

Psychological Factor Behind Alcatraz Federal Prison Outweighs Its Heavy Maintenance Cost, Congress Is Told

By CLARKE BEACH
WASHINGTON—Has Alcatraz outlived its usefulness? Fewer prisoners than ever before are now being held in the escape-proof federal prison in San Francisco Bay, and it's very expensive to operate—\$8 a day to maintain each desperate guest. In other federal prisons the "bean money" is only \$3.

But the main consideration is the restraining effect of Alcatraz on the inmates of other jails and on men outside who might be plotting a great crime and yet decide against it because of their dread of "The Rock."

The issue is now being pondered by the House Judiciary Committee. James V. Bennett, director of the U. S. Bureau of Prisons, has made no firm recommendation. He has only pointed out that one or more federal prisons must be closed to keep within the proposed budget, that operation costs at Alcatraz are excessively high but that the psychological factor behind Alcatraz is the big question-mark.

Abandonment of Alcatraz wouldn't be a total saving in any case. The Federal government still would have to establish in one of its 25 other prisons a "maximum security block" where incorrigible prisoners could be kept safely and apart from other prisoners for whom there is some hope of rehabilitation. All large penal institutions have such dungeons—called by criminals "Klondikes," "Siberias," "solitary" or "deadlock."

Alcatraz was established in 1934, when the government was at the peak of its battle against kidnapers, racketeers, bank robbers and imperious gangs. Hosts of the underworld were slain or imprisoned. By 1939 J. Edgar Hoover, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, was able to say that not one nationally organized gang was left.

What part did Alcatraz play in the victory? Will criminals become bolder if there is no more Alcatraz? No one really knows. That's why Congress intends to do a lot of thinking before it lets Alcatraz go.

As to whether Alcatraz, or any other prison, deters criminals, Director Bennett has only the broad conviction: (1) That they do not deter those who commit accidental crime or crimes of passion, psychopaths or alcoholics; (2) That they do deter many persons who are tempted to do

such things as steal or file fraudulent tax returns. "But whether it deters the average criminal," says Bennett, "the prison system is the only system we know."

Criminals Fear Alcatraz
Of one thing he is sure: That all hardened criminals live in mortal fear of winding up on Alcatraz. He permits no brutality against inmates there, but prisoners are allowed the minimum of privileges, and the discipline is more severe than in any other American institution.

Those who enter it have no hope of delivery or parole. No one has ever escaped, although two men once did dive into the cold, swift currents that sweep the rock. They are believed to have drowned. No one has ever been paroled direct from Alcatraz. They can, however, work their way back to some other prison by years of good behavior.

Alcatraz now has 228 prisoners—nearly all of whom Bennett knows personally. This is 26 percent fewer than the peak year, 1938. The total population of all federal prisons is now about the same as in that year, a little more than 17,000. Apparently there is now a smaller proportion of the hardened, intractable, desperate type who need the Alcatraz treatment.

The chief reasons Alcatraz is so costly are that it requires one custodian to every two prisoners (instead of one to five as in

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Gene Kinkle, right, of Wilmore, Ky., shows his new electrically-driven wheelchair to fellow disabled veterans Dexter Aylesworth, left, of Oxford, Pa., and Ernest Jensen, of New York, at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington. The new-type wheelchair, which has two speeds forward and one reverse, was presented by two Keyser, W. Va., residents.

other prisons) and that there is no water on the island. All water has to be transported by barge from the mainland. Even soil has to be shipped to the Rock if a warden decides to raise a few flowers or vegetables.

Alcatraz cost \$3,000,000, and it would cost \$7,000,000 to replace

it. No other government agency wants it, says Bennett, so if abandoned it would soon deteriorate in the briny air. If the doors finally swing open, the sea gulls and the fog will soon take over the dark halls where Al Capone and his henchmen lived their longest years.



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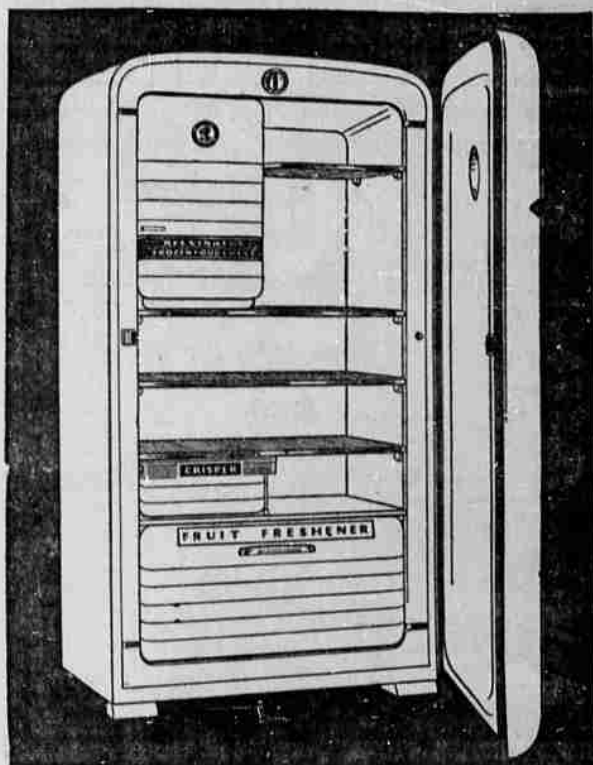
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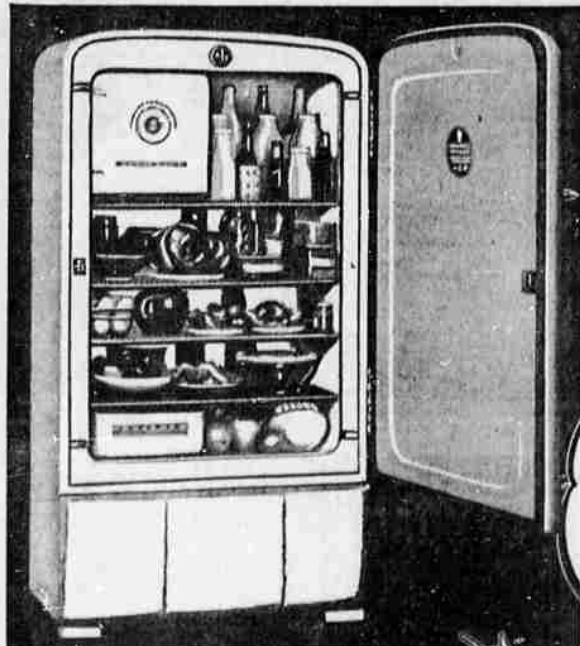
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