healthy.

So in most areas, we as individuals must start taking a holistic or long range approach in our everyday lives, and even more so in government. This means that as voters we should generally be skeptical of candidates who speak mostly in sound bites. Why? Because life is much more complicated than that, and we should consider most simple approaches not as the end of the discussion, but as only the beginning.



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