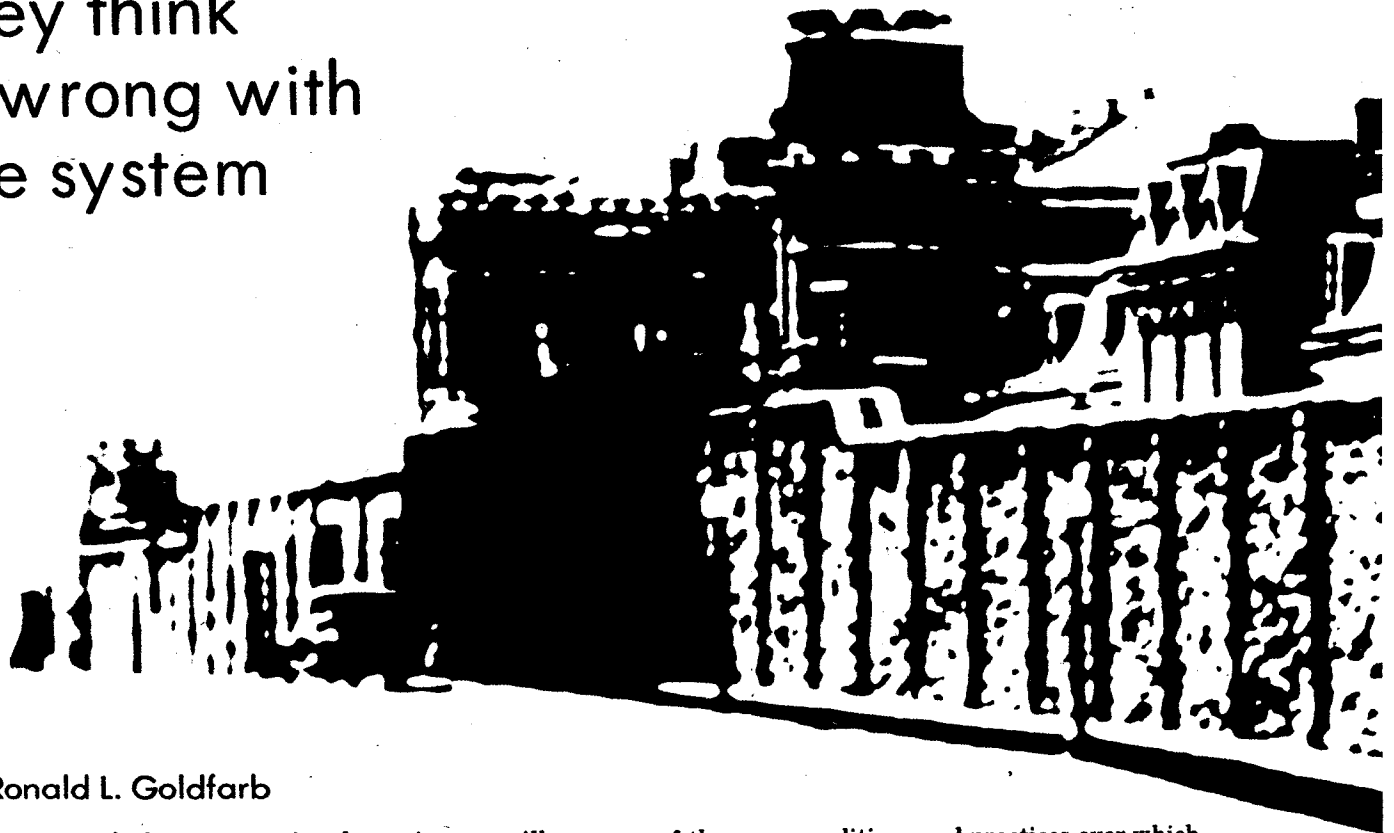


# Voices from Inside The Prisons

*The Washington Post/Potomac/November 21, 1971*

A lawyer asks  
the inmates what  
they think  
is wrong with  
the system



By Ronald L. Goldfarb

The events at Attica serve notice that prisoners will not march silently in lock-step, accepting the many acts they are expected to suffer in the name of "correction."

Riots like Attica have not been uncommon. In the past five decades, an increasing number of rebellions in jails, prisons, even military stockades have composed a low-visibility, civil-rights revolution behind bars.

Riots stand in direct and graphic contrast to the rarer, judicial rulings such as the one recently announced by the federal district court in Virginia condemning

many of the same conditions and practices over which prisoners recently have rioted. Both events in dramatically different ways address similar complaints. Onlookers are left wondering why it has taken so long for such grievous institutional excesses to be exposed and redressed. One reason is communications.

A traditional notion, which for almost two centuries has been a prevailing theme of the American correction system, is that prisoners are nonentities, that they have no rights, are unable to manage their affairs, undeserving of recognition. It is because of this premise, I believe, that critics and students of the criminal justice system rarely have sought the counsel of the subjects of the system—the "cons"—though the best market researchers advise that understanding consumers is the key to making any system work.

*Continued on page 40*

---

*Ronald Goldfarb practices law in Washington. His book, "After Conviction," co-authored with Linda Singer, will be published by Simon & Schuster next year.*

The interests of prisoners are deferred to those of the administrators of the correction system. Perhaps this is the case in all total institutions, patients in hospitals also are inconvenienced for the benefit of the staff. But the problem is exacerbated in the prison environment. The most basic and simple requests—the right to make phone calls, for example, are denied in the interest of “administration.” Many of the classic dehumanizing prison practices—lineups for count, crude physical examinations, the degrading use of ugly uniforms and numbers, and the denial of personal effects—are rationalized not as intentions but as necessities of the system. Most modern, so-called “progressive” prison and community programs fail to use convicts and ex-convicts in any way as correctional resources despite the success of the few attempts to date.

Thus, prisoners’ major sources for expression have been riots. “It may sound crazy to you that we destroy ourselves like this,” one convict told me, “but it’s the only time anyone ever listened to our complaints.”

The recent wave of prison and jail riots around the country all have been characterized by one distinctive feature: The rioters burned their property, destroyed their only forms of entertainment, their television sets, even maimed themselves to get attention. And what they invariably have asked for are eminently fair and proper demands: proper procedures to govern their existence, decent basic living conditions, a chance to get something besides waste time.

Recently, I decided to explore the relatively unmined source of unique expertise on the problems of prison reform—the convicts themselves. In the course of countless visits to correctional institutions around the country and abroad, doing research and practicing law I have found that convicts often have stirring, sometimes illuminating, comments on the criminal justice system.

At my request, Norman Carlson, the young director of the Bureau of Prisons, distributed a bulletin announcing my contest in all federal prisons, a population of over 20,000 inmates, approximately 5 per cent of the total number institutionalized in this country on a given day.

I was working on a book-length study of the American corrections system at the time under a Ford Foundation grant. It included some funds for consultants’ fees. Since I was using the convicts as consultants, in addition to experts in the free world, I offered cash prizes for what I alone would judge to be the most interesting entries.

I submitted the same questions to every prisoner incarcerated in federal prisons across the country last year.

*Suppose you had the power to decide what society should do with an individual after he has been convicted of a crime — what would you decide? What course of action makes the most sense? What should the ideal correctional program do? What kind of institutions or alternatives to institutions should we have?*

I received 134 entries from individuals in 23 different institutions, 1,047 pages of text; altogether they compose a generous, sometimes fascinating deluge of very special thoughts and advice. Some of the inmates were literate, articulate accomplished writers. Some entries were moving, even poetic. Several men, who must have been very well-educated, submitted extensive, footnoted, well-organized, philosophical discourses.

The letters did not provide a panacea to the deep and confounding problems of correction. There is none. However they do serve as another reminder. Just as in other comparable situations in the country’s recent and revolutionary social history, we can be sensible and humble enough to listen, I think, or we can con-

tinue our sad errors at grievous costs.

## How to peel a safe

Of the corrupting idleness of the prison environment a prisoner wrote. “During my stay in the county jail waiting to be tried and sent here to Leavenworth, I have learned how to mix nitroglycerine and how to peel a safe, and what weapons I could use to commit a robbery . . .” Another convict seemed to say it all when he wrote: “I have been rehabilitated so many times in the last 27 years that I now know how to pick locks, open safes (not ‘crack’ them), sort ‘junk’ from real jewelry, fence stolen goods, put in a fix with the local politician and draw up a writ. I have arrived! I am what you call a ‘subject’ of the system. I have learned my lessons well, and instead of being

a doctor, engineer, or a tugboat captain, I am a burglar doing a bum rap for bank robbery.”

## The stink of injustice

One writer attempted to explain the rationale of prisons and to respond to it:

“The criminal is society’s bogeyman. The average person will not assume his share of the guilt for the moral degeneration of society. Instead he blames the vague ‘criminal element’ or other ‘malcontents.’ If, in a rare moment of introspection, the respectable member of society sees within himself ‘criminal’ tendencies, he cannot admit it even to himself. Instead, he seeks a Judas goat. He, as a willing accomplice of the judiciary, puts the criminal on trial in a justice ritual that is nothing less than cathartic drama, a public passion play, a story with a moral. And so, the criminal ends up serving time, or even dying — for our sins. There is no definite demarcation between the criminal and the so-called honest man. The difference is a matter of certain internal characteristics that influence behavior. The ‘normal’ man either possesses

enough self-control to suppress and sublimate his aggressive impulses, or, conversely, lacks the aggression to overcome his social conditioning. Bourgeois morality extolls the virtues of hard work, of patience, of postponement of rewards, of acceptance of one's lot, of satisfaction with one's role in society. That economic abundance and its resulting consumer ethic have eroded this morality in

part explains why it is losing its power to keep men honest. Prison, resorted to as a stop-gap measure, seems to have become the permanent state of affairs. While no one claims prison to be the ultimate panacea for crime, society appears to have accepted it as the next best thing. Caveat Emptor! Punishment cannot instill in a man the inner restraint, empathy, and sense of involvement with others that would create within him a social conscience. Prison only worsens the problem it is intended to ease. Condemning the prison system is an easy but necessary step toward replacing it. Reform within the present system is not sufficient. Prison is so odious, so destructive an institution that nothing less than its complete abolition is required. So strong is the stink of injustice within

the prisons that no amount of reform can allay it. Measures merely mitigating the present system tend to perpetuate it.

---

"Every fibre of his entire being cries out for help; for a tiny, minute drop of pity, but there are no ears to hear, and this desperate cry is buried far, far down in the very depths of his soul."

---

Rather let the prison system collapse from the rot of malice and injustice than let it continue in any semblance of its present form.

### An ebbing shadow of memory

One writer tried to describe the feelings one experiences upon entering the system:

"As an offender enters the penitentiary, he is filled with apprehension and fear, natural enough when one is first confronted with an unknown and unnatural environment. The smooth and familiar closing of wooden doors is replaced by the nerve-shattering clanging of steel against steel. The cajoling cries of a competitive society and the gentle tones of acquaintances are replaced by the crisp and impersonal bark of commands and orders. One is met by a sea of faces hardened by the combats of life and the depravity of crime; searching eyes filled with contempt and mockery. The offender's first 30 days are filled with a program of depersonalization, under the guise of security and cleanliness. The offender is shorn of every shred of individual identity, beginning with the most important. The deepest rooted form of identity, the individual name, is quickly replaced with a number. The 'distinguishing' marks of identity swiftly follow suit. Each head of hair is closely clipped, each article of clothing is replaced, every personal belonging is sacrificed to the monster of sameness. After being served a meal (if the term may be used loosely) the offender is then assigned to temporary quarters, and left to shift for himself in a moment of deep, personal need. For 30 days he will

live with a group of total strangers, heads as comical and faces as bewildered as his own. As defense mechanism, the offender covers his exterior with hardness and pretended indifference in order to protect the penetration of his loneliness and misery, his feelings of rejection and hopelessness. Every fibre of his entire being cries out for help; for a tiny, minute drop of pity, but there are no ears to hear, and this desperate cry is buried far, far down in the very depths of his soul. His nights and a considerable portion of his days are spent in a tomb of concrete and steel where the very walls themselves seem to cry out 'I'm cold and impersonal,' where even the pretense of softness or tenderness is fast becoming an ebbing shadow of memory."

### The nature of exile

All punishment is exile, one convict wrote. "In every civilization there has been but one answer for the transgressions of the moral and social code: EXILE. Exile takes many forms: deportation, death, imprisonment. All are punishment and none are rehabilitative. "By the very nature of isolation from society you prevent rehabilitation. You cannot completely and absolutely isolate a man from anything and return him to it expecting that he now is capable of coping with every situation. Much less can you expect to take a man who admittedly failed to cope and thrust him into a cruel, brutal, sub-human existence—destroy his ties with family and friends by threat, restriction and intimidation—and then years later, when he is alone, embittered and still no wiser in his rationalization, thrust him back into that society and expect any measure of success."

### Getting even

A prisoner pointed out that "if society wants to use punishment as a means of getting even with the prisoner, the

prisoner is pretty apt to want to get even with society after he is released." One prisoner warned, "Despair and frustration is at the end of each sentence and we are all planning who to rob when we get out, not only for the money but for revenge. Another blow at society, that's about all we crave. I would rather be me in here scheming than you out there just waiting for your turn as victim."

## Work

A common demand of prisoners is the right to decent work at a reasonable wage. Prisoners resent the menial, meaningless work they are forced to do at less than peonage wages; and they are affronted by the waste and indolence of their prison existence. They want to be working, taxpaying men. One prisoner recommended a "national job monitor and placement system" to help solve the convict's problems finding work in prison and after release.

Most employment in prison is simple housekeeping; the maintenance of the institution overcomes the purposes of its existence. "The institution now," one convict wrote, "is in the ludicrous position of offering valuable training to arm convicts for jobs in a highly competitive society; plunging Johns, mopping floors, mowing grass. The truth is, most of the time is wasted."

---

"I come to this point and was told to make license tags. When I get out, there is only one place I can make tags—back in prison—and that's where I'll probably end up."

---

Where there is work, it is often unrelated to the employment scene to which the prisoner will return. In San Quentin, those prisoners who work do so on the only cotton mill in the state. As one Maryland convict said recently: "I came into this joint and was told to make license tags. When I get out, there is only one place I can make tags—back in the prison—and that's where I'll probably end up."

Idleness, make-work, housekeeping and training unrelated to job markets, union rules or employment realities outside await the man in prison. The prisoners' problems are compounded when they are released, usually without any money or negotiable skills—and with a criminal record which encumbers him like a scarlet letter precluding much of his job opportunity. As one prisoner wrote,

"a man is not a criminal until he goes to prison and is released."

In letter after letter the idea was stressed that prisoners should be trained, given work and the right to earn a decent wage. One prisoner called for a "system of socialized wage earning" by which he would be given training, a job and would be required to pay his own way for his cost of living in the institution, including his clothes, quarters and meals. The idea: "to resemble life on the outside, and instill a confidence in the individual who is being confined." Unless we do something like this, one prisoner from the Atlanta penitentiary said, "half of the population will be in prison and the other half will be working to pay the tax to keep them in prison."

One prisoner pointed out that forcing men to work without pay or incentives as most prisons do, makes them very bitter: "... he thinks of what he could have achieved if he had been on the streets, he then feels that society owes him something so he goes out to get it, which usually winds him right back in jail."

## Rules

Criticism was made of the rules that regulate life in prison: "Generally, the rules broken in prison, and for which exacting punishment is demanded, have in most cases little or no meaning whatsoever outside. Rules are necessary both in prison and out, but any rules or laws which tend to degrade or demean the person are wrong, and rules which demand conformity of all, allowing little individual expression, I believe are also wrong."

## The religious establishment

One inmate criticized rules regarding the practice of religion: "Religion here is overseen by government-paid agents, under the cloak of chaplains, who naturally are biased against divine precepts contrary to theirs. Moreover, if a prisoner doesn't participate in the religious establishment here, he is prejudiced when being considered for parole. He is considered as being unfit for society in rejecting the absurdities or refusing to worship the god of

the regular orthodox denominations."

---

"You can teach a man only to live in a prison by imprisoning him. You cannot expect him to learn how to live in a community while he is held in social isolation."

---



pleting their sentences.

For the prisoner who is not likely to be rehabilitated and who is dangerous and needs to be segregated, some special place like this might provide a sensible alternative to prisons, which one writer said makes men "bitter, vindictive beasts," "shrinking parodies of humanity."

## Parole

Parole practices were common targets of criticism: "In parole, there exists unreasonable and archaic clauses. A man on parole can be delivered back to prison and declared a violator for a variety of reasons. Among them, and reasonably so, are further violations of the law. In this instance he is usually given an additional term to serve as well as his remaining time on the previous sentence. But he may also be sent back for: not being home at a specified time; driving or riding in a car without prior approval of his supervising officer; at the request of his wife if she feels mistreated, and not always physically; being seen in a tavern—regardless of the state of alcoholic influence; and for an unending list of petty and often senseless minor things as well as the major ones. It makes a perfect parole nearly impossible to complete. There is an all-inclusive clause in parole regulations that leaves a parolee helpless. It states that he may be returned to prison as a violator for any reason deemed advisable by his parole officer.

---

"For the man who kills, I would banish him, along with his fellow murderers, to a remote island to either work and live out their castrated lives in harmony or kill each other off as they pleased."

---

Thus any action that might be quite normal and ordinary for everyone else can be the reason for a parolee serving many more years in prison. And even such things that would cause a free citizen to pay a small fine or receive a reprimand are the violations which imprison a parolee for many months and years."

## After release

A writer made these suggestions: "Upon final discharge from servitude of the sentence imposed, the entire record should be sealed and should not be resurrected for any purpose other than if that person commits another offense in the felony class. . . . Upon discharging a full five years of productive life without further involvement with the law, the former errant should be given a full pardon. This means absolute restoration to the status of never having committed an offense. It has been earned and is only right."

"The rapist should be emasculated. . . ."

Surprisingly, several of the prisoners were conservative, strict, and, in some cases, they made Frankensteinish recommendations. One prisoner suggested that, just as we do not treat a disease by closeting it, we should weed out convicted misfits "and inject them with something and dispose thereof."

A writer from Atlanta said: "For the man who kills, I would banish him, along with his fellow murderers, male and female, to a remote island to either work and live out their castrated lives in harmony or kill each other off as they pleased. The rapist should be emasculated and you may be quite certain that you will have no recidivist, as has long been the case. The thief should be used as the builder of roads, his pay going to di-

signated people of his family, wife, mother, etc. The amount he stole, plus any damage or injury to any place or person would have to be payed back double to the parties concerned, through official channels. The only one to gain from this system would be the victim, not the politician or the prisons. . . . A lot of menial jobs at minimum wage could be performed for as many hours as a man chose to work. He then would be literally working his way back into society. His family would not be supported by welfare, he would not be sheltered on the taxpayers feeding and clothing him year after year with no end to it. Brutal and sadistic guards could not punish him just for being there."

## Build a fence

One prisoner suggested that, since so many convicts

spend most of their time in prison anyway, we should forget releasing them temporarily, and dispose of the cage-like prisons we use: "This could be done by setting aside one of the states and building a fence around it. Texas would be an ideal state for this since it is big and has a good start building prisons." He pointed out that we could explain to the next generation that this is the way our forefathers handed it down to us and that future politicians could refer to the fight on crime as "fence spending." "The fence could be widened as required, and when all of the states were enclosed, we could take the last man outside the fence, put him in the center, build a fence around him and start the process all over again. If the liberals didn't want to start it all over again, we could accuse them of using drugs and homosexuality, and I am sure the public would rally behind it."

---

'To the blacks, the law is the white man's law . . . To the poor the law exists to protect the rich and, to the rich the law is something that applies to someone else.'

---

Lest the seriousness of his suggestions be questioned, consider his concluding paragraph: "The only drawback to this system would be the possibility that someone might come along after aeons and aeons—who could think and decide that a society could be built wherever a man who had made a mistake might live, and that maybe he might find enough people to listen to him not busily engaged in greed, graft, corruption, crime fighting and fence widening."

### Whom does the law serve?

Naturally, some of them men were bitter, their comments cynical. One man wrote about "this legal quagmire the rich call justice": "To the blacks, the law is the white man's law. To the younger generation it is the law of the establishment. To the poor the law exists only to protect the rich, and to the rich the law is

something that applies to someone else. To the lower classes the law is usually only a device used for their oppression."

"My good citizen. . . ."

A prisoner from Terminal Island in San Pedro, Calif., wrote: ". . . As a veteran of six state and federal institutions, I can testify firsthand as to their failure to either rehabilitate or to provide an effective deterrent to crime. Rehabilitation cannot be ac-

complished by isolating the lawbreaker from everything that is normal and alienating him as much as possible from the values you want him to emulate. Such correctional institutions correct nothing, least of all the prisoners tendency to deviate from the law. In actuality, such institutions could not have been better designed to enhance such deviation. From the time of his apprehension until his release the lawbreaker is placed in a peer group which commends criminal conduct. Upon his release his criminal identity is further reinforced. His ex-felon status is used to deny him a passport, a responsible job, a license for a business of his own, any credit or credit references, and in some cases even a driver's license. At each step of the way for the rest of his life he is required by law to declare himself a criminal. In most cases he winds up holding down a low-paying, dirty job which no one else wants and is expected to be grateful to his employer for providing the 'opportunity' to do so. This is it, my good citizen: he has advanced as far as you will let him. Do you still wonder why he usually says, 'the hell with it,' and goes back to crime?"

### A new concept?

A writer from the Atlanta penitentiary ended his letter: "There are some of us offenders who have a firm, unshakable belief that the same dynamic society which created the magnificent, awesome America will one day reconsider and out of that inexhaustible storehouse of compassion and understanding, a new

concept will emerge which will once again allow those of us who are willing and desirous the opportunity to regain, not only our place as citizens, not only our unique claim to interaction with America, but even perhaps, our humanness." ■