

Psychiatrist Sees Soledad Prison A Study in Institutional Paranoia

Dr. Frank Rundle, 43, was chief psychiatrist at Soledad State Prison in California during part of the disturbances involving the "Soledad Brothers" — three black inmates charged with killing a guard. He is now in private practice in Monterey, Calif.

Question: What is your net feeling about Soledad prison? . . .

Rundle: . . . It was a peculiar institution, not like any other . . . There was this atmosphere in the whole place which I would characterize as institutional paranoia. Like everybody in there was so uptight, and fearful, and suspicious and distrustful. This was not only staff with inmates but inmates with inmates. The inmates really believed that the staff was conspiring to kill certain ones of them, for example.

Q. Were they?

A. Well, I really was never able to make up my mind about that conclusively, but there was enough that made me think it was possible . . .

There was what they call a deadlock, which was a mechanism to control all the doors of the whole tier at once. And then each cell had an individual lock . . . It was possible for the guard to put everything on deadlock, he could then walk on the tier, unlock an individ-

ual cell, go back and take it off deadlock, and only that cell would open. There were numerous instances of cell doors being left unlocked, cells of inmates who were mortal enemies.

And they would suddenly confront each other and there'd be a fight and somebody would get stabbed, sometimes killed. The staff would say this was a malfunction. But it was just hard to buy that, that it could happen repeatedly . . .

Q. Did the staff have any way of controlling which one of the two would survive?

A. If you subscribe to the inmates' belief, the staff wanted a certain one of them dead. Like one of the three blacks who was killed in January reportedly had been set up to be killed by another inmate because he was a political leader.

There was one incident that happened while I was there which really decided it for me. I had resisted this notion that the staff was capable of doing that sort of thing. Then in January of 1971, right near the anniversary of the shooting of the three blacks, one inmate who was a white, an obnoxious racist from the South who had been for a year segregated totally from any black inmate, was suddenly in the presence, in the shower, of several blacks

and got stabbed in the chest.

I heard an administrator ask the staff, "How did that happen?" And I just couldn't believe that it was chance, because every single staff person knew that if there was anybody the blacks wanted to kill it was that guy.

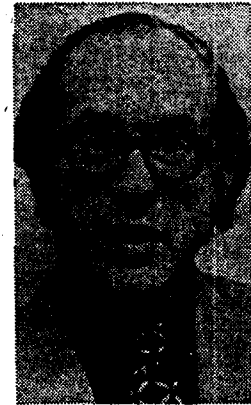
Q. If the staff was antiblack, why would they arrange to have a white person killed?

A. I'm not saying that they were antiblack. I had heard many staff people say that they wished that that guy would be killed because he was so personally obnoxious to almost everybody.

There was another incident, too, which occurred about that time, which involved two blacks who were reportedly enemies, who suddenly confronted each other on a tier. They got into a fight and the guard down in the office was heard saying to the gunman up in the cage on this particular wing, "What are you waiting for? Shoot!" . . .

I don't think the racist angle is nearly as important as (many) believed. I think it's there. I think it's much less overt . . . I never heard or saw anything in the six months that I was there of an overt racial nature . . .

Q. If it's generally paranoia, what can a warden do about it?



JAMES BRODIE

. . . deals with himself

A. The way it was dealt with at Soledad was that security procedures were tightened and the staff was instructed to be extremely cautious, to watch your back, don't trust anybody . . .

Q. Doesn't that increase the paranoia?

A. Sure . . . Another way to handle it could be what they finally did when the last incident occurred . . . When the prison administrator was killed. They got rid of the superintendent, they got rid of two deputy superintendents, they made wholesale transfers of inmates, some 500 or 600 out of there, and they brought in a man who was much more liberal, and, apparently, a decent human being. And there have been no major incidents at Soledad since.