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Haley Barbour: Why I freed 26 inmates

By Haley Barbour

The furor over the pardons I recently granted as governor of Mississippi initially focused on numbers. I would like to set the record straight.

People thought I had let 215 prisoners out of jail because the secretary of state reported that many people received clemency.

In fact, 189 of those people were not released from prison. In most cases, they already had been out for many years.

I granted fewer than 10 pardons or reprieves in my first term as governor. After Hurricane Katrina hit, my staff just didn't have time to deal with the issue, so at the end of my first term, I pardoned only the inmates who had worked successfully at the governor's mansion that term.

This was not a new thing. For decades, Mississippi governors have granted clemency to the inmates who work at the mansion. I followed that tradition four years ago and did so again at the end of my second term.

I authorized the release of 26 prisoners from custody. As of last week, there were 21,342 inmates in the state corrections system and 60,517 people under Mississippi Department of Corrections supervision. I released 12 one-hundredths of 1 percent (0.0012) of our state's inmates.

When people realized only 26 prisoners were being released, and that half of those 26 were given suspended sentences for medical reasons, the political attacks on my pardons shifted. The story became that many of the 13 non-medical releases were murderers. Of those 13, only 10 were pardoned; the other three were put under house arrest or a revocable, indefinite suspension.

All this public noise, then, boils down to 10 inmates — in particular, the five who worked at the governor's mansion during my second term.

Historically, most of the inmates sent to the mansion have been murderers, convicted of crimes of passion. Experts agree these inmates are the least likely to commit another crime and the most likely to serve out their sentences well.

The criteria the Corrections Department uses to select the prisoners who work at the mansion narrows the pool to those convicted of terrible crimes, almost always crimes of passion. To work at the mansion, an inmate must be classified as minimum-security by the Department of Corrections.

The mansion inmates I fully released are not threats to society. They have paid the price for their crimes, having served an average of 20 years' imprisonment.

Mississippi spends about \$350 million a year on our corrections system, much of it aimed at rehabilitating those who went wrong. Regrettably there are bad actors who never will be rehabilitated, but many who go to prison can be helped. Our state recidivism rate is just above 30 percent, far below the national average.

For some who are rehabilitated and redeem themselves, the governor is the only person who can give them a second chance. I am very comfortable giving such people that opportunity.

Haley Barbour, a Republican, was governor of Mississippi from 2004 to 2012.

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