

CALIFORNIA'S CRISIS

California's prison system has a notorious history riddled with racism, torture, murder, mayhem, and corruption. Where once these institutions were nothing less than draconian dungeons, they now are the cornerstone to a multi-billion dollar conglomerate that entwines politics and poverty, gangsters and businessmen, and drugs and policing. From the state's oldest penitentiary in San Quentin to the newest, North Kern State Prison, California boasts an overwhelming nation-high 34 penal institutions with nearly 300,000 inmates. The sheer volume of lives affected and the money produced therefrom can only be a recipe for disaster.

The California prison movement was a mass mobilization of prisoners aimed at not only eradicating harsh and unjust sentencing, inhumane prison practices, and covert and overt racism within the institutions, but, it sought to address the root cause of the above social maladies in order to destroy and rebuild the system that birthed them. It is a movement that transcended these prison walls and racial lines uniting people from all walks of life around the common cause of freedom, justice, and human dignity.

In the 1960's the conditions of California's prisons were atrocious. Violence committed by inmates on other inmates, staff on inmates, and inmates on staff was prevalent. Racism was an intrinsic aspect of this system as white inmates were shown favor over inmates of color. Prison disciplinary practices could find one in an empty cell without a toilet, water, sink, bed, blanket, clothes, etc. Couple this with the fact that communication with the outside world was minimal, therefore, these problems seemed to have no end in sight.

During this time many inmates began to organize themselves along militant lines in order to resist the oppression handed down from prison officials. Violence now became more organized and purposeful on behalf of the prisoners as they sought to establish themselves as a force to be reckoned with. This all came to a head on a cold December morning on the exercise yard of Soledad's infamous O-Wing Adjustment Center in 1969.

After a year locked down due to racial tension prisoners were finally permitted access to the yard. As expected, a fight between black and white inmates ensued. Prison guards opened fire with live ammunition striking three black inmates, amongst them was W.L. Nolen, a known militant organizer. After delaying the emergency response team due to "securing" the scene, all three inmates bled to death on the yard, an act that "Buzzard" Harris, a self-proclaimed white racist inmate, denounced as "clearly racist".

This violence did not fail to go unanswered. The following January, a Soledad prison guard was found dead after being beaten and thrown off the third tier in Soledad's Central facility. Accused of the murder were three known militants John Clutchette, Fleeta Drumgo, and George Jackson, better known as the "Soledad Brothers".

The popularity of this case caught the attention of college students, professors, community organizations (Black Panther Party), and lawyers. Such activists and scholars such as Angela Davis, Bobby Seale, Huey P. Newton, John Gerassi, and Fay Stender all began to focus their attention on the prison situation.

The real call to action came from a seventeen year-old high school student from Pasadena, California.

Jonathan Jackson was a brilliant young man and staunch disciple of his brother George. Under the guidance of George, Jonathan became imbued with a social consciousness that spawned him to action. On August 7, 1970 armed with a cache of weapons, Jonathan Jackson raided a San Rafael Courthouse in an attempt to free his brother and co-defendants. While driving off with two black prisoners James McClain and Ruchell Magee, along with hostages taken from the courtroom, Jonathan was murdered by prison guards and police officers. So many bullets ripped through the van he was driving that along with Jonathan, two hostages, a judge and district attorney, and McClain, were killed as well.

This act and the release of George Jackson's world renowned book "Soledad Brother", a collection of his prison letters that gives a scathing account of U.S. justice, economics, and the racism embedded therein, pushed the prison movement to the forefront of the nation's headlines. Riding the wave of political uprising from the civil rights era to the anti-war movement many began to re-evaluate the purpose of prisons and the root cause of crime in America.

On August 21, 1971 George Jackson was assassinated by prison officials in an alleged escape attempt at San Quentin State Prison. He left behind a legacy that included his posthumously released book "Blood In My Eye" and a prison population that was committed to fighting for equality and human justice.

The Prisoner Bill of Rights was formed at Folsom State Prison shortly after Jackson's death as a tribute to the fallen freedom fighter and as a means to ensure fair and humane treatment of prisoners by staff.

The Black August Memorial is a month long fast by inmates to commemorate the lives of George and Jonathan Jackson as well as others who died for this noble cause.

The 1980's proved to be a turning point in the history of California's prison movement. The drug trade on the streets brought in an influx of new criminals, all less politicized and more greedy for personal gain. Gangs began to fractionalize the population giving prison officials the necessary ingredients to dispell the violence and resistance perpetuated against them.

Racial tension became an increasingly difficult problem as the lines became distinct between Black, Hispanic, and White inmates. There have been many instances where prison officials have been found to be cohorts of such activities as murder, drugs, prostitution, and weapons smuggling. In the early 1980's at Folsom State Prison inmates were given permission by staff to "clean house" meaning for nearly a year straight each race was allowed to rid themselves of less desirable convicts via stabbings in order to keep the violence against staff at a minimum.

The 1980's also witnessed the profitization of California's Department of Corrections. From 1985-1997, primarily under the authority of Director James Gomez, 22 prisons were constructed as law makers were forced to implement harsher penalties for the so-called "war on drugs". This lead to mass investment in prisons, in particular the newly formed crown jewel of the Department, Prison Industry Authority (P.I.A.), a manufacturing enterprise operated by inmate labor at menial wages.

In 1989 California's first super-maximum security prison was built in Crescent City. Pelican Bay State Prison was intended to house the most dangerous prisoners in the state. However, a federal investigation resulting from the Madrid vs Gomez case, found numerous instances of staff malpractice, cruel and unusual punishment, and even officials manipulating inmates towards violence.

Prison officials became increasingly powerful after the unionization of guards. The California Correctional Peace Officers Association has become the largest union in California as well as the most influential lobby. Guards, now having an enormous amount of political clout, are less likely to be fired, thereby, increasing the possibility for corruption.

Never was this more present than in 1994 at California State Prison- Corcoran where guards were found to be engaging in cold-blooded murder by setting up fights in the Security Housing Unit. When known gang enemies were placed on the same yard and began fighting, prison guards would open fire with live ammunition from twenty-feet above, killing the combatants. Even despite this revelation the CDC and CCPOA called for more prisons as a solution to growing inmate violence.

The prison population in California has increased nearly 400% since the late 1960's thanks in part to harsh drug laws, three-strikes, Marsy's Law, and even the PATRIOT ACT. Today the state is claiming to be broke and has slashed numerous rehabilitational programs. However, though there is much blame to be placed on prison officials for curtailing the prison movement, ~~one can't~~ help but acknowledge the fact that prisoners themselves have, to a certain extent, dropped the ball. Gangs, drugs, cooperating with the administration, etc. have replaced the emphasis on personal development mentally, physically, and spiritually. Education has diminished when once it had been the cornerstone of the movement. We must recognize that for all the changes the prisons have seen over the years, nothing can compare to the mental shift towards frivolity and subservience.

The 1960's and '70's produced staunch, disciplined brothers who resisted oppression through education. The conditions dealt with at that time were far more demeaning and demoralizing physically, yet, they continued to strive for excellence. Today the conditions are mentally defeating as prisoners are lead to believe that they live well relative to their predecessors and, therefore, feel no longer a need to struggle. The damage to the human intellect and spirit cannot be measured in numbers, yet, when called to give an honest assessment of where we are and from where we came, we can't help but notice a disturbing trend.

This piece was written for all the men who have been eternally transformed by the prison experience. The broken men who, although they may be walking and talking amongst us, are mentally and spiritually dead. These are the ones who, as George Jackson said, "have that thing in their eyes; defeat stamped across their forehead."

DARE TO STRUGGLE, DARE TO WIN!

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