

## ARRIVISTE PRESS



READ. LISTEN. EVOLVE.

### THE SPANISH PRISONERS

by *Editor Incarcerated (A.K.A. Mr. Anonymous)*

As I sat down to write this morning, the orderly who cleans the law library was just finishing his work. It only takes him about 15 minutes. The rest of the day, he's out on the weight pile or humping laps around the yard. Even if he wanted to work more than 15 minutes, he couldn't because there aren't enough cleaning supplies and equipment to go around. He has to hurry so that he can pass along his tools. (There is probably a metaphor here related to under funded federal mandates that I could dig out if I were so inclined, but I'm not.)

Anyway, after he ran the buffer over the floor, this orderly swept it again to pick up the dust that had been kicked loose by the buffer. By this time, however, someone had made off with his Cadillac. A Cadillac is a long-handled dustpan that can be used without the necessity of bending over. (A convict sweeping up litter and cigarette butts outdoors is said to be "driving his Cadillac around the yard.") The Cadillac in question had already made its way over to the rec room, which is in another building. To keep his dust pile from getting tracked back through the room he had just cleaned, the orderly pushed it outside into the hallway where another orderly was mopping. Recognizing the library orderly's dilemma, this orderly pointed at the pile of dirt and said, "Don't worry about that. I'll take care of it."

But he said it in Spanish, and he said it emphatically in a tone reminiscent of the bandito in *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* when he told Humphrey Bogart that he didn't need any stinking badges. The library orderly doesn't speak Spanish, and he doesn't take any shit either, so he tells the hallway orderly, "Fuck you, I'll move it as soon as I find a Cadillac." Now the hallway orderly doesn't speak English, but he sure as hell understands "fuck you," so he drops his mop and charges over to stand chest-to-chest with the library orderly and spews a stream of Spanish invective, at which point they start bumping each other through the door into the relative privacy of the library, where it looks like it's going to be fist city.

If we were in a penitentiary rather than our lower-security camp, I have no doubt there would have already been blood on the floor. Before things got further out of control, however, a friendly bilingual guy stepped between them and explained everything that had transpired. Needless to say, the library orderly was greatly abashed and apologized profusely. After a toothy round of handshaking and backslapping during which the words "amigo" and "my friend" were spoken maybe a dozen times, everyone went his separate way -- a close call, but no harm, no foul.

The moral of this story is that if you're going to come to prison, and *I* think that there is a better chance of that than *you* probably do -- 2.1 million currently being served, or in this case serving, and still counting -- then it's never too soon to learn a little Spanish.

It has long been the custom in America for newcomers to try their hands at crime. Think of the Pilgrims ripping off the Wampanoc and Pequots, the "Gangs of New York," the Jewish, Italian, and finally the Russian and Vietnamese mobs. Crime has always been an equal-opportunity employer, especially the drug trade. There are no barriers to entry; everyone is welcome, and there is no glass ceiling. The only limits are an individual's abilities and drive... oh yeah, and the cops, too. That explains why so many of these newcomers end up in here.

Over a third of all federal convicts are foreign-born. And with Hispanics having recently become the No. 1 minority group in America, it's understandable that a lot of people here speak Spanish. You should too. Not only is it the polite thing to do -- don't forget, in the case of the Mexicans, they were here first -- but ultimately it's the safe thing to do as well. One afternoon when I was in a higher-security facility, two Chinese convicts were screaming at each other in the yard in what I assume must have been Cantonese. They were doing this right next to the only two benches in a place that holds a thousand convicts -- so, loud and annoying as this was, no one who had secured a seat was anxious to move. Finally one guy couldn't take it anymore, and he shouted, "This is America, goddamnit -- speak Spanish!" It's good advice. You should take it.

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