

BIDEN SEEKS TO CORRECT HISTORICAL WRONGS WITH COMMUTATION OF 2,500 SENTENCES

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With one bold stroke of his pen, President Joe Biden hopes to finally correct the historical and devastating blunder of his 1994 Crime Bill that disproportionately affected African Americans. Biden announced on Friday that he has commuted the sentences of nearly 2,500 inmates convicted of nonviolent drug offenses. The decision marked the broadest use of clemency powers by any U.S. president, specifically targeting those who were disproportionately affected by harsh sentencing laws of the past that many, including Biden, now acknowledge as discriminatory and unjust.

The White House said that Biden's action addresses the disparities in sentencing, particularly those resulting from the unequal treatment of crack versus powder cocaine offenses. "These individuals were handed disproportionately long sentences compared to what they would face today under current laws," Biden stated. "With today's action, I have now issued more individual pardons and commutations than any president in U.S. history."

The decision to commute the sentences is part of Biden's broader efforts to rectify the racial injustices that have long plagued the U.S. criminal justice system. The move aligns with legislative reforms such as the Fair Sentencing Act and the First Step Act, which aim to reduce disparities and correct historical wrongs.

Reflecting on his own role in shaping criminal justice policy as a senator, Biden acknowledged his past support for the 1994 crime bill, which contributed to the era of mass incarceration that severely damaged Black communities. Having expressed regret, officials said Biden has made it a priority during his presidency to address these issues comprehensively.

"Today's clemency action provides relief for individuals who received lengthy sentences based on discredited distinctions between crack and powder cocaine, as well as outdated sentencing enhancements for drug crimes," Biden explained. He said this step not only aims to amend past oversights but also serves as a testament to his administration's commitment to reform and progress in criminal justice.

In recent weeks, Biden has also commuted the sentences of nearly all prisoners on federal death row and set a record with 1,500 commutations for those moved to home confinement during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aggressive use of clemency is part of a broader initiative to overhaul the penal system and reduce the nation's prison population, which is the largest in the world.

With just two days left before President-elect Donald Trump takes the oath of office, Biden indicated that his administration would continue to review and process additional commutations and pardons. Among other considerations are pre-emptive pardons for several former elected officials

and individuals who may be targeted for political retribution by Trump.

Advocates for sentencing reform have widely applauded Biden's actions. Sarah Gersten, Executive Director and General Counsel at Last Prisoner Project, released a statement and noted the broader implications of Biden's decision. "This historic decision offers hope—not just for those freed today, but for all the individuals still incarcerated for cannabis and their families that have been impacted by the War on Drugs," Gersten stated. "President Biden's actions remind us that meaningful change is possible when people work together and listen to what is needed to provide true justice through second chances."

These final clemency actions will forever define Biden's legacy on justice," said FWD.us Executive Director Zoë Towns. "Too often, our criminal justice reforms only apply to the law going forward, leaving behind the very people and injustices that moved us to change. For example, we reached consensus long ago that the crack/powder cocaine sentencing disparity could not be defended on public health or public safety grounds and that it fueled already stark racial disparities," Towns noted. "Yet many are still incarcerated on sentences that could not be handed down today. We're grateful for President Biden's final acts of leadership in delivering relief, justice, and mercy to thousands and, importantly, calling attention to the harms of extreme sentencing and the benefits of reform."

There are no comments yet.