

The Last Minority

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by Keith Preston

Like chattel slavery and religious persecution, the mistreatment of prostitutes is an age-old practice rooted in the social structure of very ancient times. In earlier civilizations, women were literally bought and sold as property. Prostitutes were considered “used goods” in the same way as used cars and hand-me-down clothes in our own culture. The social position of prostitute women was further diminished by the membership of many of them in the slave classes. Women who entered prostitution voluntarily were considered an affront and a danger to male authority. Historically, prostitutes have been flogged, beaten, tortured, imprisoned, exiled and executed.

Contemporary American anti-prostitute laws are rooted in the “eugenics” beliefs and practices adopted by many physicians in the late nineteenth century. The goal of the eugenics movement was to eliminate birth defects, venereal diseases and persons regarded as sexual deviates by means of castration, clitoridectomy, sterilization, electric shock, criminalization and imprisonment. Targets included homosexuals, orphaned children, the mentally handicapped and prostitutes. Many of the laws enacted during this time remain on the books today.

Nearly a thousand arrests are made in the Richmond area each year for solicitation, prostitution and sodomy. Richmond’s prostitute population includes both males and females. Most of them come from the poorer classes. The majority are African-American. Many are single parents. Many are addicted to drugs. All of them practice prostitution as a means of supporting their habits, feeding their kids, paying the rent and surviving.

Hostility to prostitutes comes primarily from elite “civic” organizations, such as the Fan District Association, who view the presence of prostitutes on city streets as a threat to their own class position, property values, lifestyle interests and status of artificial superiority. Persecution of prostitutes is also a lucrative business for the police and the city administration. So-called “vice enforcement” is a source of employment for police. Cops are sometimes paid a bounty for every prostitute they drag in off the streets. Arrests for prostitution are a way for police to inflate arrest statistics in order to demand a larger budget. In many urban areas, prostitution enforcement is the single largest item in the police budget. Many cops use vice-related work as a means of career advancement. Former Richmond vice lieutenant Walter Allman was recently promoted to police captain. Prostitution cases also provide business for prosecutors and the city of Richmond generates nearly half a million dollars a year in revenue from fines collected from prostitutes.

Richmond prostitutes are frequently subjected to physical and sexual assault by vice cops. one member of the Richmond vice squad, Mark Williams, is a known sexual sadist. He once inflicted a brutal beating on a 43-year-old African American female prostitute who was subsequently hospitalized for four days. Williams has inflicted beatings on other prostitutes as well. Vice cops sometimes engage in sexual acts such as fellatio, fondling, disrobing and even vaginal penetration with prostitutes before arresting them. Other vice cops have engaged in drug use with prostitutes whom they subsequently arrested. Some Richmond vice cops and uniformed policemen alike accept bribes and sexual favors as a payment for looking the other way. Some

cops have used prostitutes as a means of blackmailing rival members of the police force.

Vice enforcement often involves the sleaziest tactics imaginable. Vice agents use intrusive and degrading surveillance methods hoping to catch prostitutes “in the act” with their clients. Vice agents pretending to be “cruising” johns often take prostitutes to private locations and expose themselves and arrest the prostitute when she/he responds. Vice cops sit in local bars, drink and attempt to approach and entrap women known to be prostitutes. Surveillance cameras are sometimes hidden in the rooms of Richmond hotels known to be “hot spots” for prostitution.

Vice officials deliberately present fraudulent information to the media regarding HIV/AIDS rates among Richmond prostitutes. The vice squad has at times claimed that ninety-nine percent of Richmond prostitutes are HIV-positive and that the average prostitute in Richmond carries four or five venereal diseases. A check with the Department of Health will disprove these claims. Prostitutes are publicly scapegoated for AID by the Fan District Association. Privately, the association claims prostitutes are a threat to their property values.

The vice cops usually attempt to have prostitution cases heard under Judge Ralph B. Robertson who typically hands out jail terms five times greater than the Richmond norm. Robertson has at times denounced prostitutes from the bench as depraved AIDS carriers as a means of degrading and humiliating them. At the same time, Robertson looks the other way for prostitutes who are clients of attorneys who are friends of his. Robertson also covers up for vice cops who assault prostitutes by refusing to allow them to tell their side of the story in court.

Vice agents often solicit oral rather than vaginal sex from prostitutes. This way, the prostitute can be charged with sodomy, a felony. The felony charge is then used by prosecutors to gain legal leverage in plea bargain negotiations and to obtain parole and probation violations. Police refuse to investigate crimes committed against prostitutes. One Richmond female prostitute was detained and interrogated after being harassed and threatened by a car load of aggressive young men. Signs throughout Richmond neighborhoods declare “Prostitute-Free Zones” just as signs proclaiming “Jew-Free Zones” were placed in German neighborhoods sixty years ago.

Many prominent Richmond officials are involved in the persecution of prostitutes. Mayor Kaine provides the names of johns arrested for solicitation to the Fan District Association who then informs the family of the arrested person. This creates the potential for violent domestic conflict. Police Chief Jerry Oliver has publicly blamed prostitutes for the drug trade. Councilwoman Reva Trammell began her career by waging a bigoted harassment against prostitutes on Richmond’s south side. The Phillip Morris corporation provides fake employee identification cards to undercover vice agents. The Martin Agency and the Fan District Association have pressured the state government to raise prostitution from a misdemeanor to a felony.

The mistreatment of prostitutes is a crime against humanity. It is a crime every bit as heinous as racial and religious persecution or the abuse of children, the elderly or the handicapped. It should be recognized as such.

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