

A pardon Bush must mull

Should a young drug dealer really serve 45 years?

Michael Santos didn't get a chance to meet President Bush on his swing through New Jersey this week. Maybe next time. There's no rush. Santos lives at Fort Dix, where he's serving 45 years to life, with no chance of parole.

Santos is in prison for running a distribution ring that brought cocaine from Miami to Washington State. He was 23 when he was sent away. At the time, he was the youngest person ever convicted of running a continuous criminal enterprise. Federal Judge Jack Tanner told him, "I imagine you'll be an old man [when you're released], but you've earned it, sir."

That was in 1988. Santos has been in prison for 13 years. With perfect behavior and good luck, he'll be eligible to leave in 2013, at age 49. Not quite an old man, but close.

Santos is in prison on a first conviction. He didn't commit any violent crimes. Still, he readily admits that what he did was bad enough. Between 1985 and 1987, he ran an operation that dumped at least 50 kilos of cocaine on the streets of Seattle. And he doesn't have the drug dealer's usual excuses. He came from a strong, prosperous Cuban immigrant family. He was a good student, popular and charming. He was victimized by nothing but his own irresponsibility and greed.

In court, Santos vowed to Tanner that he would go straight — not exactly a unique sentiment at a sentencing hearing. But unlike most federal prisoners, he meant it. In the past 14 years, Santos has turned himself into an extraordinary reclamation project.

The route he chose was education. In 1992, he got a behind-bars B.A. from Mercer University.

Three years later, he received an M.A. from Hofstra. His thesis — which his adviser calls "enormously impressive" — described a model prison system in which inmates would be required to earn their release. Then he began a Ph.D. program at the University of Connecticut.

Santos is an exceptional student — some of his work has been published in academic journals — and he has used his education to help fellow prisoners as a teacher, mentor and advocate. This is more than altruism. He is trying to break out of jail, using remorse and rehabilitation as his pick and shovel.

The only tunnel he can dig is to the White House. As a federal prisoner, nothing short of executive clemency will get him out. Does he have a chance? Why should Bush pardon a drug dealer?

Two reasons. First, it would contrast nicely with Bill Clinton's cash-for-freedom deal with Carlos Vignali. Less cynically, freeing Michael Santos would serve as eloquent testimony that the phrase "compassionate conservatism" isn't an oxymoron.

The President couldn't dream up a better candidate to make this point. Santos, from all appearances, embodies the virtues Bush preaches — education, hard work and good citizenship. Behind bars, he has made himself into a poster boy for personal responsibility.

The judge who sentenced Michael Santos to spend most of his life in jail presumably wanted to send the signal that crime doesn't pay. Letting him go — after a thorough vetting by the Justice Department — would allow the President to send the equally important message that nobody is beyond redemption, and doing the right thing can earn you a second chance.

**ZEV
CHAFETS**



NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
3/16/2001 PAGE 51