

PART IV

**Challenges
to the System**

From Riot to Revolution

by John Pallas and Robert Barber

The deaths of forty-one persons at Attica and six at San Quentin in 1971 brought home to America the fact that social revolution has come to the prisons. This discovery was surprising and shocking to most Americans, yet it need not have been. The social history of the country can be as well understood by examining the prison as by examining any other American institution.

Prisons are society's ultimate means of control over people who are actually or potentially disruptive of the social order. Thus, any resistance which poses a serious threat to the prison threatens the entire society as well. The prison's capacity to achieve this goal of control rests largely on its ability to reduce prisoners to active accomplices or passive recipients of their own oppression.

The ideology and composition of prisoner resistance has changed dramatically over the past twenty years. In order to best understand these changes it is necessary to examine not only the evolution of the prison movement itself but also the wider struggle within American society.

Three types of prison struggle occurred during the period 1950-1971: the traditional prison riot such as those which were widespread during the 1950s; the organizing of black prisoners

by the Nation of Islam; and the revolutionary upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s. This is not to say that the progression from one type to another was inevitable, or that other important things have not been happening in prisons during this period. Earlier forms of prison struggle still exist, and many prisoners continue to be apolitical. Nevertheless, the events at Attica and elsewhere suggest a radically new dimension in prison resistance, a dimension which has implications for the wider revolutionary movement and for state repression.

On the one hand, participants in the prison movement such as Malcolm X and George Jackson have provided models of leadership for the movement as a whole. Their writings have illuminated for millions of people the nature of American society and its legal system. On the other hand, the repression of political rebellion in prisons is connected to the repression of other rebellious domestic groups (such as the Black Panthers) and of people's movements in Latin America and Southeast Asia. There are, therefore, practical and analytical insights to be gained from an examination of rebellion by prisoners.

Any discussion of prison riots and strikes must be conducted in the framework of a political analysis. If "political" events are those dealing with the existing arrangements of power, then clearly acts that stem from the powerlessness of prisoners are political. Such powerlessness is rooted in the social and economic structure of the society. The lack of a political articulation of prisoners' grievances by no means negates their political nature. Even acts rooted in psychological despair, such as self-mutilation, are expressions of an unarticulated political revolt.¹

RIOTS IN THE EARLY 1950s

More than 50 major riots occurred in American prisons between 1950 and 1953; until the disturbances of the 1970s, the

1. See Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), especially the chapter entitled "Colonial War and Mental Disorders."

early fifties were characterized as the worst period ever for American prison administration.² These riots and strikes were largely spontaneous uprisings against intolerable living conditions. Such uprisings have often occurred in prisons and continue to occur today. Yet the increase in their intensity in the early fifties presaged the current period of organized political rebellion, for the inability of the system to respond to their demands created the conditions in which more radical ideas could take root.

The riot of April, 1952, at Jackson state prison in Michigan was typical of these upheavals. Two prisoners overpowered a guard, took his keys, and released the other prisoners in the maximum-security wing. They smashed up several wings of the prison and liberated the canteen to provide food. For five days they held hostages at knifepoint, refusing to release them until officials agreed to hear their grievances and publish them in the local newspaper. The demands, quickly formulated after the riot began, were as follows:

1. 15-block (the maximum-security wing) be remodeled to provide for adequate lighting and treatment facilities.
2. Counselors have free access to the disciplinary cells in the 15-block.
3. Segregation (solitary confinement) policies be revised, and a member of the individual treatment staff be given a position on the segregation board.
4. Only guards who would not be inhumane in their treatment be picked for duty in the 12-block (reserved for epileptic, semimentally disturbed, blind, handicapped, and senile cases).
5. The carrying of dangerous hand weapons and inhumane restraint equipment by guards be prohibited.

2. Richard McCleary, "Correctional Administration and Political Change," in Lawrence Hazlerigg (ed.), *Prison Within Society* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968), p. 130.

6. Adequate and competent personnel for handling mental cases, and more adequate screening of such cases.
7. A letter on prison stationery be sent to the parole board asking for a revision of procedures to give equal treatment to all parolees.
8. Postoperative care be given under the direction of the medical director (instead of by prisoner technicians).
9. Equal opportunities for dental care for all prisoners, with special regard to the elimination of special buying preferences.
10. Creation of a permanent council elected by prisoners, to confer periodically with prison officials.
11. No reprisals against any leader or participant in the revolt.

The uprising ended when officials agreed to publish the demands, allow an outside group to inspect the prison, and not take action against the participants. But eventually the leaders were indicted for conspiracy and almost none of the demands were met. Things continued at Jackson much as before.

A number of generalizations can be drawn from the Jackson revolt. It was unplanned and uncoordinated. The demands put forward reflected the day-to-day needs of the prisoners. They dealt with internal conditions and problems of survival, and their accomplishment would have materially improved the prisoners' lives. Despite their narrow focus, these demands were in fact political, because they were demands for social justice.

The pattern of leadership at Jackson is indicative of the level of organization in this type of riot. A white prisoner named Earl Ward imposed his leadership upon the group when it became clear that internal fighting and disorganization needed to be controlled. He prevented prisoners from attacking the hostages and supervised the formulation of the demands. He decided when the group should surrender, although a number of his fellow prisoners clearly disagreed with his decision.

In general, the leadership of such revolts was white, although

blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Chicanos participated. The leaders were generally prisoners feared or respected for their toughness; power accrued to them by default. Rarely, however, would they use their position to their own personal advantage. The apparent unity of the moment usually concealed intense personal or racial hatreds, which the leaders, through force or personal persuasion, had to control in order to prevent the revolt from disintegrating.

Once such outbreaks were under way, the prisoners would often willingly negotiate with certain members of the prison staff whom they regarded as sympathetic to their cause. Such individuals were usually members of the "treatment" staff, such as psychiatrists and counselors. These trusted individuals had great influence over the leaders. At Jackson, prison psychiatrist Vernon Fox convinced the prisoners to modify some of their demands. He also convinced them that the officials were sincere in their promises of change. After the revolt was over, Fox wrote an article in *Collier's* entitled "How I Crushed the Prison Riot."

State and prison officials faced conflicting pressures during such disruptions, but the question was a tactical one: whether to crush the revolt with force or to bring it to an end through empty negotiations. Whichever method was chosen, the results were the same, and the prisoners accomplished little or nothing. The lessons of such experiences were not lost on them, however.

The tenor of the demands and political thrust of these riots and strikes was consistent with the general forms of challenge to American society which occurred in the 1950s and early 1960s, especially the civil rights movement. Likewise, officials of the state used essentially the same means of containing and suppressing prison revolts as they did for the larger civil rights movement.

During the period between 1950 and 1960 the mechanisms of social control in American society appeared to be working

fairly well, and few significant political groups disputed the legitimacy of the social order. Those groups who had not yet shared in the general wealth were seeking to be included. The accompanying political style was "pluralism": various political groups attempted to bring pressure on the authorities to fulfill their obligations as defined by the prevailing system. In this sense, both the prison movement of the time and the civil rights movement were expressions of the same impulse. They were aimed at eliminating explicit practices and customs which were seen as antithetical to American democracy. They challenged the abuse of power rather than its nature.

The goal of the civil rights movement was the integration of black people into the mainstream of American life. In prisons, at this time, the notion of "rehabilitation" was gaining credence. This notion implied that prisoners were "deviant" and in need of treatment which would enable them to "adjust properly" to the existing society. The demands for an increase in the role of treatment officials in prison life and the trust shown those officials by prisoners during their uprisings indicate that prisoners tended to place hope in the idea of rehabilitation. In this sense, rehabilitation and integration were identical—they both posit the adaptation of individuals to the social structure which opens up to receive them.

Although the civil rights movement attempted to bring change through established channels such as the courts and the legislature, its cutting edge was the use of direct action, undertaken with the faith that the federal government would back it up. Effectively closed off from the legal channels of change outside prisons, prisoners also turned to direct action to influence their institutions. Their faith in at least part of that institutional structure (the treatment staff) indicates that they still granted some legitimacy to the power exercised over them.

Both movements met with similar response from the state. Violence was used routinely to break up civil rights actions and prison revolts. The civil rights movement, able to enlist the

support of various segments of the population, achieved limited progress through the legal system. With no outside constituency at this time, prisoners were unable to prevent prison officials from revoking promised reforms after a rebellion was over. In the short run, both civil rights and prison dissent were crushed or coopted. Such responses by the state, however, only laid the groundwork for more radical challenges to the society and its prisons.

BLACK MUSLIMS

During the time that these essentially reformist efforts were being made, political activity was being carried out in another way among black people by the Nation of Islam. A high degree of organization and discipline enabled this group to reach large numbers of blacks on both sides of the walls. Although their organizational talents were important in gaining recruits, the most significant element in their success was the fact that their philosophy spoke to the anger and frustration of poor blacks, and especially black prisoners.

This philosophy stood in sharp contrast to that of the mainstream of the civil rights movement, which was essentially geared to integrating middle-class and professional blacks into the existing society and to bringing poor southern blacks into minimal participation in the political system. Little attention was paid to the cities of the North, where racism seemed less naked than in the South.

The Black Muslims, however, concentrated their organizing in the northern urban ghettos and in the prisons. Instead of attempting to obliterate race consciousness, they taught that black people should be aware of their group identity and collective oppression. Their ultimate objective was the creation of a separate black nation. They viewed prisons as a place of recruitment for new members of this nation, rather than as a point of political struggle in its own right. Their demands focused on the

requirements of the religion, not on general prison conditions.

Central to their philosophy was the notion that blacks as a group were victims of white society, that the miseries they faced were not the result of their own personal deficiencies. Muslim organizers within prison always stressed this point: "The black prisoner, he [Elijah Muhammad, the Muslim leader] said, symbolized white society's crime of keeping black men oppressed and deprived and ignorant, and unable to get decent jobs, turning them into criminals."³

Muslims generally came from the same class background as most black prisoners: the unemployed or irregularly employed working class. Their philosophy appealed to this class, the class that had the least hope of benefiting from the assimilationist approach of the civil rights movement. The Muslims spoke more realistically about the nature of prisons for blacks than did the (white) leaders of the spontaneous uprisings of the time. Thus, the Muslims recruited large numbers of black prisoners to their movement, and fewer and fewer participated in the general riots and strikes.

Their chief mode of organizing was through personal contact. Because of their class background, many Muslims were at one time or another in prison. Once in prison they devoted their full time to contacting and organizing other blacks. Muslims on the outside wrote continuously to prisoners, espousing the Muslim philosophy. Prisoners were encouraged to write to Elijah Muhammad; they always received a personal reply and literature. Malcolm X became a Muslim while in prison through continued correspondence with his family and Elijah Muhammad.⁴

Throughout the early part of the 1950s, the Muslims remained more or less "underground" in prisons, educating new

3. Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), p. 169.

4. *Ibid.*, especially the chapters entitled "Satan" and "Saved."

recruits and building an organization. By the late fifties, they had the allegiance or sympathy of most black prisoners, and began pushing their demands. The demands were few: the right to hold religious meetings, the right to purchase the Koran, the right to build a mosque, and the right to receive visits from Muslims outside.

The organization, discipline, and unity which backed those demands presented a threat to the prison's goal of isolating prisoners from one another. The organization was based on complete loyalty to the philosophy and way of life of the Nation. Each prison mosque was rigidly structured along the lines of the mosques outside, with clearly delineated channels of authority. The prisoner-minister was recognized both by his followers in the prison and by the Muslim hierarchy outside as the leader of the Muslims in prison.

These ministers were trained to prevent violence on the part of Muslims. No acts of violence or retaliation against white guards or inmates were permitted. Eldridge Cleaver relates,

After the death of Brother Booker T. X., who was shot dead by a San Quentin guard, and who at the time had been my cell partner and the inmate Minister of the Muslims at San Quentin, my leadership had been publicly endorsed by Elijah Muhammad's west coast representative, Minister John Shabazz of Muhammad's Los Angeles Mosque. This was done because of the explosive conditions in San Quentin at the time. Muslim officials wanted to avert any Muslim-initiated violence, which had become a distinct possibility in the aftermath of Brother Booker's death. I was instructed to impose iron discipline upon the San Quentin Mosque. . . .⁵

The official policy of refraining from violence despite provocation was in part imposed because violence was seen as suicidal: the Muslims were afraid of creating a situation which could be used as an excuse for the mass killing of their number by guards.

5. Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), p. 57.

More importantly, however, this decision grew from Muslim attitudes toward the prisons. They wanted as many new recruits as possible to be active in their communities; the goal was to get them out on the streets safely.

Two essential tactics, strikes and lawsuits, were used by the Muslims to achieve their demands within the prison. Strikes were usually called in the aftermath of a particular incident. After the killing of a Muslim by a San Quentin guard in 1967, the Muslims called a work strike and demanded the prosecution of the guard. They also reiterated their central demands for religious freedom. Their primary tactic, however, was the use of lawsuits to force the prisons to grant them this freedom. They invariably lost the suits, but turned the losses to political advantage by pointing to the biased nature of the court system.

In dealing with the Muslims, the goal of prison officials was primarily to break up the Muslim organization. Meetings were disrupted, ministers continually transferred from prison to prison, Muslims routinely placed in isolation, and communication with the outside cut off. State and prison officials publicly portrayed the Muslims as violent fanatics who posed the gravest threat not only to the prison system but to the society as a whole.

Although the Muslims declined in influence in the mid-1960s, a positive legacy of their work remained. They helped destroy the barriers to political consciousness which have impeded prisoners in previous attempts to struggle against their oppression. The Muslims introduced disciplined organization among prisoners, the idea that collective action could be taken to achieve desired goals. They also introduced the notion of collective oppression to black prisoners, which counteracted the prison ideology of individual pathology. Although they located the source of that oppression in the "white devil" and his institutions rather than in specific class-related institutions, their insistence upon the collective nature of that oppression marked an important step in the transformation of black consciousness. In

addition, the Muslims brought with them the notion that outside support for a movement inside could strengthen that movement. Finally, the Muslims brought with them models of successful anticolonial struggles in Africa. They could point to the newly independent African nations as examples of self-determination for black people in struggle against white oppression. This development was crucial for the continuing growth among black prisoners of their self-conception as people involved in a worldwide struggle, and it placed them firmly in the vanguard of the new prisoners' movement. As Malcolm X once pointed out, "The first thing the American power structure doesn't want any Negroes to start is thinking *internationally*."⁶

The immediate causes of the Muslims' decline in influence in the mid-1960s lay in the nature of the Muslim religion and movement itself. The split between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad in 1963 led to an uncertainty about the future of the Muslims. Furthermore, the Muslims had promised that Allah was coming to deliver blacks from the white devils; Allah's failure to appear caused a great deal of disillusionment with the theological analysis of the Nation of Islam. And finally, the Muslims' refusal to define prisons as a point of struggle alienated many new converts who needed legal support and wanted action in prison. As prisoners grew in political sophistication, they became increasingly aware that the Muslim philosophy of nationalism with its religious emphasis was reactionary and inappropriate for the prison struggle. The Muslim preoccupation with separatism and black racial superiority played right into the hands of the administrators who wanted nothing more than to keep black and white prisoners divided. What the black and white inmates needed, in fact, was to unite with one another in opposition to the prison administration. Malcolm's changed analysis of racism after his 1965 trip to Mecca forced many

6. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, p. 347.

Muslims to reexamine their own attitudes toward this issue. Malcolm wrote of his changed perceptions, "The white man is *not* inherently evil, but America's racist society influences him to act evilly. The society has produced and nourishes a psychology which brings out the lowest, most base part of human beings."7 Malcolm's special appeal to black prisoners gave his change of mind a special impact. Cleaver later wrote:

Many of us were shocked and outraged by these words from Malcolm X, who had been a major influence upon us all and the main factor in many of our conversions to the black Muslims, but there were those of us who were glad to be liberated from a doctrine of hate and racial supremacy. The onus of teaching racial supremacy and hate, which is the white man's burden, is pretty hard to bear.⁸

THE REVOLUTIONARY PRISON MOVEMENT

In the wake of the decline of the Muslims between 1964 and 1967, the prisoners' movement underwent fundamental changes in its political thrust. The bitter lessons of the fruitless riots of the 1950s and the inability of the Muslims to relate to specific prison struggles left the prisoners open to new influences and new forms of struggle more consistent with the state of society and the movement of opposition to it. Changing conditions in the United States and around the world during this period laid the groundwork for the rise of a revolutionary movement in prisons.

During this period the contradictions within American society had become increasingly clear. Unable to respond to the rising pressure for reform, the system turned increasingly to the repression of its challengers, the advocates of Black Power and the antiwar movement. The war in Vietnam and the intervention in the Dominican Republic revealed the roots of American

7. *Ibid.*, p. 371.

8. *Soul on Ice*, pp. 56-57.

foreign policy in imperialism and its concomitant racism. In this context, opposition to the state grew more radical and militant, and was met with increasing repression.

In the spiral of challenge and retrenchment, of revolution and repression, new political movements in the U.S. and around the world appeared: a Black Power movement expressed in ghetto riots and the growth of the Black Panther party; an anti-imperialist movement among white students and intellectuals manifested in campus revolt; Third World liberation groups rooted in local communities; and revolutionary movements in Indochina, Latin America, and Africa. These groups articulated an understanding of the interrelationships of domestic and foreign repression, of the role of racism as an ideology used to divide people of different races in the interest of economic exploitation, and of the necessity for international solidarity among the victims of imperialism. They proceeded to act upon these analyses, thus providing models of revolutionary theory and practice, and a general atmosphere of confrontation for prisoners.

The impact upon prisoners of these developments in the outside world cannot be overestimated. Nonwhite prisoners especially made quick connections between their struggles inside and the struggles of oppressed peoples around the world. These prisoners were joined by an influx of new prisoners, imprisoned for radical activities. Black, Puerto Rican, Chicano, and other nonwhite men and women active in radical movements, and an increasing number of whites arrested for offenses stemming from their opposition to the Indochina war, brought their politics and organizing talent to prisons.

Since 1964, then, the prison struggle has consciously become a part of an international struggle. Among the political leadership inside prisons, the need for interracial unity and political education and organizing has become accepted. Putting the new precepts into practice, however, has been more difficult, for prison and state officials have not stood by to let these devel-

opments happen of their own accord. Prisoners have had to overcome their own backgrounds of hate and mistrust. This attempt is paralleled on the outside by the increasing number of street gangs of white and Third World youth who have buried their former conflicts and turned to political activity in their communities.

Prison authorities have never hesitated to exploit racism as a divisive element to further their control of prisoners. Interracial violence continues, often encouraged or ignored from above. Such conflict, however, has been increasingly repudiated by a growing united front of black, brown, and white prisoners.

The situation at San Quentin prison in California provides a model for the changing nature of revolt during this period. A massive race riot in January, 1967, involving nearly half of the 4,000 prisoners, resulted in cautious attempts at reconciliation by prisoner leaders. The self-defeating nature of such violence was acknowledged by the inmates, and truces were arranged between various black and white groups. An underground newspaper called the *Outlaw* began publication. It attacked the prison system and called for unity among the prisoners.

Within a year, open racial hostility had nearly ended, and a united general strike in early 1968 caused the shutdown of nearly all of the prison industries. At this point, officials moved to break up the incipient organizing by transferring suspected leaders to other prisons and increasing the general harassment of everyone. (The facilities of the *Outlaw* were discovered, although the paper continued to be occasionally published outside and smuggled in.)

The degree of prisoner participation and outside support of a second strike on Unity Day in August, 1968, brought an investigation of grievances by a legislative committee, as well as further repression by the prison administration. Guards began passing out weapons and manufacturing threats among antagonistic racial groups. They clamped down on all prison activities,

and again transferred the leaders. Within months unity had dissolved into racial killings and polarization.⁹ But the precedent of unity had been set.

Three more recent prison revolts indicate a greater ability on the part of prisoners to deal with the problem of racism, and provide insights into the nature of the new prison movement. Each new revolt draws upon the experience of previous revolts and invokes the memory of earlier struggles; each revolt provides an inspiration for the next.

In early October, 1970, prisoners took over the Long Island branch of the Queens House of Detention, immediately touching off similar revolts in other city jails around New York. At Long Island a number of hostages were taken and a list of demands issued. The central demands concerned bail and speedier trials. Members of the prisoners' negotiating committee which presented the demands identified themselves only as "revolutionaries." The committee included four blacks, one Puerto Rican, and one white. They demanded immediate bail hearings on forty-seven cases they had selected as examples of the racism involved in the granting of bail. A group of individuals with whom the inmates had asked to meet attempted to persuade them to give up this demand and release the hostages.¹⁰ In addition, Mayor John Lindsay attempted to assure them that such a demand was unnecessary because a complete review of the bail system was to be undertaken in the courts "within a week." He also suggested that force would be used immediately if the prisoners did not capitulate. The prisoners refused to be persuaded or intimidated. Victor Martinez of the negotiating committee told newsmen, "Unless that pig judge

9. See Robert Minton and Stephen Rice, "Race War at San Quentin," *Ramparts*, vol. 18, no. 7, Jan., 1970.

10. Herman Badillo, a former Bronx borough president, Representative Shirley Chisolm of Brooklyn, Manuel Caseano, former executive director of the office of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, Louis Farakham, a Black Muslim minister, and George McGrath, New York Corrections Commissioner.

appears here you will never see those hostages alive."¹¹ Subsequently, three state supreme court judges held hearings inside the jail on thirteen cases; nine paroles and four reductions in bail were granted.

Several of the demands related to the Panther 21, then in jail on conspiracy charges and unable to pay the high bail.¹² A number of these Panthers were involved in the revolt. After the bail hearings, the hostages were released, but some prisoners continued to hold out for the demand of a "jury of peers" for the Panthers and for bail for one of the defendants. The issues of bail and lengthy pretrial detention had been chosen not only to assist the Panthers but also to dramatize to the public the interrelationships among political repression, racism, and the refusal to grant reasonable bail. At this point, officials ordered the police to storm the jail with tear gas and clubs, and the revolt was crushed.

Within a month, in November of 1970, a work stoppage began in Folsom prison. It grew into the longest and most nonviolent prison strike in the history of this country. Nearly all 2,400 prisoners held out in their own cells for 19 days in the face of constant hunger, discomfort, and continued psychological and physical intimidation.

They issued a 31-point "Manifesto of Demands and Anti-Oppression Platform," labeling prisons the "Fascist Concentration Camps of Modern America," and calling for "an end to the injustice suffered by all prisoners, regardless of race, creed, or color." The demands focused on the denial of political and legal rights to prisoners and the exploitative nature of work programs inside the prison.

11. *New York Times*, Oct. 3, 1970, p. 58.

12. In 1969 twenty-one black men and women were arrested on 156 counts of "conspiracy to commit murder," "arson," and various other charges. The Panther 21 trial, perhaps the longest criminal trial in the history of the United States, ended when the jury acquitted all the defendants of all 156 charges after deliberating for only 90 minutes.

In the months prior to the strike, interracial cooperation had been building among the prisoners. The Muslim group offered their help to Chicanos in holding a memorial service for a Chicano journalist killed by police in Los Angeles. After the service a number of the participants were attacked by prison guards and the Muslim minister was officially rebuked for having conducted the service.

After the strike began, the prisoners designated certain members of the radical community outside the prison to represent them in negotiations with authorities.¹³ Prison officials refused to meet with these negotiators and even refused to admit that a united strike was occurring.

After nineteen days the strike was finally broken through a combination of force and deception. One prisoner described the collapse this way:

The strike was broken *not* because the prisoners had become disenchanted. The Collective Spirit and optimism were too real to make me believe that the prisoners went to work as a result of disillusionment. Two thousand men don't strike for 19 days and then suddenly become disenchanted. Only the most naïve fools would believe that such a thing could happen. Therefore it is only logical that devils means were employed to break the strike.

It is clear as crystal that Craven [the warden at Folsom] used political deception and brute force to get the prisoners to go back to work. On the 23rd of November [Monday morning, the day the strike was broken] the prison pigs, armed with rifles and wooden clubs, stopped in front of each man's cell and ordered each man back to work. Of course the order was weighted down with the threat of violence. Not wanting to be shot or clubbed to death, the prisoner naturally complied with the pigs' vicious method of brute force.

In Building One, one of Craven's inmate agents drew up

13. Sal Candelaria (Brown Berets), Huey P. Newton (Black Panther party), Charles Garry (Third World Legal Defense Counsel), and a representative from the California Prisoners' Union.

several reactionary leaflets and circulated them throughout the building [Building One is where "Kitchen Row" is located]. The leaflets, which were passed from cell to cell by the inmates, said that the kitchen workers were supposed to go back to work so that the prisoners could start eating hot meals. Because so many legitimate leaflets and notes were being circulated throughout Building One, the inmates in that building naturally assumed that those reactionary leaflets were the real thing. This was the method used to get the kitchen workers back to work.¹⁴

After the suppression of the strike, four prisoners were singled out for a brutal 14-hour ride to another prison, shackled and naked on the floor of a van. Another 52 were thrown into the hole. In spite of all this, many prisoners felt that the strike was a success. One prisoner wrote:

The strike may have fallen short of our goal, but it was not a failure. We accomplished something that has never been accomplished before. Not just the record length, but more important is that the spirit of awareness has grown, and our people begin to look around and see what's happening. The seed has been planted and grows. If we have accomplished nothing else, we have accomplished this. Let this knowledge at least console you from the disheartening news you received that the strike was broke.¹⁵

The demands of the Folsom strike became the model (sometimes on a word-for-word basis) for the demands of the striking prisoners at Attica state prison in Attica, New York. The Attica Liberation Front had been formed in May, 1971, around 29 demands centering on prisoners' rights to organize politically and economically, and on living and working conditions. Included was a demand that the warden be fired. A negotiating committee met with officials several times, but the officials did nothing about the prisoners' grievances.

14. Eve Pell (ed.), *Maximum Security* (New York: Dutton, 1972), pp. 206-207.

15. From a letter to an Oakland, California, attorney.

On September 9 several hundred prisoners captured the prison yard and seized numerous guards as hostages. Their numbers swelled immediately to 1,500, and two demands were added to the original list: transportation to a nonimperialist country for those who wished it (later dropped), and total amnesty for participants in the action. Discipline and an operating support system were quickly organized in the yard. Leadership was chosen from the Panthers, Young Lords, Muslims, radical whites, and other groups.

Negotiations around the demands soon came down to the issues of amnesty and the resignation of the warden. These demands put into focus the political nature of the revolt. If granted, they would have established the precedents that prisoners have a right to participate in (if not control) the process of choosing who rules them, and that they have a right to rebel without fear of punishment. Both prisoners and officials knew that these issues were at stake and that the implications went far beyond the walls of Attica.

The demand for amnesty in particular indicates the political progression of prisoner revolts from twenty years earlier. Increasingly, the demand for a guarantee against reprisal is being replaced by a demand for amnesty. The term "amnesty" denotes a relationship between political actors; the term "reprisal" implies a power relationship independent of specific political conditions. More important than the semantics is the fact that amnesty is becoming one of the central demands in prisoner revolts. It was over this demand that the Attica negotiations broke down. Inmates and administrators alike are coming to realize the political significance of this demand. Prisoners are no longer looking only for personal protection; they are seeking the legitimization of a political tool.

The prisoners at Attica had no trust in the officials they were dealing with. From past experience they knew that whatever promises were made by the warden would later be revoked;

hence the demands for his removal had implications beyond his personality. The prisoners' only hope lay with whatever power the Observers Committee may have had to win concessions for them and to follow them up. In the end it was shown that the committee had no power; it was not even informed of the impending attack by state troopers.

In the short period of its heyday, the Attica Liberation Front exemplified several aspects of the new prison revolution. The overcoming of mistrust and hatred between black and white prisoners was the crucial development which allowed the Attica prisoners to live by their slogan, "The Solution Is Unity." All reports indicate that there was complete racial harmony in the yard. Journalist Tom Wicker, a member of the Observers Committee, noted: "The racial harmony that prevailed among the prisoners—it was absolutely astonishing. . . . That prison yard was the first place I have ever seen where there was no racism."¹⁶

Following the crushing of the rebellion, forty prisoners were thrown into segregation and charged with numerous "crimes." One of them told a lawyer:

They don't realize how they're helping us. They think they're slick, but we get tighter and stronger every day. Hell, we don't even want to go back to the general population. Up here we're all together, we can keep our eyes out for each other so they don't rip us off one at a time. I never thought whites could really get it on. . . . But I can't tell you what the yard was like. I actually cried it was so close, everyone so together. Now we're more united than ever, and the longer we stay together, the tighter we get. Everything they do, they're helping us.¹⁷

16. Tom Wicker wrote a number of articles for the *New York Times* about the Attica uprising in which he stressed the racial solidarity that prevailed. One of the most interesting was "Unity: A Haunting Echo from Attica," *New York Times*, Sept. 15, 1971, p. 1.

17. Cited by Gus Reichbach, in "Attica: War Behind Walls," *University Review*, no. 22 (1972), p. 5.

A week after the massacre, prisoners at Attica smuggled out a statement discussing the revolt and placing it in the context of a revolutionary struggle against American capitalism. The statement concluded, "These brothers whose lives were taken by Rockefeller and his agents did not die in vain. Why? Because the uprising at Attica did not begin here nor will it end here."¹⁸

The revolutionary prison movement, still in its infancy, has several characteristics, then, which set it apart from earlier movements. To the traditional and still unwon demands for decent food, shelter, and health care have been added demands that challenge both the ideology and the structure of the prison system and larger society. Prisoners are collectively articulating what was once expressed in a less eloquent way by loosely knit groups of individuals. The leadership of these collective groups is based on mutual consent and an apportioning of responsibilities among various racial and political groups, as an indication not only of the strategy of unity but also as a concrete manifestation of its practicality. Organizing inside the prison is around education: education involving the acquisition of simple tools such as reading and writing, and education involving the sophisticated political writings of past and present revolutionaries. The new movement addresses its demands to the people of the world, calling on them to assist in their own liberation through support for prisoners. The movement operates in conjunction with outside support groups and groups of ex-prisoners who see their task as bringing support to the prisoners in whatever way possible. As George Jackson concluded: "Only the prison movement has shown any promise of cutting across the ideological, racial, and cultural barricades that have blocked the natural coalition of left-wing forces at all times in the past. So this movement must

18. *Berkeley Tribe*, vol. 6, no. 8 (Oct. 1-7, 1971), p. 10.

be used to provide an example for the partisans engaged at other levels of struggle."¹⁹ In addition, these outside groups focus independent attacks on the prison system, the court system, the legal and medical professions, and the corporate system, all of which contribute to and benefit from the exploitation of prisoners. For example, the Medical Committee for Human Rights is investigating the use of drugs to tranquilize and torture militant prisoners and the use of prisoners for testing new drugs by the multibillion-dollar drug industry.

The crucial measure of the advancement represented by the current movement in prisons is its level of political articulation. The rioters of the 1950s were not conscious of the similarities between their protest and protest in the larger society. Today's revolutionaries are not only conscious of that connection, but strive to make it more complete. The current movement offers a class analysis of American society which sees prisons not only as an institution for class control in the United States but also as part of the global system of class control called imperialism. The movement grounds its activity in this analysis and is based on interracial and international solidarity. It represents the development of the revolutionary potential of the most exploited part of the working class, the wretched of the earth, with that forsaken class providing both leadership and analysis for the larger movement. To the degree that these things are true, even in the face of incredible repression, the prisoners' struggle today is in the forefront of the revolutionary movement in America.

As prisoners have moved from riot toward revolution, the state has responded with intensified repression. At this point, the direction that this repression will take is not completely clear, although it is clear that it is linked with the intensified repression in the society in general: the death of George Jackson in San

19. George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 109.

Quentin, for example, immediately brings to mind the murders of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in Chicago.²⁰

The indications are that the basic technique of preventing rebellion will continue to be the pitting of prisoners against each other, particularly along racial lines. Promises of early parole and good treatment and threats of torture or denial of parole will be used against prisoners to prevent them from participating in political activity. When such tactics fail and a revolt does occur, the prison will continue to turn to intense repression to deal with the situation: transfers, torture, assassination, officially sponsored racial violence, and other forms of crisis management.

The use of differential rewards and punishments to prevent prisoners from cooperating with militants may still work, since all prisoners are at the mercy of the system and not all are strong enough to resist completely. But an increasing number of prisoners are turning their backs on bribes and threats. And because of increased public consciousness and alertness about prisons, especially after the murders at Attica and San Quentin, it is becoming more difficult for prison officials to hide or defend the practice of mass murder and torture behind the walls.

Because of these developments, the prison system is looking for new techniques of dealing with disturbances. A dim outline of the "prison of the future" is emerging. It is based on the application of sophisticated techniques of medicine and social

20. On December 4, 1970, fourteen special police, acting on the orders of State's Attorney Edward Hanrahan, raided the Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther party. Deputy Chairman Fred Hampton was murdered by the police while he slept, and Mark Clark, also a Black Panther, was critically wounded and died shortly thereafter. Hanrahan described the incident as a shoot-out, and said police fired only after the Black Panthers had fired several volleys at the police. However, subsequent investigations revealed that the police had fired approximately 99 shots, and that the Panthers *might* have fired one shot. As other evidence was uncovered, it became clear that Hanrahan had lied and that Hampton and Clark had not been killed in a "shoot-out" but rather had been deliberately murdered. Despite the efforts of a number of government officials to prevent any action from being taken against Hanrahan, he and 13 law officers were indicted on August 24, 1971 for "conspiring to obstruct justice."

science to solve the "problem" of prisons. These techniques include mind-altering drugs and brain surgery designed to eliminate violent, "antisocial" characteristics, and electric shock and pain-inducing drugs designed to "negatively condition" prisoners. These techniques may be clothed in the respectability of psychiatry, but they represent the same basic effort to control the lives of recalcitrant prisoners.²¹

Along with these new techniques, we are beginning to see the rise of a new breed of penologist: liberal, academically trained, and sophisticated enough to understand the revolutionary movement and its appeal to prisoners. He will attempt to undercut that revolution through "far-reaching reforms" aimed at removing the boredom and frustration from daily prison life. He will understand and sympathize with the drive for cultural and racial identity by members of Third World nationalities. He will talk about opening "lines of communication" and "sharing power with responsible inmates." Yet, all this time he will be ready and willing to use whatever force is necessary to deal with prisoners who do not cooperate with the system, and his ultimate goal will be the maintenance of a prison system whose primary purpose is the integration of prisoners into the existing social order; for him, rehabilitation will still mean conformity. With these new techniques and new prison administrators, the "liberal totalitarianism" of American prisons will become an even more pervasive reality.

The construction of such liberal horror chambers has implications for society as a whole. Just as drugs are used on rebellious prisoners, so too are tranquilizers being used to control "troublesome and overactive" children in schools. Just as prison officials have proposed the increased use of electronic technology to maintain constant surveillance of prisoners (closed-circuit television, electronic sensing devices, etc.), so too the FBI, local

21. See Chapter 15 for a more detailed discussion of the new methods of control.

police, and corporate establishments have stepped up the use of electronic surveillance of citizens at large. More and more people are coming to see that they are not free, but merely prisoners in a "minimum-security" wing of the same prison in which prisoners are held. The rise of a revolutionary movement among prisoners is inseparable from the rise of a larger revolutionary movement in America and around the world; so too is its fate.