

## Program turns convicts into converts

The state of Texas leads the nation in the number of violent criminals put to death. Texas may soon claim another top ranking by helping to save more prisoners' souls than any other state.

### Columnist



**Jeremy Valdez**  
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Last week, the Texas Board of Criminal Justice made a decision that could benefit both convicts and the law-abiding public. In an unexpected and controversial move, the board cautiously agreed to allocate prison space and resources to a Christian gospel-oriented rehabilitation program.

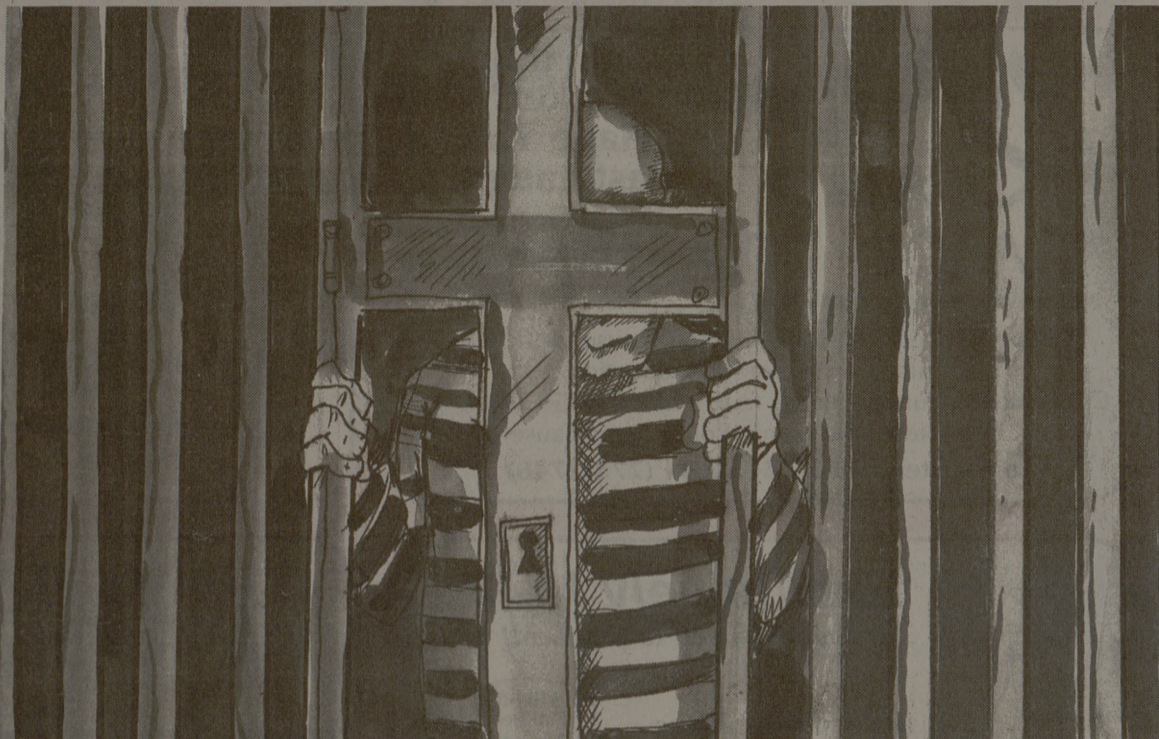
Even more surprising is that there have been few protests from other interest groups. Jay Jacobsen, legal director for the Austin office of the American Civil Liberties Union, said the program most likely doesn't violate the constitutional provision for separation of church and state unless the state treats those in the Christian project better than other inmates.

Jacobsen might as well start filing a lawsuit now because, by design, the new Christian-centered program will provide inmates with a better chance of rehabilitation than current non-religious efforts.

The problem with secular prison rehabilitation is that there basically is none. With our judicial system's revolving-door parole policy, prisons are only temporary holding pens for thieves, drug dealers and rapists.

But even when criminals are incarcerated long enough to need a shave, the "correctional" institution doesn't adequately provide inmates with the skills they need to be productive members of society.

Texas prisons can't even instill the golden rule into the hearts and minds of their prisoners because too many inmates have no reason to believe the rule works. They



have seen what others have done to them, or they have eked out a survival through a childhood full of neglect. This doesn't excuse criminal actions, but in many cases it explains them.

The ministry's mission statement says inmates will focus on "restoration with their family, community and Jesus Christ." It is a reconciliation with these three entities that will provide convicts with reasons to turn themselves around.

In an increasingly hostile political environment, Christians are going public with a list of issues they feel strongly about. But when religious Americans cry out over domestic policies, they are accused of hypocrisy, shortsightedness and inaction.

In the case of prison reform, people are putting their actions where their faith is.

Prison Fellowship Ministries, the group that will oversee the program, is a private volunteer organization. It was founded by Charles Colson, an aide in the Nixon administration who himself found religion while imprisoned for his involvement in Watergate.

The project benefits from Colson's sincerity. Far from being a hypocrite, Colson knows firsthand how religious faith can change a person's life.

The ministry has pledged to provide eight permanent workers and 350 volunteers to staff a two-year pilot project in the Houston area. About 200 of the inmates who apply will participate.

One reason groups like the ACLU are slow to complain is because no state money will be used for the program. Despite a formidable estimated price tag of \$1.5 million over the next two years, the ministry has promised to raise its own funding.

If successful, the ministry hopes to eventually receive subsidies from the state. But it probably won't get any, since Texas legislators hardly want to fork over any money they don't have to. And they want a constitutional lawsuit even less.

"We just need to be aware of what are the results. Are people who attend [Christian rehabilitation], are they given special privileges as far as parole or status?" Jacobsen said.

"No one will be penalized for

not being of that religious ilk, and no one will be rewarded either. If [the Christian project] works, it may be expanded to other faiths," said Allan Pollunsky, chair of the Texas Board of Criminal Justice.

The TBCJ is trying to have its politically correct cake and eat it, too. How does the board expect to measure success apart from the improved behavior and decreased recidivism of the prisoners? If prisoners do become better people as a result of religious study, that fact should be considered at their parole hearings.

But the state seems determined not to reward Bible-studying convicts. The first half of Pollunsky's statement hints that inmates who make no extraordinary effort to become better human beings will have just as good a chance at parole as any reformed Christian prisoners.

That's fine. Because even if better people (who just happen to be religious) don't get preferential parole status, many — most notably the inmates who volunteer for the program — believe that a chance at salvation is a good enough reward alone.

## EDITORIAL

### THE BATTALION

Established in 1893

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## LISTENING UP

### Bowen should be commended for listening to student input.

Texas A&M president Dr. Ray Bowen and the administration have had to face significant adversity in dealing with the proposed General Use Fee increase.

However, Bowen has done a good job of communicating with the students as to the current situation with the proposed fee increase.

The proposed increase would raise the GUF from \$24 to \$34 per semester in the fall of 1997.

As a result, the average professor's salary would increase from \$71,568 to just over \$75,000. The rationale for the increase is simple.

The average salary for professors at Texas A&M is 8 percent below the national average of A&M's peer institutions.

Raising salaries is critical not only in recruiting top quality professors, but also as an important morale boost for current faculty, who have not received a pay raise in a year and a half.

Students may remember the proposed hike in the GUF last year.

This proposed increase was not directed entirely toward professor salaries.

Many students reacted negatively to the proposal, questioning Bowen's rationale and the need for an increase at all.

As a result, the Board of Regents decided against instituting the increase.

However, Bowen has now set his sights not only on a reasonable direction for the money

collected from the increase, but also on making sure students' voices are heard.

Bowen has said students' support of the proposal is of personal interest to him.

Those who believe this kind of talk is simply rhetoric should remember that Bowen changed the focus of the GUF increase solely to raising professor's salaries in response to student opinion.

Students should realize Bowen is in a difficult situation.

In one ear, the faculty is screaming for a raise to its abysmally low salaries.

In the other ear, students are shouting against any increase whatsoever in yet another increase in the cost of education.

Currently, total fees at A&M rank ninth in Big 12 universities.

Students are getting quite a deal at A&M, and should understand Bowen's justifications for an increase.

Bowen has also done a good job in his attempts to educate students about the need and rationale of a GUF increase.

He has spoken to student groups, made all information concerning the increase readily available on the Internet and held a GUF forum last night.

Criticism of the GUF increase should therefore not be directed at Bowen.

Bowen's motivations are for the benefit of the entire University, and he has helped make the GUF increase an easier pill to swallow.

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## MAIL CALL

### Heinroth's column induces nightmare

Regarding Michael Heinroth's Nov. 25 column, "Seven 'gates' of Hell plague Clinton":

After I read the column in the Nov. 25 Battalion by Michael Heinroth, I took a nap. It made me drowsy, as this type of immature, misinformed, so-called journalism usually does, but it bothered me far more than I thought it did. You see, it gave me a nightmare, or a napmare, whatever the case may be.

I dreamt that I went back to my hometown of Washington, D.C. and found myself entering the Capitol. Instead of the beautiful marbled walls and the high dome, I found myself smelling the burn-

ing of sulphur and heat on my face. As I rounded the corner near Newt Gingrich's office, I saw that the Speaker tried to hide his long red tail and cover up his horns with Ralph Reed's hat. As I proceeded down the hall, by now glowing like red lava, I ran into the office of the Bureau of Untruths and Lies, with Phil Gramm behind the desk, as his secretaries, Dick Arme and Al D'Amato answered the phones.

I started running, but the hallway just got longer. I ran by the Office of Draft Deferments and saw that Rush Limbaugh, Gingrich and Jack Kemp had pictures on the wall. Tricky Dick Nixon had another office. I ran by the Administration of Senator Porn-Producers, headed by Sen. Gramm.

Just as I was falling off the cliff,

toward my certain death at the bottom of the Anti-Environmental Protection Agency pit, I reached into my pocket and found the autographs of Ann Richards, Mario Cuomo and Ted Kennedy, and I knew I would be all right.

I woke up, I thought I was safe. But then I realized I was not: I had the folded Batt on my chest, and I knew I'd have to read Heinroth's "columns" again.

George Chip Villarreal  
 Graduate Student

The Battalion encourages letters to the editor. Letters must be 300 words or fewer and include the author's name, class, and phone number.

The opinion editor reserves the right to edit letters for length, style, and accuracy. Letters may be submitted in person at 013 Reed McDonald with a valid student ID. Letters may also be mailed to:

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For more details on letter policy, please call 845-3313 and direct your question to the opinion editor.

## Students shouldn't criticize Bonfire if they don't know the facts

There are many things in nature that cannot be avoided. Lemmings jump off cliffs, flies flock to campus dining centers, and Battalion columnists can't resist writing about Bonfire.

In just a few hours, Bonfire will burn once again, but the animosity toward one of the most visible Aggie traditions has been burning strong all year. Many believe Bonfire to be a disgraceful waste of time, a misuse of resources and a horrible blight on the environment.

Not to mention that they think those associated with building Bonfire are disgusting rednecks, illiterate and insensitive to anything that a civilized society holds dear.

I'll be the first to admit that Bonfire is not for everybody. But the criticism of Bonfire seems to come primarily from those who have not once put on a pot, not once loaded a log, and not once been on a stack shift.

But even without firsthand knowledge, the opposition to Bonfire continues to denounce the

### Columnist



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tradition for a multitude of reasons.

Environmental concern is an important argument. But how significant is Bonfire in the environmental matrix?

According to a senior redpot, Bonfire requires about 10,000 trees to be cut from a site of less than 20 acres.

This sounds like a significant number, but compare it to this statistic provided by the Rain Forest Action Network: 150 acres of rainforest are destroyed every minute. By comparison, Bonfire seems of little concern in the global scheme of things.

Some say the cutting isn't the real concern. They feel the logs would be better used in another endeavor. The trouble is, the wood is unsuitable for any constructive purpose other than stack. Most of it would be destroyed anyway to clear the land for future use.

What about the harassment issue? Tales of over-aggressive Crew Chiefs attacking and insulting anyone who doesn't participate in Bonfire are blown out of proportion. Walton Hall, where conventional wis-

dom holds the worst Bonfire offenses are committed, just doesn't live up to that stereotype.

"There was only one incident this year regarding Bonfire," said Thurman Schweitzer, resident advisor at Walton Hall. "It involved banging axe handles on University property."

It would seem then that the participants in Bonfire are exactly what they claim to be: actual willing participants.

So where does that leave the critics? Unfortunately, it seems the zealotry over the harms of Bonfire is nothing substantial.

But the real tragedy is the effort wasted on stopping it. Every minute spent trying to stop Bonfire takes away from efforts to really make a difference in the world's environmental problems.

If that's too large of a scope, how about local community service? There are much more constructive and beneficial activities to spend time with that would improve our local environment socially — something that everyone can appreciate.

For all that people say it is, Bonfire is first and foremost an exercise in leadership development.

Being active in Bonfire requires organizational skills and time management. It is more than just building a stack of wood. It builds pride in those who participate. The skills needed to shape a good leader come from a variety of different methods, and Bonfire is certainly one of the most intense.

Leadership development, in any form, is an essential function of the University experience. If this sort of development opportunity doesn't appeal to someone after trying it, participation is not required.

But the benefits of Bonfire extend across campus. Even if not directly involved, functions such as Elephant Walk or the Bevo Car Bash stem directly from the healthy rivalry between Texas A&M and the University of Texas. These great events would certainly lose something if Bonfire didn't exist.

Many will continue to disagree with what happens tonight. If that is their decision after examining all the evidence, they are justified. But spouting off the same tired old arguments against Bonfire year after year is an exercise in futility against one of the finest leadership training exercises anywhere.