

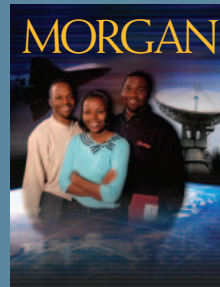
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# On the Battlefield



# for America's New Invisible Man

By Ferdinand Mehlinger

After the release of Ralph Ellison's literary classic, *Invisible Man*, (1952) the title of his book became a metaphor for law abiding but disenfranchised African American citizens struggling to retain their sense of dignity and worth, in an inequitable social system. More than four decades later, a new invisible man began to emerge in America's cities. United States citizens by birth, most have served, or are serving mandatory minimum sentences for nonviolent drug crimes. After serving their time, they are set adrift, stripped for life of one of America's most coveted civil rights...the right to vote.



**Devon Brown**

New Corrections Chief  
Washington D.C.



After gaining a national reputation as an 'innovator' running the state's largest correctional system, Devon Brown (MSU Class of '71), New Jersey's former corrections commissioner takes his prison reform crusade south, to the nation's capital.

Through his personal efforts and message of urgency, he seeks to change the course in which corrections officials, states, and Americans view and manage the mass incarceration of African Americans and Latinos.

The War on Drugs, enacted during the Ronald Reagan administration, created mandatory sentences for non-violent offenders that were seen by some as exorbitant when compared with the crime. Along with the harsh sentencing came a new social phenomenon appropriately referred to as the prison industrial complex.

Brown came along when state officials began taking notice that their prisons were bulging with non-violent, minority drug offenders. Many were incarcerated as users of illegal

drugs not as pushers. And many of the new inmates were women. As a direct consequence of the nation's rush to imprison, correctional budgets surged, often outpacing those for education and human services.

Brown became New Jersey State corrections commissioner in 2002 and gained national attention shortly after taking office when he initiated unprecedented

changes in corrections rehabilitation. A lawyer with two master's degrees, one in psychology and another in public administration, Brown attributes his innovative approach to directing and running correctional institutions to his education at Morgan.

His signature initiatives, such as mandating inmates to watch "educational" television programs that he selected,

participate in chess tournaments and develop capital growth skills in the Stock Market Game were both surprisingly however successful. Brown was not surprised how quickly prisoners became engrossed in pursuits that require intellectual muscle (93% of New Jersey prisoners are now in school and or have jobs with 81% of them receiving their GED at first testing).



Dr. Carrol Perrino came to Morgan State in 1968 and has taught psychology to more than three generations of Morganites.

Devon Brown, new Corrections Chief for Washington D.C., graduated from Morgan in 1971 along with his wife, Beverly Cooper-Brown, and his brother, Vernard S. Brown. Devon and Beverly Brown's son, Mark S. Brown, graduated from Morgan in 1995.

**Teacher and student:** Dr. Carrol S. Perrino, Associate Professor of Psychology and former student, Washington Brown. Brown calls Dr. Perrino his "mentor and guardian angel." Brown's Morgan education helped shape his view

"One thing you have to keep in mind when you're working with an inmate population is that an inmate population is made mainly of individuals who have committed drug offenses. A successful drug dealer is not without skills, without some intellect." As Brown saw it, the key is to direct the inmate's intellect toward socially constructive, worthwhile pursuits.



D.C. Corrections Chief, Devon Brown, whose ideas drive his reform ideals.

Brown's prison chess team won a competition (captured by Sports Illustrated Magazine and ESPN) against a team of nationally-ranked chessmasters from Princeton University during a televised match shown around the world.

Recalling how he introduced The Stock Market Game to prisoners in New Jersey, he said, "It started back in 2002 at East Jersey State Prison (the infamous Rahway Penitentiary). The goal was to teach inmates skills that could be used successfully in our society. Paine Webber, a major stock exchange from New York, sent a team to participate in the competition in which we were involved. We beat them badly. We beat them so badly that they took their marbles and went home. They would not play us again."

Appointed by former Governor James McGreevey, Brown stepped into the New Jersey state correction system quickly, proving that he is no ordinary corrections bureaucrat. His signature initiatives made him appear more like a professor than a warden, a social architect than a jailer.

Brown stressed education for his staff and inmates. He urged officers to go back to school, and he created programs to get inmates to learn. Turning off Jerry Springer in favor of the History Channel and other educationally enriching broadcasts was one move. The New Jersey State correctional system houses 27,000 inmates at 14 state prisons and employs about 9,500 guards and support workers. Brown reduced the prison system's overtime costs by over \$50 million. Not commonly known is the fact that New Jersey leads all other states in the disproportionate number of minorities who are

behind prison walls (81%).

Brown was nominated for the Michael Franke Award for outstanding leadership in the field of corrections in 2003. In 2005, he received the E.B. Henderson Presidential Award from the International Community Corrections Association (ICCA) in recognition of his outstanding leadership and contributions to advancing quality correctional practices. In that same year, the American Correctional Association (ACA) named him "The Best in the Business" for progressive correctional leadership. Since his arrival in the nation's capital, Brown has been selected to join the Board of Directors of the nationally acclaimed, "Sentencing Project," one of the country's premier organizations promoting criminal justice reform.

Another initiative that gained national attention was aimed directly at prison and street gangs. Brown's "Be Smart, Choose Freedom" anti-violence cam-

paigned was so successful that it was adopted by the NAACP to lead its national crime prevention program.

"We put together what was at the time the only crime prevention initiative to come out of corrections: "Be Smart, Choose Freedom" that had several components, one focused on drugs, going out with inmates who have had addictive prob-

lems to alert students in schools. Also gangs, where reformed gang members go out to persuade children in the schools from getting involved in gang activities." A principal component of this initiative was the development of 12 cleverly crafted public service announcements (PSAs) promoting the

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**"A TEACHER CAN  
NEVER KNOW THE  
FULL GRAVITY  
OF HIS OR HER  
INFLUENCE."  
—DEVON BROWN**

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A close-up portrait of Devon Brown, a Black man with a mustache, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and a patterned tie. He is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a serious expression. The background is an American flag.

Devon Brown  
Washington D.C. Corrections Chief

theme that “Jail is the worst Four Letter Word” and the “Worst Thing That You Can Do Is To Establish a Criminal Record.” These messages are presently being displayed on billboards and bus stops throughout California, New Jersey, and New York with the PSA’s airing on television stations from New York City to Philadelphia.

The United States has approximately 2.2 million people behind bars. Of those, 50.5% are serving time for violent crime, leaving more than 1.1 million people imprisoned for nonviolent offenses, mainly property and drug crimes. African Americans, who make up just 13 percent of the U.S. population, comprise 47 percent of the country’s prison population. Brown says that something has to be done about the alarming growth in prison populations.

At 56 years old, one does not get the impression that Devon Brown is planning his retirement anytime soon. Just the opposite; his mission is critical and the battle is just beginning. Brown wants to continue creating opportunities for inmates to engage in positive reform and he wants to attract attention to his reform programs at a national level. Thus far, his efforts seem to be gaining momentum as many states have emulated his “Be Smart-Choose Freedom” program. In addition, at the time of his move to the District of Columbia, New Jersey had become one of only 11 states showing a decrease in their prison population.

“My job is to alert the criminal justice system and society at large that too many people are being incarcerated. That while we as Americans take pride in being number one, that there is part of our existence that is worthy of shame in being number one and that is that we incarcerate more of our citizens than any other country...any other country on this planet.”

“For African Americans, and minorities in particular, this poses a very serious consequence. One has to realize that in most states, all but three, when you are convicted as a felon you lose your freedom

and along with it one of the most precious gifts that this country has to offer, and that is the right to have your voice heard. The right to vote.”

Brown also wants to desperately break the cycle of prison life which complicates an already precarious existence for many African American families: “In prison, inmates learn ‘Do what you can to survive’, even if it means stealing from another, exploiting another, or harming another,” he says. “They’re taking those values back into our communities.”

Washington’s new corrections chief wants juveniles to avoid the criminal justice system at all costs. He goes out into communities with programs targeted to impressionable juveniles in schools, encouraging them not to get involved in gangs or other negative activity. To do this effectively and convincingly he enlists reformed gang members to tell their own stories of social redemption so that others will not fall to the wayside. “The goal is to encourage governments to both understand that prevention is truly the best intervention and to have inmates leave prison as better people than when they arrived, to get a job, and to hold a family together.”

A correctional professional for more than three decades, Devon Brown said that his interest in the field started at Morgan.

“My interest in public safety and furthering the application of psychology in all areas of government had its origins at Morgan. That foundation and that preparation are a tribute to the professors of Morgan State University and to the professors in the psychology department.”

Commissioner Brown says that the times in which he grew up and his professors helped shape his views that drive his reform ideals.

Brown’s family has a rich history and tradition at Morgan. “I met my wife in one of my psychology courses. My son graduated from Morgan and likewise benefited from some of the same wonderful staff, and my brother and I walked across the stage, receiving our diplomas together in 1971.”

“ONE OF THE HIGH POINTS OF MY LIFE IS THAT MY SON HAD THE BENEFIT OF DR. PERRINO’S EXPERIENCE, KNOWLEDGE, AND WISDOM. SHE COULD HAVE GONE TO ANY UNIVERSITY IN THIS COUNTRY. SHE COULD HAVE GONE OUTSIDE THIS COUNTRY, TO AN OXFORD OR TO A YALE, OR A HARVARD WITH HER SKILLS... DR. PERRINO CHOSE MORGAN STATE UNIVERSITY, AND GOD KNOWS WE ARE ALL DEEPLY GRATEFUL THAT SHE DID.”

— DEVON BROWN