

`A Rational Career Choice'; [FINAL Edition]

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The remarkable Chambers brothers rose from grinding poverty in the Arkansas delta to running a retail trade earning \$1 million a week in Detroit. This was in the mid-1980s, when the automobile industry was shrinking and the city was losing a quarter of a million jobs and a fifth of its population. The four brothers' enterprise had revenues larger than any other privately held business in the city.

This story of ghetto capitalism is told in a virtuoso exercise in reporting, William M. Adler's new book "Land of Opportunity." Adler details how the brothers, without benefit of education beyond their high school in the nation's sixth poorest county, identified a market niche, mastered wholesale buying and mass production and risk analysis, monitored cash flows, devised employee benefit plans, performance bonuses and customer incentive plans. Adler admires the way the brothers' leader, Billy Joe, "refused to settle for passivity and hopelessness" in Lee County, Ark.

Billy Joe is now earning \$5 a month in the kitchen of a federal prison where he will be for at least another 20 years. Yet Adler, a terrific reporter and a terrible ethicist, says Billy Joe and his three brothers, who also are in prison, made "a rational career choice" when they became pioneers of the age of crack cocaine.

Adler is not averse to moral judgments. He vigorously disapproves of "the Reagan-Bush era's domestic spending policies," "the wealth-obsessed culture," "the decade's cult of money" and so on. But Adler's honest reporting vitiates his ideological judgments.

Billy was 16 in 1978 when he bought a one-way bus ticket to Detroit, where his brother Willie was a postal worker. Soon Billy was working his way up in the drug business, and with some help from Willie.

"By 1982," writes Adler, "seven years as a letter carrier and his prudent way with a dollar had left Willie with a tidy nest egg." And an eye for cheap real estate he saw as he delivered mail. Willie bought some inexpensive houses. Soon they were distribution centers for the family drug business. By 1984 one was a crack house "pumping" \$35,000 a day.

It is a bit much to blame Republicans for Willie's choice of a criminal career. And brother Larry had made that choice in 1969, long before "the decade of greed." When the youngest brother, Otis, came to Detroit to join the moneymaking, crime was a family tradition.

Crack came to the United States from the Caribbean, where a dying crack addict had said to a Bahamian doctor, "When the world tastes this, you're going to have a lot of trouble." It got to Detroit late in 1983. In that year about 100 people were admitted to Detroit clinics for treatment of cocaine use. In 1987, the year the Chambers' business peaked, about 4,500 were admitted. Between 1983 and 1987 emergency room admissions linked to cocaine rose from 450 to 3,811. In 1987, when Detroit's murder rate peaked, half the murder victims age 40 and under had cocaine in their systems.

By 1986, Adler writes, Billy Joe and Larry were folk heroes, "the Lee Iacoccas of the crack business." Children played games of "BJ and Larry." Larry ran a drug dispensing apartment house where the doorman, who carried an Uzi, was admonished by Larry to project warmth to customers:

"When a crackhead comes to you and his woman is on his back, his babies don't have no Pampers, he hasn't eaten in two days, and he's about to spend his last \$5 on crack, you have to make him feel good about spending his money."

Larry was stern with disobedient employees (he had hot grease poured on one), and his "wrecking crews" would "hammer" people who displeased him. Adler tells about Dennis, one of Larry's wreckers:

"{Dennis and colleagues} grabbed {the victim's} wrists, held them to the concrete floor, and pummeled his hands with hammers. Then they hammered his feet, his knees. The kid lost consciousness. They hammered his ribs. They left him in the garage. Dennis says he heard later the injuries left the young man paraplegic, never to walk again. Dennis says he felt bad about the beating, but that `I did it because it was part of my job and I wanted to move up in the organization and I wanted a {Ford Mustang} 5.0."

To say, as Adler comes close to doing in his otherwise illuminating book, that the Chambers and their friends were only obeying social imperatives or cultural promptings is today's version of the Nuremberg defense -- "I was only obeying orders" -- that was offered in 1946 by people who for a while thought they had made rational career choices.