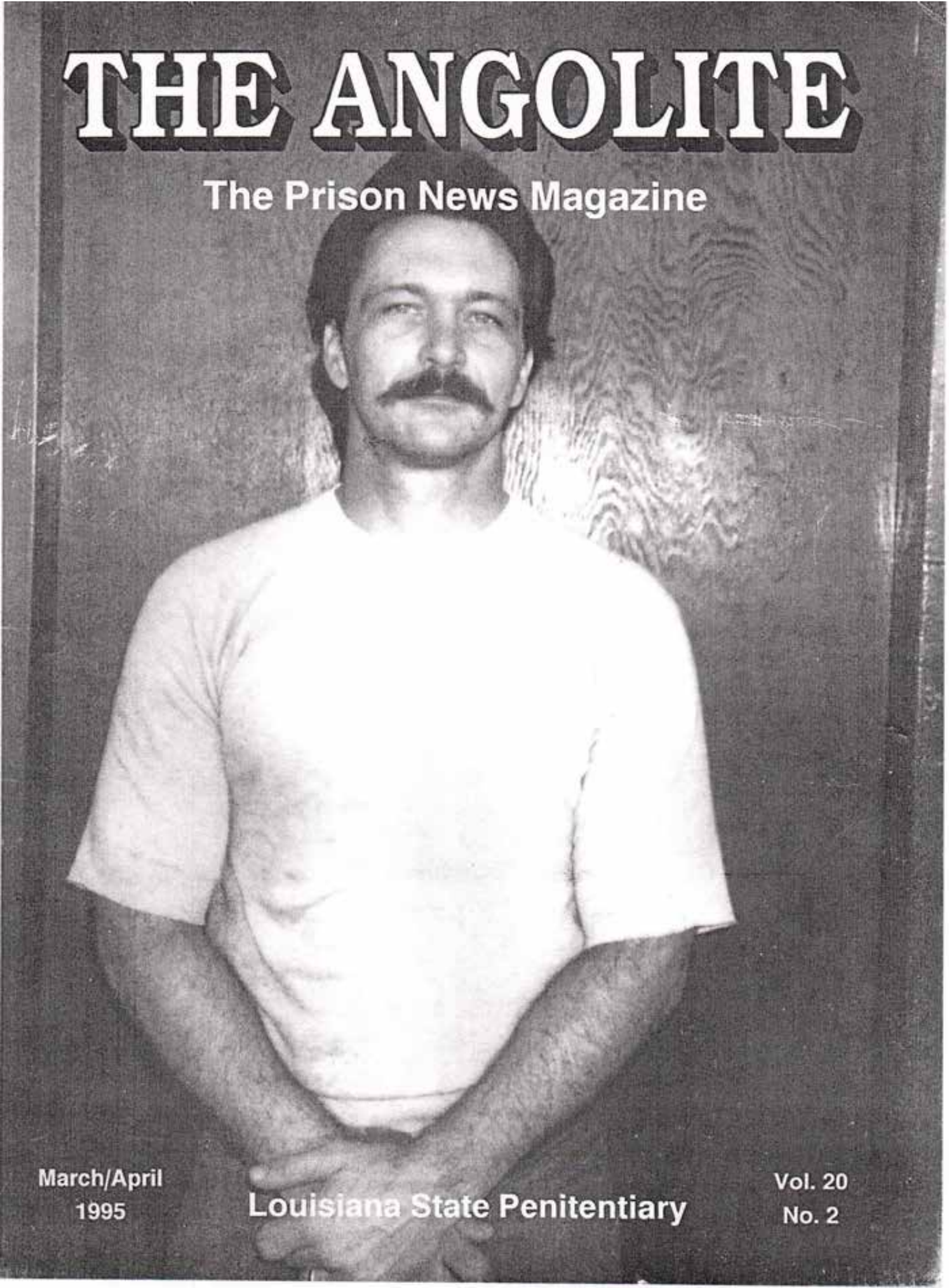
THE ANGOLITE

The Prison News Magazine



March/April
1995

Louisiana State Penitentiary

Vol. 20
No. 2

THE CHRISTIAN WARDEN

By MICHAEL GLOVER

N. BURL CAIN BECAME HEAD warden of Angola as of February 1, 1995. He comes with a long history of service to the state of Louisiana, including thirteen years experience as warden of Dixon Correctional Institute (D.C.I.) in Jackson, La. No one in the Department of Corrections has more top-level experience dealing with male prisoners than Burl Cain.

In many ways Cain's career parallel's corrections giant Ross Maggio. Most remember Maggio as the two-time warden of Angola; the man who ended the "bad old days" when Angola was known as the bloodiest prison in the nation. Some remember him as Federal Judge Frank Polozola's state-wide prison expert; the man who insured Louisiana's jails and prisons attained and remained within constitutional guidelines. But few remember that Maggio began his career as an assistant secretary over agri-business—a position Cain took over when Maggio left to become warden of Angola. A few years later Cain left to become the warden of D.C.I. The two men were a few years apart, but they both attended LSU at the same time with intersecting social circles.

As a new warden, Cain would occasionally call Maggio if he had a problem. "When I first started we found a number of .38 caliber bullets in a coffee pot inside the prison," Cain said. "So I called Ross and asked him what to do about it. 'Hunt the damn gun,' he told me. We went back and tore the prison apart looking for a gun. We never did find one, but the thing is, Maggio was there to coach me, and that's important for a new warden."

Cain did not need coaching long. "I found that being a prison warden requires an ample amount of common sense, and very little else," he said. He soon became the coach and trained his deputy warden, Richard Stalder, now Secretary of Corrections, in his common sense philosophy. Kelly Ward, warden of Wade Correctional Center, also received training as Cain's deputy warden at D.C.I. Over the years Cain's influence and philosophy have touched so many people that 65 thousand state employees elected him to their highest office—State Civil Service Commissioner. "You need to have strong values and a sense of fair play to do any job well," Cain said. Perhaps he gets those values from his upbringing.

Cain was born in the little town of Pitkin, La. He sometimes pokes good-natured fun describing it. "Pitkin is pine trees and poor folks," he told us. "It's so small we don't even have a caution light." In describing his parents Cain is serious. "I was raised in a Christian home with a father who I never saw smoke a cigarette and never heard use a curse word in his life. He was a good family man and provided for us as best he could. He was a farmer. My mother was a school teacher. Together they taught us fair play, and encouraged us to solve our own problems. For instance, my father didn't allow us to tell on our brothers and sisters, or anybody else. My momma used a little jingle, 'Tattle tails, tattle tails, hanging on a bull's tail, catching everything that dropped.' As children, we learned to rely on ourselves to solve our own problems, and those lessons are still with me today."

With him also, and coloring every decision he makes, are the moral teachings of his religion. "I was raised in a Southern Baptist church," he said. "A country church with country values and

country preachers. I was raised in a community that had no alcohol. A community that prohibited its children from learning to dance. My parents, and the church, grounded me in moral principle and gave me the tools I needed to live a meaningful life."

Those moral principles guide his prison philosophy. "I studied the recidivism rates and realized that nothing was helping. Harsh treatment or soft treatment, long sentences or early parole, none of it effected those rates. I came to the conclusion that rehabilitation is a *moral*, not a social, phenomenon. The only thing that helps is when you change a man's soul. This is not rocket science, just a warden's common sense conclusion. I'm sure some social workers will disagree, but even if I was an atheist I'd still want religion in the prison because the side-effects are peace and harmony. Godly people don't steal or strongarm, or do the things that cause problems. In addition to the Christian's duty to promote the faith, it's just plain good sense."

If there is a particular quality an Angola warden needs, it's good sense. Angola is nearly four times the size of D.C.I., larger than many Louisiana towns and villages. Administering to the physical plant alone is a full time job, but the warden is also responsible for 4700 prisoners and 1800 employees. He is mayor and sheriff of a small city, and every move he makes is scrutinized by the courts and the media.

Still, the most significant difference between Angola and the satellites is the high percentage of lifers and practical lifers in the prisoner population. More than half are sentenced to death by incarceration. Over a thousand have been in prison longer than the thirteen years Cain was at D.C.I. They don't have good time or parole eligibility—tools traditionally used to modify the behavior of short-termers in lesser prisons. The population turns over every few years in the satellites. There is no memory of the way things were and no impetus to effect them in the future. In Angola, many of the men doing time today are the same men who were doing time ten years ago, and who will be doing time ten years from now. They have nothing to look forward to except an early death, and nothing to lose, except a few privileges. Angola's warden must deal with large numbers of this type of prisoner, found nowhere else in the state, and rare throughout the world.

John Whitley had the character needed to do the job. He left as the most loved and respected warden in recent history. But even he had a period of adjustment during which Angola had difficult times. Understandably, the mood inside the prison whenever the warden changes is tense and apprehensive. The first few days are critical.

On his second day on the job, Warden Cain gathered inmate leaders in the prison court room

CAIN

and told them, "I'm going to be good as you let me or as mean as you make me. It's just business. I can't give away this prison. You might take it, but I'll take it back. It's going to be bad when I take it back. So let's just work together."

"I'm real big on discipline," he told them. "Real big on following the rules. If the wardens follow rules, and the sergeants follow the rules, and you follow the rules we won't have any problems. Most of you are not disciplinary problems, so these words are not for you personally, but I want you to pass the word to those inmates who are violating. Tell them I promise you they will get their issue.

"On the other hand, if an inmate does well, works hard and gets no write-ups, then any way I can help him I will. This is called reality therapy. I'm no psychologist, I graduated with a degree in agriculture, but I've used reality therapy and I know it works. It means if you are incorrigible you will be treated harshly, and if you are a good man you will be rewarded. It means I will always be fair with you. Now, there may be some lieutenant or some sergeant down the walk who is not being fair, but I want you know if I can find out about it I'm going to bust it up. The problem is me finding out about it.

"So this is what I want from you. If something is not right, if you're not being treated fairly, you let me know about it. It's not fair to me if you start reacting without letting me know. After that, if you're still getting treated unfairly, if you don't believe that we are doing what we have to do, then I might deserve *my* issue. That's never going to happen. This prison is going to be fair.

"I hope what I'm telling you is what you need to hear. I'm telling you the truth. I'm going to mess up, you're going to get screwed over. It's going to happen. But it's going to be a *mistake*. It's not my intention. What you've got to do is give me a chance to fix it.

"Listen hard now. This is the most important thing I'm going to tell you. I'm like wet spaghetti, you can pull me, but you ain't going to push me. I don't do hunger strikes. I don't do ultimatums. I don't do it for no soul on this earth, including my wife. You understand? Don't let it get it that far."

"Don't construe anything I said as weakness, I'm not weak. I feel when a man leaves a job he ought to leave it with his head held high. When I leave I'll leave with dignity and my head held high. There may be a body count behind me where a tactical team went through the camp, but that's the way it is. It's just business."

Cain hit the right notes. He spoke of discipline and fairness, but he also spoke of his love for his children, and his religious beliefs. He explained his strengths and admitted his weaknesses. The prisoners listening knew a weak warden would bring instability, and an autocrat would bring dissension. They left their first meeting with Cain believing there would be no catastrophe on the river.

Eventually, the warden visited the *Angolite* office. He went over all the things he'd said at that first meeting, and added a few items that bear repeating:

"I'm concerned with the time. Not the crime. I think that the free people basically should have that attitude. If you'll notice I never ask anybody what he's done. I'll ask how long is his sentence. That's what is important. That's what my role is, to worry about the time.

"We are going to have to depend on peer pressure, and the strong prisoners are going to have to take an attitude of being their brother's keeper. They are going to have to help us run a safe prison. It can't be "us and them," because we are all doing time. I'm doing time too, though mine's a lot easier, I'm still doing it. We need an inmate population that's cooperative. Sometime we are going to be wrong, but you are going to have to have a spirit that knows it's not on purpose and it's not malicious.

"I don't mean to overemphasize prison. We are going to be fair, but we are going to have prison. You've got to have good discipline. Some people need it. Some people don't. What's important is being able to differentiate between the two.

"Honest and truly I found this prison more enlightening than the medium security prisons. I found more maturity in the inmates. People know they are going to be here for a long time, and they want to do that time as easily as possible. The prison I came from had too many juveniles, too many juvenile games going on. Now I understand why so many Angola inmates who transferred there told me they wanted to go back. I hate to say this, but Angola may be easier to run than D.C.I."

To have "good prison," Cain believes there must be good religion, good food, good sports, and good medicine. He explained why he felt good medicine was important.

"You can't go to another doctor if you don't have confidence in the one the prison provides. I feel our doctors have to be good ones because if I was a prisoner and thought I was dying and couldn't see a doctor I trusted I would be planning an escape. Therefore, I've got to figure you would feel the same way. Good medicine is essential for a good prison."

"The prison I came from had too many juveniles, too many juvenile games going on. Now I understand why so many Angola inmates who transferred there told me they wanted to go back. I hate to say this, but Angola may be easier to run than D.C.I."

One of the first things Cain did was visit the hospital:

"I wanted to speed things up over there, and we have. When I first got here prisoners would go over to see a doctor, wait all day and never see him. They'd schedule him to come back the next day and he still wouldn't see him. You just keep getting further and further behind when you do that. I think we can turn that around."

In the weeks since that interview, it has turned around. Cain had a meeting with the entire hospital staff to let them know what he expected:

"The doctors told me they could see four people an hour. They wanted to say three, but I told them at that rate they'd go broke on the streets. They should at least see as many people as they would to make a living on the streets. Four is a very conservative number. I also told them if they don't get through they will just have to work late. I don't want them to rush through, but I want good medicine.

In the midst of these changes hospital administrator Ella Fletcher decided to retire:

"Right now I don't have a hospital administrator. Dr. Gutierrez is temporarily assigned. I'm really cautious about who I eventually hire because I could end up with too many chiefs and not enough Indians. You can have too many bosses and cause chaos."

"I'm going to hire another doctor to come in here at night and we are going to review the duty statuses [medical exceptions that limit the work a prisoner is required to perform]. There are too many prisoners with duty statuses, you know it and I know it. Our doctors will be treating anyone with a bonafide illness, but those who malinger will get a dose of that reality therapy I told you about."

If something isn't broken, Cain believes there is no point in fixing it. He does not plan to make many changes in the way Angola is run, but he does intend to institute unit management:

"Unit management is the best thing that ever happened. When you run a prison you can't fix a problem if you can't hem up who's wrong. The problem with these prisons is everybody wants to pass the buck. I realized that's what they were doing to me at D.C.I. years ago. They passed the buck from shift to shift and department to department.

"I realized that security was too narrowly focussed. They didn't care about preaching, they didn't care about social workers, they didn't care about classifica-

THE GREAT DEBATE
Reality Check

Recently Warden Cain appeared on the *Angela Show*, WWL TV in New Orleans. He argued, in front of a live audience, with District Attorney Harry Connick. Cain advocated release of elderly prisoners who were no longer a threat to society. Connick campaigned to put an end to goodtime credits, which would create more elderly prisoners in the future. A number of inaccurate statements were made. Here's the reality check.

1. Mr. Connick implied that goodtime resulted in felons serving less time than intended. In fact, the sentencing judge is aware of the good time law, and takes it into consideration. If an armed robber is sentenced to 30 years under the present system, he would be sentenced him to 15 years if there was no goodtime.

2. Mr. Connick stated that violent criminals are released on good time and return to prison two and three times in the same year. Considering the time necessary for apprehension, trial, conviction, and goodtime release, this scenario is impossible.

3. Mr. Connick suggested that Warden Cain give "bad time" and add to a prisoner's sentence. In fact, sentencing authority resides solely in the courts, and only after stringent procedures are followed. The Habitual Offender Act is just such a procedure. It allows enhancement of a multiple offender's sentence from twice the maximum to natural life, and often precludes goodtime and parole. If a DA proves a defendant has at least one prior conviction the court must impose the enhanced sentence. Warden Cain does not have this option. Connick does.

4. An assistant district attorney in the audience claimed there was a statutory provision to effect the release of ill and elderly prisoners. In fact that provision excludes the very people who would benefit from it—the lifers. To more than half Angola's population that statute is worthless, and most of the rest will never qualify.

5. The same ADA implied that prisons operated well prior to goodtime. In fact, some form of sentence relief has been on the books since 1866, and goodtime as we know it was established by Act 311 in 1926.

6. One member of the audience claimed that a man convicted of murdering his brother was sentenced to only twelve years, with probation. In fact, murder carries a mandatory life sentence without goodtime or parole (if the defendant is not sentenced to death). This assailant may have been charged with murder, but perhaps the judge or a jury of his peers delivered a lesser responsive verdict. No prison warden is involved.

7. No one pointed out that 90% of the time the DA plea bargains with suspects—murder charges are often reduced to manslaughter, rape charges reduced to sexual battery, etc.—eliminating the need for trials at the convenience of the DA. If a criminal does not get the sentence the public feels he deserves, the reason is usually a plea bargain, made by Harry Connick.

tion officers. All they cared about was security. Good and bad, right and wrong, black and white, write you up or don't write you up. That's not good enough.

"Unit management is better for everybody. There's going to be one person in every camp who is going to be responsible for everything there. Including the preaching, the classification, the social working, everything is going to be under one man, and he's going to be a security officer. Of all the departments, security is the strongest. That's why I put them in charge. Now they have to care about the other departments because if they don't work I'm holding them responsible for it. "We make the unit manager a 'mini-warden,' for lack of a better term. He'll have the authority to issue the orders to make things happen, and I'll have somebody I can hem up if things go wrong. He's going to be the fall guy. I'm really the fall guy, I'm the warden of the prison. But he'll be the 'mini-fall guy,' for lack of a better term.

"The concept worked well at D.C.I., and it will work well in Angola's outcamps. The Main Prison is going to require more study because the situation here is unique. There are just too many inmates in one place. We're working on some modifications that should make things better."

Cain is as much concerned with events outside the prison as he is with internal problems. He is aware that prisoner bashing is the vogue, and anyone who argues on prisoners' behalf will be ridiculed by posturing politicians. Nonetheless he appeared on New Orleans local television to argue, on behalf of the aging prisoners in Angola, with the ever popular district attorney, Harry Connick [see sidebar]. In that program, as in a dozen other interviews for radio and newspapers, Cain advocated the release of the elderly, the infirm, and any prisoner who has served a decade or two and rehabilitated. He wants to replace them with those who constitute a real threat to society:

"We need to start preaching, we need to start screaming, to get the hoodlums

off the street. There's no room for them in Angola because we've got all these harmless, elderly prisoners who have long past the criminal menopause. There's an old man who put the TV in my house when I moved in. He's 67 years old and his violating days have long gone. Why are we keeping folks like that in here? They need to be home with their families, if they have any, not in our expensive beds."

Before this interview, Cain went over to the hospital ward to take pictures of some of the prisoners. He felt those pictures would help prove his point, and he actually used some of them during his debate with Connick.

"I'm trying to move those who are ill out to the nursing homes. We were able to move one, we have many more to go. One of the holdups was we couldn't find anyone to be responsible for them. I just told Warden Peabody to let the nursing home be responsible. If they want the Medicaid money they'll accept responsibility for them. Get them out of here. Don't wait on their family to do it. We need to use the state's limited resources wisely, and getting these old-timers out of the budget is just the right thing to do.

"I'm going to keep preaching to let the older lifers go. The victims are going to have a problem with it, but I'm trying to prevent *new* victims.

"I'm going to keep preaching to let the older lifers go. The victims are going to have a problem with it, but I'm trying to prevent new victims. The way I do that is make more beds for the people on the streets who are committing crimes today. Let's bring those renegade gang bangers to Angola, and let's let the older men out. What are you going to do with an armed robber who's 70 years old? We've got one over there in a wheelchair. It's about time to let him go.

But prisoner bashing extends beyond keeping harmless prisoners locked up until death. The idea that inmates have access to television and exercise equipment is also under attack. Cain has gone public with his arguments against removing them:

"I simply say it like this; don't take away my tools to run this prison. Television and other privileges are tools. Not only does TV give prisoners something to think about during their leisure time, but the threat of losing that TV modifies behavior. It's the same with the weights. These things keep prisoners from going at each other on one hand, and it gives them something to lose. You need that, especially in Angola where they have nothing else. It's just business. Once you don't have any privileges to take you have to rule through brute force, and I think that's what causes bad prisons.

"We are all human, we can think, and when we have nothing to think about we go stir crazy. We've got to have things to do with our hands and our minds. People on the street can do what they want, but they are not responsible for keeping peace and harmony in the largest maximum security penitentiary in this nation. If they start talking about taking those privileges, you can bet I'm going down there to the legislature and argue to keep them. I understand how important they are, and you should be relieved to know I understand it."

Cain has many ideas on how to reduce recidivism. Some of them are novel:

"The parish sheriff is keeping prisoners on the wrong end of incarceration. He keeps them before they get to prison, but he needs to keep them just before they are released.

"When you have only six months left on your sentence you should be sent back to the parish where you were convicted. From there, your church and your family ought to help you find a job. If the church doesn't help then they don't care about God's creatures and should be chastised for it. In ef-

fect, the sheriff should be running a halfway house in every parish. He should keep a percentage of the money you make to offset his costs, but you will get a head start on the money you'll need to live crime-free on the streets. This is important, you need to have this transition period. You don't need to go through the culture shock of being gone ten years, living under severe prison conditions, and then go right back out there that next night. Right now we cast you out with no job and no nothing. We are doing it wrong."

For those prisoners who can never be released unless they gain the governor's signature on a pardon, Cain remarked:

"When it comes to pardons you're walking into the political realm. People are scared to take a chance with what they perceive to be their career on a convicted felon. Remember what happened to Dukakis. You're paying for the sins of Willie Horton, and that's not fair. You even lost the furloughs when Roemer's cook killed somebody on the street. We haven't had a furlough since.

"Pardons are one of our tools. We need pardons. When we get a Governor who doesn't give any that hurts us. Roemer hurt us. I'm willing to say that to the press. I'm going to preach it whenever I get a chance.

Cain had some careful thoughts about the prison chaplaincy:

"I could say too much now if I'm not careful. What bothers me is Jesus Christ wouldn't qualify to be a preacher in this prison. Nor would the Apostle Paul. There's something wrong with that. One of the first things I did as civil service commissioner was cut back on some of the rules that restricted people who wanted to be chaplains. We wouldn't be hiring a chaplain today with the rules we had three or four years ago.

Cain's overall goals includes making Angola a flagship for the state corrections system:

"Here's what we're all about. I don't want Judge Polozola to come tell me that I've got to run a constitutional prison. I want him to come here and say, 'These people are doing a good job, I want other prisons to be like them.' I don't want anybody to have to make me do a good job. I don't want the judge to have to watch over my shoulder. Polozola's doing a good job, and thank God for him. But I don't want him to have to do this for me to run a constitutional prison."

Cain espoused a philosophy requiring prisoners to be "their brother's keeper." He told the leaders at their first meeting that if any one inmate abused a privilege many inmates would suffer for it. Many in the population considered that to be just another way to strip them of all privileges. Sooner or later, someone is going to break any rule. It follows that sooner or later, all privileges would be revoked. Cain addressed the issue:

"This prison is open to religion from now on. We're not going to let anything stand between the prisoner population and the Word of God."

"We're going to be fair. I believe this, if a group of prisoners are on the weight pile and one of them is about to beat another with a bar bell, and the rest of them stand around and watch him do it, then I'm going to take the weights. Now, if they know I'm going to take the weights then one of them is going to grab the barbell and tell him to fight with something else. Of course, if there are just two people at the weight pile I would be unfair to take the weights, and I won't do that."

One can't help but notice frequent references to the Bible whenever Cain speaks. He is nothing, if not a Christian, and the Christian duty to "promote the faith" is not something Cain takes lightly. In one of his frequent meetings with inmate leaders he said:

PRISON-WIDE BIBLE STUDY

Experiencing God is one of more than 500 courses available from the Church Study Course of the Southern Baptist educational system. It was written by Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King, and is part of the Lay Institute For Equipping (LIFE).

Warden Cain completed the course, and was so impressed he asked Angola's inmate religious leaders if they wanted to take it. Sixty men, from congregations throughout the prison, enthusiastically volunteered. Members of the Muslim community, and Angola's civil service chaplaincy department, also agreed to take the course.

Cain then went to his church, where he teaches Sunday school, to ask for volunteers to administer the course. His wife, his pastor, and four others signed on as facilitators.

Over a twelve-week period students will be studying lessons from the course text for about a half hour each day. Every Tuesday night at 6:00 PM they meet in the prison's visiting area where they arrange themselves in six small groups to discuss the week's study with each other and their facilitator. Before leaving, they gather in one large group to view a specially prepared video tape.

The inmate organizations that usually use the visiting area on Tuesday night willingly cancelled their meetings for the twelve-week period.

"We need to know what God wants us to do," said Cain. "This course will help us do that. It's easy to deceive yourself and we need to watch out for that."

Thee weeks into the course Larry Calloway, a participant from the Reception Center, remarked, "I've never heard of anything like this ever happening before. Men from every corner of Angola are getting together for the first time to study the Word, and nothing short of revival can result from that."

Graduating students will be expected to serve as facilitators for the next group of inmates. "This is why I wanted the religious leaders to take it first," said Cain. "The next group will be ten times larger, and by the time the third group comes around every prisoner in Angola will have an opportunity to participate."

Calloway could be right. Revival could run rampant in Angola before Christmas.

"This prison is open to religion from now on. We're not going to let anything stand between the prisoner population and the Word of God."

In the short time since then he has started the only prison-wide Bible study the prison has ever had (see sidebar). Restrictions on participation from outside guests have been relaxed, and open church call-outs (meetings any prisoner can attend without first submitting his name to a "call-out" list) have become common. Two new chaplains have been hired, and the New Orleans Southern Baptist Seminary has committed to bringing college theology courses to Angola.

The Southern Baptists may have an inside track, but Cain is not turning any religion away:

"I don't feel a man must accept the tenets of the Southern Baptist church to be a godly person. I feel he must believe in God Almighty. I don't have a problem with other religions. There will be no denominational barriers in Angola."

Cain includes Muslims in his definition of godly people.

"I spent a lot of time learning about the Muslim religion because as a warden I need to understand it. I studied the Quran, and the more I got into it the more I realized they were worshipping God the Father. I didn't know that before. I once thought they were a group of radicals. They are not. If you follow Muhammad's writings you are going to be doing good. You can't follow them without doing good."

Religion permeates all aspects of Cain's professional life:

"I can't do a bad job as a warden if I'm trying to let the Holy Spirit and the Good Book lead me in the direction I'm going to go. You are fortunate to have a Christian warden. You see, I have to be right or I'm going to be condemned myself. I want prisoners to have a second chance in life. They will have that chance if they believe in God Almighty."

Angola has approximately 700 prisoners who attend church, not all of them regularly. For Cain, the 4,000 who ignore religion are a fundamental challenge:

"As Christians we have a great commission — 'Go ye forth in all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.' We should have 700 missionaries out there witnessing to the rest of the population. We have to do that, and we can never quit. This is our purpose in life."

Ö