

The Breakfast Club [in prison...gdz]

by Roger Blackwell July 2008

The diary of a daily discussion group in a white-collar prison.

So a priest, a national rodeo champion, a Harvard M.B.A., and Richard Hatch from Survivor are discussing economic policy over stale bran flakes in prison...

Last year, nearly 16 percent of all federal convictions were for white-collar crimes, as many as 12,000 in that one year alone. So perhaps it shouldn't be a surprise that the group of inmates that gets together daily in the federal prison in Morgantown, West Virginia, would put the Harvard Club to shame. (See a [map of white-collar prisons](#), featuring some of their high-profile inmates.)

Though it's a minimum-security prison, Morgantown couldn't be further from Wall Street's power spots. More than 1,000 male inmates live in crowded dorms, sleep on cots with two-inch foam pads, and work menial jobs for a few cents an hour. The white-collar group, which calls itself the Breakfast Club, meets every morning in the prison's cafeteria and has included Hatch, along with former executives, surgeons, hedge fund managers, and Roger Blackwell, a former marketing professor at Ohio State University who was sent to Morgantown for six years after being convicted of insider trading in 2005. Since January, Blackwell has been sending Condé Nast Portfolio — David Sax highlights from the club's discussions. Edited excerpts follow.

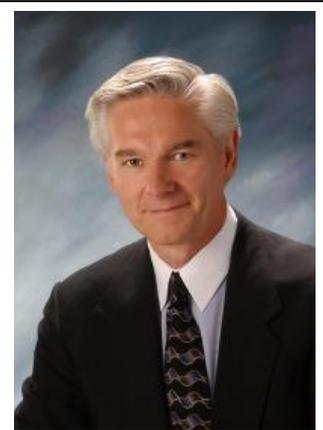
Politics

Throughout the past week, the discussion frequently returned to the Reverend Jeremiah Wright. His speech to the N.A.A.C.P. in Detroit received high approval, at least with our members who are familiar with the rhetoric of the black church. They vividly expressed their agreement with Wright's statements by jumping up and down and thrusting their arms into the air with a simulated slam dunk. For the white-collar (largely white) members here, prison is like a graduate degree in understanding diversity. Unfortunately, Wright's later speech to the National Press Club in Washington went too far. He lost not only the support of Obama

but the support of many of those here.

The Opera

The topic this morning was the opera on Saturday afternoon on NPR, Donizetti's *La Fille du Régiment*, of special interest because two of the newest members of the club are from France. It was performed in French.



Gary Zeune, Founder The Pros & The Cons provided the contact for this article.



Former Ohio State Marketing Professor Roger Blackwell. Picture Inserted by Gary Zeune.

Because the French members have been unable to get money from their French bank accounts, they have no money in their commissary account to spend here, so I found inmates who loaned each a radio for the afternoon. Many of us listen to NPR a lot, not only the opera on Saturday afternoon but classical music and the news. These broadcasts are much more in depth than those available on TV monitors, which are mostly tuned to ESPN, BET, and MTV. We agreed that the performance at the Met yesterday was amazing.

Farm Policy

The big discussion today was on agricultural markets. One member brought articles from farming magazines reporting on the economics of large windmills on the high ridge of Illinois. The sites are now sufficiently productive to yield a few thousand dollars per month for each windmill to the owners of the land. They are high enough for most of the land beneath them to be used for conventional farming, substantially increasing the total yield from the land. Real estate may be in the doldrums, but not agricultural real estate.

Jail Food

Perhaps the catalyst for this morning's discussion was the menu—it included the French version of a doughnut, called a beignet. The French members said that they were good. We all agreed, but it may have been the first time in weeks anyone had commented on something tasting good at breakfast. The conversation is always much better than the food, which consists most mornings of the same thing—dry cereal or farina (whatever that is, but it seems appropriate that it rhymes with Purina)

that is served with a glass of milk, some very bad coffee, and sometimes a Danish or an untoasted slice of bread. The “roast beef” served recently came just 24 hours after Eight Belles was euthanized at the Kentucky Derby. The “beef” was very tough, dry, and dark. Makes us wonder if maybe the Bureau of Prisons had first dibs on Eight Belles.

The Gas Tax

“What’s your opinion of the proposal by Hillary and McCain to cut the 18-cent gas tax?” one member asked this morning. “Stupid” was my answer. It will produce higher gas prices for consumers (cutting taxes during summer is sure to do that, causing a price rise probably greater than the amount of the tax reduction), increase consumption, and reduce construction employment by eliminating \$10 billion of gas taxes that would otherwise go to highway construction. Even if they take the \$10 billion from some other program, that will have a deleterious effect on that program. It is amazing how little people on the outside understand about economics compared with many of the men in prison.

Life After Prison

“What’s the first thing you are going to do when you leave prison?” That’s a question discussed often at Breakfast Club.

“My wife,” answered one member, the former C.E.O. of a finance company and father of nine. We thought he was joking until we found out that he had arranged for his wife to be the person to whom he would be released, at 6:30 a.m. on his final day.