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EXCLUSIVE Mark Lane interviews Huey Newton in jail

MARK LANE

I celebrated the American Revolution by spending the first part of the July 4th weekend in jail with America's authentic revolutionary. In three days I spent more than twelve hours with Huey P. Newton.

Charles Garry, counsel for Huey and the Black Panther Party, met me at the San Francisco airport. I had just arrived after appearing on the Dick Cavett show with Jane Fonda. Cavett's continual denial of the national malignancy projected him in the role of the scoundrel, yet during the early commercial breaks he was both frank and charming. On the air the closest he came to an intellectual assessment of our recitation of the facts was to throw his hands up in the air and say, "Ah, c'mon now, Lane. I mean really."

The function of a prison is to prohibit the inmates from communicating freely; from being free. Dick Cavett speaks to millions of Americans every night. Yet he is not free.

Charles and I flew to San Luis Obispo and then drove to the prison just outside of town. Huey New-

shook hands and then entered a small attorney's conference room.

Charles gave Huey the latest issue of the Black Panther Party newspaper. Huey began to read the paper and said, "We must get bigger type. People often have to read the paper where the light is not too bright." You knew he was thinking of other prisoners. I asked if there was much control of the literature that entered the minimum security prison that we were in. He replied in the affirmative and, smiling, added, "The inmates and I are really in a maximum security prison. You're in a minimum security prison—it's called America." As he browsed through the paper Charles said that he had several taped messages from members of the party in response to a position that Huey had recently taken. Huey asked that they be played then. As the voices of the party members rose from the little cassette recorded Huey read the paper and talked with both of us. The record-

us, wanted to utilize the entire visit to its fullest. I did wonder if he was really able to concentrate on all aspects of the mixed media experience until he interrupted the discussion at one point to ask Charles to play the last portion of the tape again. Together we listened. One sister had disagreed with Huey's evaluation and judgment. Huey was obviously pleased. He nodded his head and smiled as he said, "Now, the debate has begun. Now, through an exchange of ideas, we can get somewhere."

Another woman spoke to Huey as the tape played on.

"Brother Huey, this is sister _____. I just hope that I can have my baby. I'm in my sixth month—while his father is still out on the street. I hope that I will be out also so the baby can be born on the outside, not in a jail ward. I suspect that we might all be arrested. All power to the people, Huey."

I asked if this was typical of the thinking in the party, this awareness of imminent peril. Huey said that the party was founded in 1966 and that he has been in jail since 1967. "I really haven't been with the party for three-quarters of its life. This was not the thinking when I was arrested. Obviously, to be realistic, we must be aware of the probabilities."

I asked if Huey expected to be killed when he was released. I was soon to learn that Huey almost always de-personalizes any question that is directed at him. "I think that there may be genocide practiced against the black people as we become more aware that this system does not work. Not for us, not for the poor whites in Appalachia, not for the Chicanos and not for the Indians. As we get closer to the answer when those who are oppressed understand that only by changing the system, that only through socialism can we secure democratic rights, we constitute a more serious threat. We are getting closer."

During the three days that we talked Huey made a number of comments regarding prisons. This first article will deal primarily with those comments. In a subsequent article I will relate his views on ideology, philosophy and his plans upon release. He may be released within a few weeks.

Mark: The authorities told me that all the prisoners are out of their cells all day.

The 'goon squad' took away the read so the other inmates wouldn't

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clean clothing and take care of other similar housekeeping details. Also every prisoner is subject to a complete strip search at any time at the whim and caprice of any of the guards. That tends to rob a man not only of his time while he is out of the cell, but more importantly of his dignity.

Mark: What is the size of your cell?

Huey: It is approximately seven feet by eight and a half feet. I never did measure it.

Mark: Are the other prisoners locked up 21 hours a day?

Huey: No, the other prisoners are out of their cells from 7:00 AM to 10:00 PM. The reason that I am treated differently from the other men is that I refuse to "program" — to use prison administration terminology. I refuse to work without just compensation. Not just for me but adequate compensation for all the prisoners. Most prisoners here work six or seven hours a day. There is no compensation for most of the work but a few of the jobs pay from two cents an hour to ten cents an hour. You can only earn ten cents an hour after about five years of loyal service.

Mark: What is the nature of the work? Does the end product enter into the flow of commerce?

Huey: Yes it does. That's just the point. They make shoes not only for the inmate population but many of the shoes that are manufactured here are sold by contract to other agencies. There is a canning plant here. The prison institution sells the canned goods to other institutions and agencies. The prisoners, of course, make all of the license tags for California. They also make furniture for state buildings. The prison is a capitalistic enterprise.

It differs very little from the system used in the South where inmates are "farmed out" to growers. In those instances the growers compensate the state. Most civilized people agree that that system is abhorrent. Yet the California method is to employ the reverse system. The convicts are not farmed out; the work is farmed in. What factors remain the same? The convicts are still exploited by the state; the work still is accomplished; the state is still compensated.

There is also a textile plant here as there is at many prisons in the state. Clothing is manufactured here. Some is worn by the prison population; other clothing is sold on the open market. Deceptive labels are used by the prison so that the

on the inside of the collar.)

Mark: It says, "Washington Dee Cee Sanforized."

Huey: Yes. Well, this shirt was made at the prison. Various labels are put into the shirts depending upon where the institution wants to market them. I refuse to be part of that activity and that is precisely what their "program" is all about.

Mark: Did you make a specific proposal?

Huey: Yes. I demanded that each of the prisoners be paid the minimum wage. Of course, I recognize that we are provided with room and board and I proposed that an appropriate sum be deducted from our wages for the accommodations and service.

Mark: To whom was the proposal made?

Huey: To the Adult Authority.

Mark: They liked the idea?

Huey: They were wild about it. They rejected it at once. We are now at a stalemate. Each month I must attend the disciplinary court. They review my case. With some alarm I might add. The "court" is comprised of prison officials, the psychiatrist, the warden, the assistant warden, a lieutenant, a captain, and a physician. I report there each month, although I have asked them not to call me anymore unless their side is prepared to add something new to the talks. I guess you could say it's a stand-off.

Mark: Not exactly. You're not working.

How did the talks progress during the first few months?

Huey: At that time we did at least communicate. They asked me, "Mr. Newton, have you changed your position yet?"

I answered, "No."

There would be a moment's pause and then I would ask, "Gentlemen, have you changed your position yet?"

They would reply, "No."

I would then inform them that while I would be available for further

books that Huey be contaminated

talks and that angered them. After awhile I asked to be represented by counsel at these meetings. They call them courts. Of course, they took the position that prisoners were not entitled to counsel. Recently there was a decision in New York State. Are you familiar with it?

Mark: The Sostre case?

Huey: Right. And it holds that prisoners are entitled to counsel. We need to get so many lawyers in here to represent the men at all stages. Lawyers for all the prisoners, black and white. One first job in here is to break down the artificially induced animosity between the black and white prisoners. We are, all of us here, natural allies. If we stood together we could confront our natural enemy—the prison authorities.

Mark: Have you communicated with any other authorities at the prison?

Huey: I have had some contacts with my counselors.

Mark: What is a counselor?

Huey: He's supposed to see that you are making progress, adhering to the "program" that has been prescribed by the administration. They call him my counselor.

Mark: But he really is their counselor.

Huey: Right. I was assigned to Mr. Topper. He is an ex-cop. He sits in on what they call "group therapy." Civil service workers who are employed in the laundry and the bakery sit in as leaders in the "group therapy" sessions. Quite unqualified. They develop into sessions in which the prisoners try to put each other down for the benefit of the counselor who also sits in. The counselors play it that way. They create divisions. The kind of honesty that is required for a successful and helpful session would be relevant among a group of friends or an encounter group. But in a group where the prisoners harbor great hostility toward each other, often created by the prison, it is a harmful experience. Often the prison authorities deliberately create racial strife. Again they use the racial split. As long as there

with the prisoners who have been seen talking with me. He tells them that they will never get paroled if they are caught associating with me. Some men have been intimidated. Others, though, have not. A record is kept in their permanent file—in the jacket that goes to the Adult Authority every year. They place little items in there such as "He is Huey Newton's bodyguard" or "He is an organizer for the Black Panthers."

Mark: How do you know what is placed in the files?

Huey: The inmates control the prison as far as clerical work and running the plant is concerned. They run everything but the administration of the institution and, of course, security. As a result we have full access to the files.

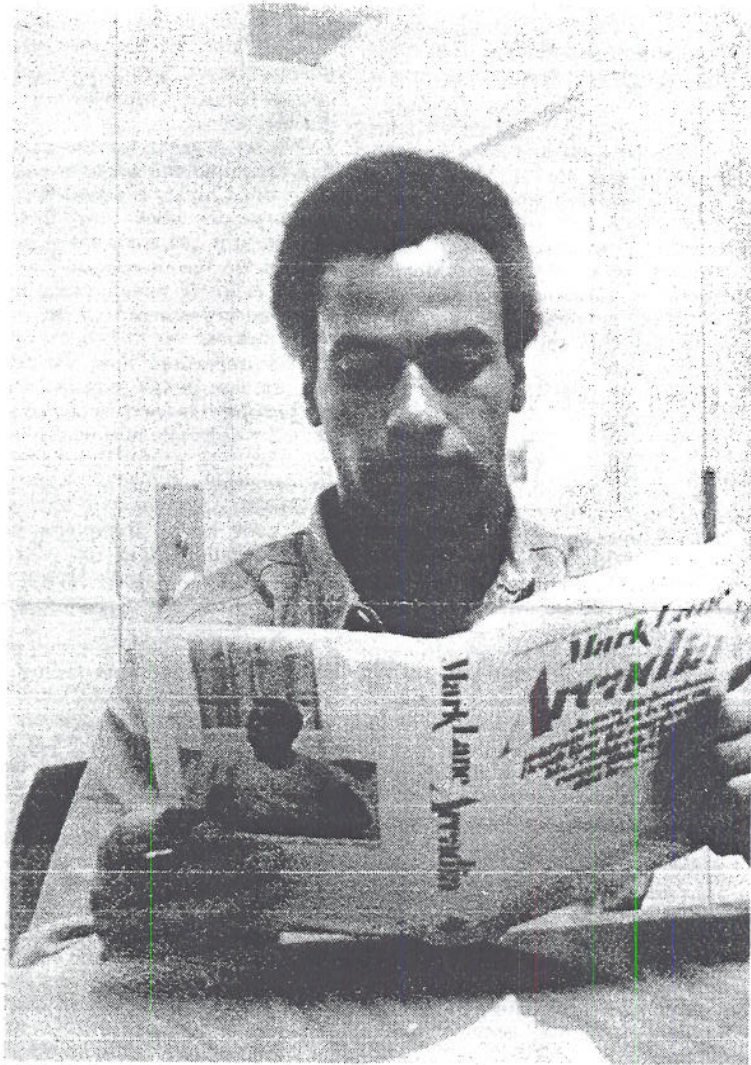
Mark: Did you confront Topper with that information?

Huey: Surely. I felt that there was an evident contradiction. Here he told the other prisoners not to associate with me; he sought to intimidate them, and at the same time the same counselor, along with the program superintendent, told me that I should join the "program" so that I could have more time to spend with my friends. I told them that it was hypocritical of them to take one position to my face and another behind my back. Topper said that he wanted to prevent me from "spreading poison" to the other inmates.

At about noon Charles, who had ordered three lunches for us, suggested that we might sit in the sun and enjoy them. The box lunches each contained fried chicken, a couple of biscuits, a canned peach in syrup and cole slaw. Since the chicken was tasty I asked Huey if the food for the prisoners was generally that good. He said that it was not but that it was edible. As we relaxed through the lunch I asked Huey how the authorities could punish him if he committed an infraction since he was locked up so much of the day anyway. He said that he could be placed in solitary. Charles said to him, "But Huey, I saw you since then and you never told me that." Huey, nonchalantly continued his lunch, looked up and said, "Oh, didn't I. I thought I had mentioned it." It could not have been clearer that the punishment was of no matter to Huey. As long as any man was in the hole, Huey was also.

Mark: How did you finally conclude your relationship with the Adult Authority and your counselor?

Huey: The last time I saw them was the day on which I had just



finished the 18 days in the hole. I report to the Board every year, and it was time to report again. They asked me why I refused to "program." I explained that I would not violate my integrity and my dignity as a man by participating in the exploitation of any human being, myself included. They asked me if I thought that I might be able to make some contribution to society. I told them that I thought that I could. Then they suggested that if I "programed," I could get out soon and make my contribution. I tried to explain to them that I could only make any contribution if I left the prison with my integrity intact. That if I was stripped of my dignity, then I would have no contribution to offer. I said that in the final analysis it would be better for me to leave prison after serving fifteen years with dignity than after serving two in craven servitude.

Mark: Did they ask you about your time in solitary?

Huey: Yes, they did. I had been sentenced to the hole for a little verbal altercation with a police officer. I had said that the officer was a habitual liar. He called me a son of a bitch, and I responded by calling him a mother-fucker, which seemed to upset him a bit. I went to the hole for 18 days for that. The Authority asked me if I felt good about calling the officer a mother-fucker. I told them that it

the hole?" I explained that I did like the hole better than the other accommodations. Then they wanted to know if I thought that I was normal. I asked them to define the term; they felt somewhat challenged by the request, but were unable to offer a satisfactory definition. Next they asked why I preferred the hole. I told them that I did not have to concern myself about housekeeping duties in the hole, that I could read and think and write all day. I explained that a guard came along quite regularly and that he was polite and respectful. So many of the prisoners there are on the verge of flipping out of their minds that the guards do everything they can to keep the place cool. It's quite tense there for many of the men. The guard came to my cell and asked, "Mr. Newton, need any towels today, clean clothing or toilet paper." I told the board that

I enjoyed the solitude and the service down there. And the absence of de-humanizing strip searches. In the hole you're just locked up and pretty much left alone. You are not being constantly harassed.

Mark: Did they ask if you were sorry that you spoke harshly to the officer?

Huey: Yes, they asked if I was sorry. If I thought that I had been immature by responding in that fashion. I agreed that both the officer and I had been immature. I said that I had been mature for a long time in their institution that was geared to crush a man's self respect and that in any event I had merely responded to the officer's provocation. They pointed out that I had first called him a habitual liar. I told them that since the officer was a habitual liar I could hardly be criticized for pointing it out to him. It was a serious flaw in his character which I thought I should call to his attention.

Mark: How do you feel about being isolated from the rest of the prisoners?

Huey: There are, of course, a few advantages to being in the main population. I could better organize there. However, there is a point being made by my being locked up in a cell. It integrates the theory and the practice. If the inmates here got the message they could close the whole institution down by doing nothing, by going on strike. Doing nothing is doing something in a situation where you constitute the majority. If the racial conflict can be solved and consciousness can be gained that it is not to their advantage to carry on racial struggles but to unite against the guards and the administration they could stop the prison from functioning. They could win any reasonable

demand, for the prison cannot run without the clerical work and the industries, both of which are carried on by the inmates.

Mark: Of course, the inmate may feel that if he is sentenced to "from two to ten years" he is placing his future in jeopardy by not cooperating.

Huey: That's what they may feel, but that feeling is entirely unrealistic. In the first place they have to release them to make way for the new prisoners who are arriving all the time or else spend millions of dollars building new prisons. Actually, if the prisoners all refused to work they'd get released sooner. It would cost too much to keep them here under those circumstances. But to realize this it takes a certain amount of consciousness and organization. We hope to have that in the near future through the programs we will be developing.

Mark: What programs?

Huey: One of the first matters that I am going to attend to when I get out is the bus program. We will purchase a bus and take the parents of the prisoners and other relatives to the prisons. Many of the prisons are so far away from urban areas that families cannot afford to visit the inmates. This can have a disastrous effect upon the men. The buses will be integrated. The families will get to know each other and through this effort we hope to begin to attack the racial conflicts. Organizers will give the families orientation talks on the buses. We hope to have regular visits, and the families will in all likelihood organize into a group, into a political force. The party members will organize this, but once the family units are meeting we will play a very small part. The parents and wives will have to have freedom to make their own decisions. Of course, the bus rides will be provided by the party without charge.

Mark: You've spent the last three years in jail, right?

Huey: Yes, this is correct.

Mark: In the course of our con-

versations in the last three days you have quoted passages from scores of books, some philosophical works, and recently published analyses of political situations. Since the rules here prohibit you from having any reading material in your possession that is not directly related to your case, how do you manage to be so well read?

Huey: Well, Mark, sometimes we break the rules a little.

Mark: Evidently, but how?

Huey: The other prisoners are permitted to be out of their cells until 10:00 P.M. Just before they are locked up several of them drop some books off at my cell. I read all night long, return the books early in the morning, and then sleep during the day.

The cops go home for the night and they leave just a skeleton force, one cop for each building. He is locked in the building himself. In order to get out he would have to make a phone call to control, a few blocks away. The cop doesn't want to go to the trouble of calling control, filing a report, waiting for someone to come over, unlock my cell and get the books. So I can read with comfort and immunity.

Mark: May I publish that?

Huey: Yes. The authorities assume that the prisoners who associate with me are highly political. Then they find out which books these men are reading; they confiscate the books and remove all copies of those books from the library.

Mark: In other words the prison authorities, unable to determine for themselves which books are "political," permit the prisoners to make that judgment for them.

Huey: Right. All that they haven't done so far is to burn them. So far as we know that is.

Mark: Who takes the books out of the library?

Huey: A group called the "goon-squad." They are special guards, most over six feet six inches tall and well over 200 pounds. As to their mental state and emotional development perhaps you know all there is to know when you know that

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