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What Went Wrong at San Quentin?

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By TOM GADDIS

PORTLAND, Ore.—What a tragic waste! In the smoky sunlight of California's "advanced" penology and highly-touted research, what went wrong?

San Quentin's first guard murder in nineteen years took place three weeks ago. Soledad prison has seen ten guards and prisoners killed in the last sixteen months. George Jackson, two other inmates and three guards died Aug. 21.

To understand the basic character of the prison system look right now at San Quentin prison. Closed to visitors, the real prison lies as naked as the 23 prisoners who were handcuffed prone on the prison lawn. Many were beaten and all of them skin-searched in the shakedown for weapons that follows any prison break.

It must be said immediately and in fairness that no one can rightly condemn the prison staff for vigilance and total lock-up of prisoners after this horror of cold steel and hot blood. All the dead have friends. Any murdered guard will cause vengeance in this setting for years to come. These prisons were already "tight."

As for official reaction to the tragedy, it is totally predictable. There will be sweeping investigations and kneejerk responses to the demand for punishment. Any semblance of humane treatment will be suspect and covert. In the public fury, the thirst for a scapegoat will parch the throats of the citizenry, even as it deepens the fear and rage of the prisoners and guards.

But what of the real cause? This will elude all but theoretical attack because, first, of its utter simplicity and, second, because its description is so extremely complex.

The cause is not persons, but a cultural process.

What is a "max prison"? It is by definition a totalitarian system. Prison is and must be run by a despot with a monopoly of guns. Hopefully, everyone wants a benevolent despot. The extent of benevolence masquerades under the term "treatment." But if you treat people, they must be sick, and subject to "cure." This is the sick-sick concept.

But more than this masquerades under "treatment." We have in this country a gigantic let's-pretend game in the bankrupt prison systems. This game is based not upon rights, but upon help. The helpers have proliferated into a vast establishment (this is a diagnosis, not an attack; it is part of our cultural evolution).

The helpees are the "wretched of the earth"—the downtrodden, the twisted, the blacks, the browns and

the red-skinned and the deprived white, all "disadvantaged" (poor). Prisoners today are lumped with the insane, the orphaned, the retarded and the delinquent under the idiotically jocose term "inmate." The "inmates" are controlled, handled and warehoused by "corrections."

The Corrections Establishment in this country (including California) is of a character that makes the Pentagon look like a quaking marshmallow. No careful observer can attend, without a sense of nightmare, an American Corrections Association convention, visiting the tool steel, tear gas, video monitors, tough linoleum and trouble armament all sold in booths, while speakers on the platform intone paroxysms of concern over their incarcerated.

Unlike the Pentagon, the Corrections Establishment uses the treatment concept as a carapace of hypocrisy over the real problems of dealing with individuals convicted of crime. These prisoners want identity as persons with legal rights, living space and educational opportunities in order to better themselves in any way they can. They do not want their personal rights forfeited as treated people. They want some opportunity, plus a fair chance to Get Out of There!

In California they have been subjected to one of the most terrifying mechanisms of control (when it is misused) that has ever been invented: the indeterminate sentence. I submit that George Jackson's genius and the lives of five other human beings were wasted because of the misuse of that device, as part of the overdevelopment of the sick-sick concept in the penal systems of California.

What is needed? Legal development of the rights of prisoners. Prisoner education and growth without the overtones of illness. Parole as a right, including due process, rather than as a secret privilege dispensed by a correctional elite. And finally, the legal and cultural recognition of human beings seen as legal and identity-secure persons.

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