

Democracy Is Easing the Life of Inmates

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WALLA WALLA, Wash., Oct. 17—A strange prison social structure, perhaps the strangest in the United States, has been formed in the last year at the Washington State Penitentiary.

At the core of the experiment is a representative council of prisoners, elected by the prisoners, who have also written and adopted a constitution. The system seems headed toward the removal of guards from inside the walls and, eventually, to the removal of the walls.

Supporters of the prison's liberalized philosophy feel that it has national implications and frequently speak of it as "an alternative to Attica or San Quentin." But it began long before the convict revolt at the New York prison and the killings at the California institution.

The new system is controversial and has been attacked by many both inside and outside its scope, particularly prison authorities who believe it could lead to a breakdown in control and discipline and endanger prison officers and guards.

There are no "guards" or "convicts" in the language of the Walla Walla prison. They are "correctional officers" and "residents."

'Take a Lifer Home'

One part of the program, called "take a lifer home to dinner," in which guards do just that, takes into account the fact that no prisoner with a mandatory term (such as life) can be furloughed for up to 30 days, as can others under a state law passed earlier this year. Some families of prisoners live in Walla Walla, and short visits are possible.

The dress in the prison yard is varied. Deviation from approved clothing styles was once punished by time in detention cells. While most wear the prison issue of blue denim, others wear football jerseys. There are beards, mustaches, sideburns and hair in all lengths, even though this is a maximum-security institution where the 1,155 inmates include the most hardened criminals.

A reporter, alone and unaccompanied by either a guard or

a prisoner, is safe to walk through the yard and cellblock to talk with inmates who converse easily and openly.

Inmates can make telephone calls anywhere, but toll calls must be made collect. Mail is uncensored and prisoners can send any amount of letters, so long as he pays his own postage.

A prisoner is no longer punished merely on the word of a guard. Prisoners sit in on disciplinary committee meetings. While they do not vote, they discuss the evidence with the correctional staff officers and offer arguments in defense of the prisoners.

One recent morning, 10 men appeared before the disciplinary committee. At least four of them would have had to serve special detention time in solitary confinement had their cases come up a year ago. Not one did this time.

The Inmate Government

The inmate government, known as the Resident Governmental Council, serves six months. Last Tuesday night, the second elected council was honored at a dinner in the dining hall. About 100 outsiders attended, some of them wives of prisoners, others officials such as the chairman of the Washington Parole Board, others reporters and photographers.

Six inmates spoke. There were degrees of difference in the heat of the militancy they expressed. But any one of them would have been put into solitary confinement a year ago if he had made such a speech in the prison mess hall, an official said after the dinner.

All of this has an effect on the appearance of the prison and on the attitudes of the guards and prisoners. Now, because the prisoners have a voice on work assignment committees, men who dislike work have been able to avoid it.

"This prison is getting to look like a pig pen," said Sgt. Robin Moses, 30 years old, who is chief of the maximum-security

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at Walla Walla Prison

section and president of the guards' union.

"The council defends people who don't want to work, and so the place doesn't get swept out and people throw papers on the floor," he said. "Now the council complains that it's dirty and ill-kept and wants the administration to do something to clean it up."

His comments illustrate one of the fundamental problems of the social structure: How does the inmate politician, elected for a six-month term by his fellow prisoners, maintain his political position while requiring his electorate of lawbreakers to follow some basic rules of behavior?

Gov. Daniel J. Evans, who has supported the reforms at the prison, said he discussed the problem, a variation on one common to all elected officeholders, when he met with members of the convict government in a prison visit a week ago.

The shift from a stiff custody operation, where a guard's word was law, to a concept of convict self-government has been difficult for the guard staff, Sergeant Moses said. His judgment was endorsed by Superintendent B. J. Rhay.

Role Is Elusive

"We stumbe around here wondering what our role is," said Sergeant Moses, who supports the changes in general but criticizes some aspects of prisoner behavior. "I don't know what they're going to do with correctional officers."

Sergeant Moses is currently wearing a beard whose stubble is as old as an agreement the guards won with Mr. Rhay last week, when they pointed out that prisoners could have long hair, mustaches and beards but that they could not.

"It used to be that we were



A dinner was given in Washington State Penitentiary last week for the elected Resident Government Council, an political body. There were about 100 outsiders present, including wives of prisoners, state officials and the press. The New York Times/Doug Wilson

not supposed to get to be close friends with the inmates," Sergeant Moses said. "Now we're supposed to take them home to dinner. How close are we supposed to get?"

The reforms began in late 1970, when the state Director of Institutions, Dr. William R. Conte, a psychiatrist, delivered a four-point ordering Mr. Bhay. He was to close the strip cells, which had been used for punishment, end mail censorship and provide an opportunity to make telephone calls at a prisoner's expense.

These three things were done quickly, but the fourth point—the creation of an elected inmate government—was not carried out until after the prisoners refused to come out of their cells for 10 days in December.

Soon after that, amid rising expectations where there had been no hope, and in the absence of pressure from the guards who suddenly stopped writing "tickets" for rule infractions, an outbreak of racial violence threatened.

One out of five of the prisoners is black; one out of 20 is an Indian, an Oriental or a Mexican-American, and the rest are white.

As the guards left the prison yard one day last January, the prisoners, many carrying weapons such as knives and clubs, gathered in the auditorium.

"We went there to fight," one of them said in a speech at the dinner last week. Instead they talked it out. For four months, while the constitution was writ-



Although some residents cooperate with their elected council, those who dislike work have been able to avoid it, and prison appearance was said to suffer as a result.

ten and the election held, a racial peace committee served as the inmate government.

With 11 members to be elected, each inmate has 11 votes, which he may divide or cast in a block. This voting device strengthens minority representatives. The 11 candidates with the most votes are elected and choose from among themselves a president, vice president and secretary. The eight other become heads of project committees.

Convicted Burglars

There is a council for the inner prison, where there are about 885 men, and another for the minimum-security building, which has about 270. Johnnie Charles Harris, 44, a black man, is president within the walls. Gordon Graham, 38, a white man, is president of the minimum-security group.

Both men are convicted burglars. They have been in and out of prison for most of their adult years. They are good friends and have associated together at times when they are outside the prison. Both have been boxers on prison teams.

One source familiar with prison records said that, of the 11 members of the inner prison Resident Governmental Council, only one is serving his first term. The members are mostly burglars, holdup men and murderers, the source said.

A civilian advisory committee has been named, as provided in the constitution, called the Constitution For Self-Government By and For the Resident Population of Washington State Penitentiary. The six members were appointed jointly by the prison superintendent and the president of the Resident Governmental Council.

Its members include educators, a state employment service officer, a businessman, a lawyer, and a psychologist.

"We perceive our role as outsiders seeing what's going on," said Dr. John Lillywhite, a sociologist from Washington State University at Pullman who is a former Parole Board member.

Not all the convicts like the system. One, who is 34 years old and will not be out for three more years, said: "I can't see where they're doing anything to get anybody out any sooner. It hasn't helped the whole body in here a bit. If street clothes is all you want, well, O.K., but I want outside."

The guards are close-

mouthered, but it is said that many of them oppose the liberalization, which has sharply cut into the authority they exercised. One officer, now in his 18th year, said: "Maybe it will work. I hope it holds together for at least 32 months." By then he could retire. Guards are paid from \$580 to \$705 a month.

A month ago, the wives of 138 prison employes signed a petition to Governor Evans in which they said, "Being very concerned for the safety of our husbands and our children's fathers, we are now beseeching your assistance to take whatever measures necessary to insure their safety at the penitentiary."

Prison administrators say that, since the new program began, three officers have been

attacked by inmates. Two of these incidents involved mental patients, they said, and the third was a prisoner who attacked a guard who had cited him for a rule infraction. No one was seriously hurt.

In early September, William P. Macklin, associate, superintendent for custody, retired and charged that the inmates were running the place "under threat of sit-downs, burnings, hostages if they don't get their way."

Don Linke, a former counselor, said: "All controls and discipline are lacking" in the inmates. In an interview, Superintendent Rhay, who started at the prison in 1945 and has been superintendent since 1958 said: "I was never an advocate of this when it started, and that's

why I can accept reluctance in some of the staff."

Thirteen employes have resigned since the program began, sources said. Some of these represented retirements, it was said, with about six employes leaving to find other jobs.

Sheriff Arthur Klundt of Walla Walla County said:

"I don't think the victims of crime are being even 1 per cent represented in this system of Justice of ours."

"People are comforted by the thought that when the law catches you, you're in trouble," the sheriff said. "But that isn't the way it turns out."

For the convicts, the change provides hope, although such men are wary from frequent

disappointment. One of them, a murderer, was 19 when he came here to spend the first five years on death row before his death sentence was commuted to life.

He has recently been out to dinner with a guard—the first time he went through the front gate since arriving in 1956. He was in the Lifer's Club, an old dormitory provided as a meeting place for the 154 men doing life sentences.

Nearby, a tall youngster, also ~~the gun towers on the gray~~ dinner recently. He is 20 and has been in prison five months.

As they talked, the guards in ~~the gun towers on the gray~~ wall looked down on the prison. They are there. Regardless of the changes on the inside, this still is a prison. The men here are not free to come and go at will. Two months ago, a mentally disturbed man was killed by a tower guard as he tried to climb the wall directly below the tower.