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Some may argue that whether the American correctional system should have private prisons is no longer the primary question at hand, they have arrived. Instead, we must turn to examining the contextual issues surrounding private prisons such as insuring a reasonable quality of confinement, contractor accountability, and an ability to monitor true economic costs. In his recent book, *Merchandizing Prisoners: Who Really Pays for Prison Privatization?*, Byron Price explores the determinants within states that have privatized some portion of their correctional institutions.

Focusing on the for-profit, adult sector of the correctional system, Price develops an argument that posits that although the underpinnings of private prisons are touted as a cost saving mechanism, in actuality, their proliferation stems from both political and ideological explanations. His book begins with a historical account of the contextual factors that have

contributed to the most recent phase of prison privatization in a manner that moves beyond what Price terms the heretofore “piecemeal discussion of privatization that normally takes place—efficiency, effectiveness and quality.” In his historical account of the privatization movement, Price discusses the broader political approach of the Reagan administration that essentially sought to reduce the scope and role of government, thereby supporting the growth of privatization to the unprecedented levels of today.

In his second chapter, Price takes a detailed approach in examining some of the evidence related to the three general standards that have been touted as the rationale to adopt private prisons in various states—efficiency, effectiveness, and quality. Taking a broad overview of some evidence within each of these standards, Price debunks “evidence” that private prisons are advantageous over state run facilities by outlining issues often overlooked by proponents of privatization. Some of these issues included hidden costs such as costs to export prisoners to the private prisons, minimum capacity agreements, corporate avoidance of tax payments, and added state liability costs. Price argues that an appropriate evaluation of the economic efficiency data that would include inmate transportation costs, costs to the state for inmate recovery after an escape, medical bills that extend beyond the contractual “caps”, and other appropriate factors, would demonstrate the cost-savings claims touted by corporations that operate private prisons to be inaccurate. In essence, Price argues that incomplete evaluations, due in part to the unwillingness of private prison parent companies to cooperate with full disclosure of

financial documents and operating information, result in misinformation about the efficiency, effectiveness, and quality of private prisons.

In his third chapter, Price explores aspects contributing to privatization beyond the standard explanations previously suggested in the literature. He suggests broader explanations that economic, political, and ideological factors must be examined if we are to fully understand the impetus behind privatization of correctional facilities. From an economic perspective, Price tested whether factors such as a state's level of correctional expenditures, per capita income (fiscal well-being), tax capacity (fiscal health), and tax effort (fiscal robustness) were related to a state's decision to privatize correctional facilities. He was surprised to learn that whereas correctional expenditures were not significantly related to privatization, low per capita income levels, low tax capacity, and tax effort were related to the decision to privatize. These results, Price argues, may indicate reasons that states in the Southern region of the United States have chosen to privatize their correctional facilities; however, decisions of states in other areas of the country not subject to unfavorable economic climates are better understood through an ideological framework. In testing ideological factors, Price found that legislative ideology (controlling party), governor's party, and state's ideology as measured by a liberal-conservative continuum were all unrelated to privatization. Higher levels of conservative citizen ideology within states, however, were associated with higher levels of acceptance of private prisons, which may have in turn affected policy development. Price concludes chapter 3 with an examination of political factors including crime

rates, neighboring states' behavior, political culture, and prison capacity. This aspect of his analysis determined that although crime rates of the state and existing prison capacities were not related to the decision to privatize, regional diffusion of pro-privatization efforts did exist. That is, states that were geographically adjacent to states with private prisons had a higher likelihood of subsequently privatizing their state prisons. Moreover, states with an individualistic political culture, which emphasizes the political arena as a marketplace for ideas and actions, were more likely to privatize as compared to those with moralistic political cultures, which view the political system as serving the good of the community. Although Price leaves the reader wondering the extent to which his analysis explains the variation in decisions to privatize, this chapter certainly introduces a fresh perspective on understanding the factors that may play a role in governmental decision making processes.

In the fourth chapter of his book, Price discusses the history, rationale, and morality of building (private) speculative prisons. The economic benefits to local jurisdictions of additional jobs and population based subsidies or revenues are weighed against the risks to both the sending and receiving jurisdictions. The historical lack of regulatory control over speculative prison building and associated liabilities with transfer of prisoners is also prominently threaded throughout the discussion. Many of the issues surrounding speculative prisons serve to underscore the major point in Price's book that "although there is a belief that governments are relieved of many of the responsibilities and costs associated with

managing a prison, this is far from the truth . . . ” (p. 106).

Chapter 5 focuses on a discussion of the vested interest private prisons have in the proliferation of mass incarceration philosophies. Price notes throughout the book that parent companies have frequently advocated for stiffer sentences, which mean higher rates of incarceration and longer sentences, primarily because these types of laws will translate into more business. The conflicts that arise when a prison becomes private are numerous. This chapter describes these conflicts in detail with accompanying statistics that are hard to ignore. Price concludes *Merchandizing Prisoners* with a sharp look at the direction of privatization in the United States and issues that remain including health and safety concerns. In conclusion, Price’s *Merchandizing Prisoners* takes a unique approach from a public administration perspective to debate the utility and claims of prison privatization. This book is an interesting read suitable for individuals with wide ranging interests and knowledge related to correctional institutions and governmental affairs. It may be that private prisons are here to stay, but as a society we must recognize they are here in Price’s concluding words with “profits [driving] their campaign . . . at the expense of the prisoners.”