Opinion

News



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by Mary Ann McGivern

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A Jewish friend of mine marvels at the Christian custom of asking our president and governors for clemency in December, as if the only time to show mercy is between Thanksgiving and Christmas, right after the turkeys are pardoned. And alas, he's right. Petitions are pushed hard in the late fall, followed in early January by executive offices publishing any commutations of sentence. Our Missouri governor, Eric Greitens, traveled to a women's prison on Dec. 20 to announce a commutation.

The woman, Judy Henderson, had been sentenced to life in prison as an accomplice to murder while her boyfriend, who pulled the trigger, was acquitted by a jury. That happens a lot, women serving long sentences for drug possession or holding stolen goods or accessory to murder, while their boyfriends are let loose. Judy served 35 years before her release. But I haven't seen that the governor has pardoned anybody else in his first year in office. President Trump pardoned former Sheriff Joe Arpaio in August 2017, shortly after Arpaio's conviction; the president later pardoned Sholom Rubashkin, a former Iowa slaughterhouse executive, in December, after he'd served eight years of his 27-year sentence.

I'm taking my Jewish friend's criticism of us Christians to heart and writing to urge Mr. Greitens to be generous and move people out of prison during this late winter and coming spring and summer. Many sentences reflect political fashion more than they fit the severity of the crime. There’s a woman in Tennessee, Cyntoia Brown, who was 16 when she killed a man who was going to have sex with her. The jury accepted the prosecution case that she was a prostitute who killed and robbed her client. That was in 2004. She was sentenced to life in prison. Today she would be seen as a victim because of her youth, and so other mitigating claims, that she was forced into prosecution and that she feared for her life, would likely get more of a hearing and the prosecutor’s charges would probably be different. That’s the argument for the clemency appeal.

In the past 30 years, sentences have grown much longer. Back in the '70s, many murderers received a 20-year sentence, with parole at about year twelve. And children like Brown were not certified to be adults. Thirty-year sentences, death sentences and even life sentences for children became common in the '90s. These heavy penalties seem on the wane today, depending mostly on prosecutorial discretion.

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But our prisons are crowded because of decades of harsh sentences, and to what purpose? We have been very tough on crime, but not very smart. The mentally ill and the drug-addicted share cells with gangsters. I'm for rehabilitation for them all, including those who committed violent crimes. Sure, it will cost money — but less in the long run than we spend building jails and prisons to lock them up for years, decades or the rest of their lives. So I'm writing the governor, urging him to be generous and merciful all yearlong.