

Prison Reform Starts With Respect

By WILLIAM J. VANDEN HEUVEL

In the summer of 1970, correction officers staged a work slowdown in the city prisons, protesting the inhumane conditions that made their work both dangerous and meaningless. Weeks later, the explosion came—the Tombs riots.

As the correction officers had tried to warn us, the prisoners had legitimate grievances. Overcrowding was one: the Tombs was not built as a prison where men were to be kept for long periods of time; it is a detention center with a rated capacity of 930. On Aug. 8, 1970, the day of the riots, there were 1,980 inmates.

Embarrassed administrators agreed to "further discussions" to restore their control of the rioting prisoners. There is now much discussion of needed relief, generally designed more for the relief of the community's conscience than for the prisoners' grievances. There is significant evidence, however, that New York City has committed itself to reform.

But the simple truth is that such programs depend on state and Federal funds. The resources of the cities are hardly sufficient to administer adequate detention facilities. The successful management of detention prisons and respect for the law itself depend upon the fair and expeditious resolution by the courts of the cases before them.

Most prisoners and many lawyers do not take the criminal justice system seriously. They frequently delay the proceedings, waiting for the district attorneys and the courts to tire of the game and settle for a plea of guilty to a much lesser crime than the one that caused the arrest. The real losers in the present plea bargaining system are the innocent victims of crime and those who cherish law and justice.

At the heart of a manageable detention prison is a fair and equitable bail system. Bail must not have money as its basis. Nothing in the Anglo-American tradition of law justifies the daily pricing of a man's freedom as though it were a commodity that could be auctioned. Thousands of citizens are in detention prisons only because they are poor. A man assaults and robs, but is freed pending trial because he has the money to make bail.

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kindness. They sense the vulnerability of a man in a cage. They speak quiet words, listen to problems, and then try to make the days and the nights more gentle. Normal prisoners invariably respond generously. Personal respect is the foundation of prison reform.

The detention prison must also be thought of as a community hospital. On any given day in the Tombs, there are 35-50 men who would be better housed in the psychiatric ward of Bellevue Hospital. About 400 are men who are deeply disturbed and who need special treatment. But there is no room at the regular hospitals. The prison is left with the responsibility for care, with neither the personnel nor the tools to discharge its responsibility.

The urban prison must also be a narcotic treatment center. In New York City, the largest and most successful methadone detoxification program in the nation was recently organized in the correctional system. In terms of handling narcotic crime, the prisons remain irrelevant. Perhaps we just do not have the resources or the will to come up with a program that makes sense, but given the violence that threatens everyone, no task should have higher priority. The prisons can have an important part in that program. Counseling, classification of problems, guidance, group therapy—anything that has the possibility of hope and success—will find men in the prisons who have both the time and motivation to consider it.

A prison can explode at any time, even when the legitimacy of the grievances is nowhere near as clear as it was for the rioting prisoners last year. When men face long-term imprisonment they can become desperate and in their desperation they can provoke riots that have no other cause.

The detention prison has to be a place where justice and human values are respected. The tone of a prison is set by the men who administer it. Skillful correction officers are much more important to the success of an institution than its newness in architecture. They combine discipline with

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