Prison officials face revolution

by Nicholas Horrock
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"In any prison, the prisoners can take control at any time. They can never escape because they can't take the towers or the weapons. But it is virtually impossible to keep a determined group of prisoners from seizing control of a given area."

The speaker is Louis S. Nelson, warden of San Quentin prison, and he has lived with this knowledge for most of his career. So have the wardens of most U.S. prisons. The only wonder is that it has taken their charges so long to become aware of the potential of prisoner power and to act upon it.

Now, the revolutionary actions are speaking louder than the revolutionary words. The recent bloodbath at New York's Attica Correctional Facility was only another milestone in a progression of smaller rebellions in prisons all across the country.

WORK STOPPAGES, hunger strikes, assaults on guards have become almost common occurrences. So, too, has the reaction. In Raiford, Fla., Pendelton, Ind., and Soledad, Calif., police or prison guards have fired into crowds of essentially unarmed men. In Raiford, for example, a 15-minute volley of birdshot and ricocheting machinegun bullets wounded 63 inmates.

So far, the violence of the counter-measures has succeeded only in stopping the outbreak at hand. The determination of the prisoners seems to be growing, and so is their unity. Indeed, two opposite and powerful forces have come smack against one another: the Black Revolution, with its accent on freedom–and the most rigid, insolated and archaic of all institutions, the prison.

By all odds, the most important development in prison life in recent years has been the radicalization of the black inmate. Blacks form a majority in many prisons and in some they constitute as much as 95 per cent of the population.

THE NEW BLACK prisoner is a changed man. "When I came into this system in 1949," says Kenneth Hardy, Washington, D. C.'s Director of Corrections, "the status symbol for a black inmate was a pair of $40 civilian shoes. Now, the status symbol is a dashiki, an Afro and a Federal City College jacket."

The new leader is self-educated (in prison), articulate, probably a Panther or a Muslim and unfailingly revolutionary in outlook. And he is a man capable of giving the inmates a new and immensely more dignified image of themselves–as American blacks who, as they see it, are members of a "colonized" race, are "political prisoners" and have been arrested less for criminal acts than for "trying to survive in a racist society."

Yet with all the accent on black pride, the racial bars between black and white prisoners are coming down in some prisons. Increasingly, the revolutionary inmate sees himself as part of a depressed class, which includes prisoners of all colors and backgrounds.

THE REAL RACIAL clash in prisons these days is between the prisoners and preponderantly white guards. It amounts at times to the deepest possible clash of cultures.

Most prisons are in rural communities, and the guards and correction officers are taken mostly from local communities. They are conservative (by contemporary standards), blue-collar, small-town people, and they are poles apart in outlook, background and experience from the minority prisoners who are overwhelmingly ghetto-bred and urban-oriented.

The average guard is, thus, totally unprepared to understand or to sympathize with the new prisoner. A Maryland prison official describes the situation pungently:

"**IN THE OLD DAYS**, if a correction officer wanted to talk to a black prisoner, he'd yell, 'Hey, boy, you come on over here,' and the prisoner would trot right over. If he did that today, most of the guys in here would say, 'Who you calling boy,' and then call him the worst name they can think of.

"The correction officer can't handle that. His life isn't so all-fired good, anyway. He has, or believes he has, a bottom-of-the-social-ladder job–hell, there are guards here who won't tell their kids where they work–he doesn't have much money and now he has to take all this guff from what he probably considers a bunch of niggers. He simply can't handle it."

The old methods no longer work. Once the most securely isolated of U.S. institutions, prisons are now opening up to public view; similarly, the inmates are now far more aware of what is going on outside the walls.

COURT DECISIONS have paved the way. Officials can no longer ban "inflammatory" books, magazines and newspapers. A few years ago, Eldridge Cleaver was not even allowed to see a copy of his own book. Now, inmates can read nearly everything, including the news of the latest ghetto riot.

Prisoner leaders, like nearly everyone else who is newsworthy, have learned to use the media. Articulate inmates can be seen on television, presenting their views and staging demonstrations for the prime-time audience. Nor is it so difficult for them to see reporters as it once was. And a new breed of criminal lawyer is increasingly able to have access to inmates and to bring their grievances before the public.

These lawyers are at opposite poles from the stereotype of the shifty, mob-oriented criminal lawyers who were once virtually the only members of their profession who took any interest in prisoners. The new breed is young, revolutionary and exceedingly aggressive.

EVEN RELIGION has helped to end the isolation–not the old-time religion, of course, but radical Catholic priests and Protestant ministers and, above all, the Black Muslim faith. Court actions have given prisoners in some institutions the right to read Muslim publications–and to get a new dose of black pride and militance.

At the same time, many nationalistic organizations–the Black Panthers and a dozen or so smaller organizations–have been formed inside prison walls. All have publications and what amounts to a party line based on pride and militance.

Yet in the face of the bombast, the threatening tones and even the taking of hostages, prisoner demands have in most cases been quite mild. They almost always include better food, better sanitation, less crowded conditions and more pay (in some institutions, the men work for as little as 3 cents an hour). Prisoners also ask to be allowed to send more letters, to see lawyers more easily and to be allowed to present their views to reporters.

ONE OF THE ironic tragedies of the present situation is that more real reforms have been made in the prison system in the past three years than at any time in the preceding 50 years. But the reforms have come late and grudgingly, and their impact has been nothing like what it would have been if they had been made a decade ago.

The Federal government pumped $180 million into local and state correction programs last year and expect to spend $250 million this year.

There have even been inroads on the chronic overcrowding of the system. These have come about through increased use of

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Environment group begins tasks slowly

The ASUN Environmental Task Force, slowed by a change in chairmanship, will attempt to define its goals and identify problem areas in the next two weeks.

The Task Force Steering Committee decided Tuesday to select two student and two faculty-administration members to work with the chairman on a statement of committee philosophy.

The committee was instructed to pay sepecial attention to the areas of environmental regulations, services and education.

Gary Gabelhouse is acting as temporary chairman until ASUN appoints a chairman to replace Diane Beecher, who is no longer a student at UNL.

The Task Force campus beautification subcommittee has begun a campaign to keep the Nebraska Union clean of litter. But, Gabelhouse said litter campaigns should be secondary and he is more concerned with environmental education.

"The best way we can get anything environmentally is by education," he said. Gabelhouse suggested that the committee work with education programs for the Lincoln schools and a workshop in environment for the city's elementary teachers.

At a previous meeting, priorities for the Task Force were established which include air and water pollution, solid waste, campus beautification and public relations.

These problem areas were assigned to subcommittees charged with researching and identifying the extent of the problem, said committee menber Ronald D. Gierhan, assistant in the Student Affairs office.

The next step is to publicize the results and encourage student participation in solving the problems, he said.

A suggestion was submitted to the Task Force that they consider the long-term aspects of transportation, parking and campus beautification. Walter T. Bagley, associate professor of horticulture and forestry, said these problems are all tied together and affect air pollution.

Bagley suggested that the committee work with the city to create a good bus system and to encourage people to ride buses instead of driving cars.

AUF

Students may vote on All University Fund priorities for this year in the Nebraska Union from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. today.

Voter league aids 18-20 registration

A voter registration drive will be held November 1-5, in conjunction with similar drives on college campuses across the state, League of Young Voters Temporary Co-chairman Michael (O.J.) Nelson, said Tuesday.

The League is a non-partisan organization formed over the summer to help newly-enfranchised 18- to 21-year-olds register to vote.

Co-sponsored by ASUN and the Nebraska Student Government Assn., the drive will give students the option to registering in Lincoln or in their home towns, Nelson said.

"But we hope to register most people here," he continued, "and we're presently negotiating with Secretary of State Allen Beerman and County Electoral Commissioner Dean Petersen."

Nelson said the drive sponsors hope to establish registration booths on campus, but if that is impossible, transportation will be provided for students to the County-City building.

For students who have decided to register in their home towns, "information and aid"–probably in the form of registration forms to be filled out and sent home–will be provided, Nelson said.

There will be an organizational meeting open to all students who want to help, Nelson added, at 7 p.m. Sunday, in the Nebraska Union.

Homecoming queen interviews

Lincoln girls interested in a Homecoming Queen interview should fill out an application and sign for an interview in the Inter-Fraternity-Council office today before 4 p.m. Interviews will be held in the Nebraska Union tommorrow night.