

The Roots of Violence at Soledad

by Frank L. Rundle

Soledad! In Spanish a special sort of loneliness—desolation. An apt characterization of its placement in the wind-swept Salinas Valley and of the spirit-sickening atmosphere which pervades the prison. But Soledad has come to have other meanings—violence, fear, death.

Every inmate within the California Department of Corrections and perhaps elsewhere is aware of Soledad's reputation as a place where one must "watch his back" at every moment, a place where racial tension has tested the endurance and control of even tolerant men. Every prison staff member, correctional officer through superintendent, shares the same awestruck and fearful attitude toward Soledad.

VIOLENCE AT SOLEDAD, 1968–1971

The documented history of violence at Soledad is sketchy before 1970, but inmates who were residents then talked with me about the racial riots of 1964 and 1965. They described events in the late 1960s, when reportedly nearly every inmate had a knife secreted somewhere. Macabrely humorous scenes were described of inmates scrambling to dig knives out of the exercise field when a rumor of impending trouble spread.

A review of newspaper accounts of incidents in Soledad prison indicates the high level of violence in the period 1968–1971. In 1968 three inmates were murdered by other inmates, and three inmates were assaulted by other inmates with serious injuries resulting. Most of these involved racial conflict. One inmate died mysteriously; other inmates say that he was tear-gassed, then beaten to death by guards. There were several major incidents of inmate rebellion, destruction of property, and physical clashes with staff. 1969 was relatively calm with no violent deaths, only two deadly assaults, two racial clashes, and one no-work strike. 1970 started abruptly with the shooting deaths of three black inmates in the adjustment center exercise yard. A new era was ushered in three days later when a guard was murdered by inmates, the first such death in at least 25 years in the California Correctional System. The revolt had begun; the signal had been given that inmates were no longer going to passively submit. In the next 17 months three strikes occurred, six riots of varying proportions, innumerable tear gassings of inmates in the adjustment center, two inmate suicides, three assaults with weapons by inmates upon inmates, three incidents involving guards taken hostage by inmates, three murders of inmates by inmates, two murders of guards by inmates, and the crowning impertinence, the murder of a program administrator by an inmate. This last incident accomplished what nothing else had: it forced the Department of Corrections to act. The superintendent, who had already been designated to move on to an obscure central office job, was abruptly moved out and a new superintendent brought in. An associate and a deputy superintendent were transferred, and several hundred inmates were moved to other institutions. Emergency treatment was finally provided for what Raymond Procnier, director of the Department of Corrections, has described as a “sick institution.” A relative calm began to settle on Soledad.

THE EXERCISE YARD SHOOTING

In early 1971, when I assumed the position of chief psychiatrist at Soledad, the walls were still reverberating in the aftermath of the shooting of three black inmates by a correctional officer on January 13, 1970. Inmates who were within the walls of Soledad at the time of that incident described a state of intense racial tension and a great deal of overt conflict between inmates and staff. They reported having heard rumors on January 12 that inmates were to be shot the following day in the O Wing exercise yard. But then rumors of one sort or another are perpetually rife in prison and must usually be discounted or be treated with watchful expectancy. This rumor proved to be prophetic. On January 13, after having been strictly racially segregated, O Wing was to be forcibly integrated. Whether they liked it or not, by administrative order, blacks, Chicanos, and whites were going to mix in the exercise yard and on the cell tiers. The accumulated racial hatred of these men for one another, stimulated or aggravated by deliberate efforts of the staff as suggested in Chapter 6, was to be controlled by the threat of gunfire from the gunman in his cage overlooking the exercise yard. As numerous prison staff watched from behind the chain link fence, the prophecy came to be historical fact, and inmates Nolen, Miller, and Edwards were killed by the guard marksman.

Inmates present at the time believe that the entire event was carefully and deliberately planned by the prison administration; that the three blacks were executed because of the threat posed by their militant political views and their leadership. Many inmates further believe that prison administrators continued thereafter to “set up” inmates for execution at the hands of other inmates or prison staff. Believing this, no inmate at Soledad could trust any other man. Every move was eyed with suspicion and caution, and each prisoner was at the ready to

protect himself at every moment, to fight to the death if necessary.

MADNESS IN SOLEDAD

These conditions bred an atmosphere of paranoia which permeated Soledad from the guard towers to the utility tunnel, from the schoolroom to the hog farm, from the superintendent to the maintenance crew. The ingredients of this atmosphere were fear, distrust, suspicion, caution. It varied in intensity from day to day, but was ever present. In O and X wings, which together constituted the so-called adjustment center, the mood was always very tense.

In psychiatry there is an axiom that there is always some fact in any paranoid delusion or distortion. Certainly there was a reality base in the fears of adjustment center inmates that they might be killed. Three of them had been. The presence of loaded guns was always obvious, as was the hair-trigger readiness to use them. I personally witnessed inmates coming into X Wing being advised by the staff that if there was trouble there would be no warning shot; the gunman would shoot to kill. So the primary ingredient of the paranoid atmosphere—fear for one's life—was at an especially high level within the adjustment center.

In addition to this justifiable fear for one's life, the extreme sensory deprivation of solitary confinement meant that these prisoners were especially vulnerable to impairment of their ability to distinguish reality. They had no access to television and little reading material. The cells in X Wing in which they were locked for most of the 24 hours of each day had only one partially obscured window and a door of solid steel. It was impossible to offset this isolation by establishing any trusting relationships with staff members. There was, simply stated, no opportunity to apply the reality-checking logic which is imperative to the maintenance of a rational state of mind. Many in-

mates slipped in and out of an autistic world of fantasy as a consequence of this isolation.

Some prisoners, after days of such isolation, would become so desperate for relief that they would set their mattresses afire so as to force the staff to open the door and remove them from the torture chamber, even though they knew it would probably be for only a few moments. Others would burst out in a frenzied rage of aimless destruction, tearing their sinks and toilets from the walls, ripping their clothing and bedding, and destroying their few personal possessions in order to alleviate the numbing sense of deadness or nonbeing and to escape the torture of their own thoughts and despair. In this absolutely insane world that was the adjustment center, "madness" was at least partially functional and adaptive. The crazy ones were those who tried to follow the rules of the world outside.

RACISM

The forced integration begun on January 13 was continued not only in the adjustment center but throughout the prison. An effort was made to maintain racially balanced populations in the various living units, which meant generally having about 50 percent white, 30 percent black, and 20 percent Chicano inmates in each wing. Despite this superficial effort at racial integration, no meaningful attempt was made to attack the real sources of racial tension. No effort was made to deal with the prejudices of the inmates or, more importantly, the prejudices and tension-promoting behavior of the staff. As a result, this superficial effort produced only superficial results, and racial tension continued at a very high level.

The dining hall continued to be segregated, and any man sitting out of his racially determined place was risking his life. The television viewing room in each living unit was segregated, proximity to the TV set being determined by which racial group possessed the greatest power at any particular time.

Within the living units, any man who became too friendly with a man of another race would be visited by representatives of his own racial group and pressured into maintaining segregation. If he did not, he would be ostracized from his group and would run the risk of physical attack or even death at the hands of his own race.

Administrative practices maintained racial stratification, competition, and enmity. In the vocational training areas, according to black inmates, the most sought-after assignments went to whites. Desirable work assignments throughout the prison were said to be made on a similar basis. And as previously mentioned, the most potent source of racism, the prejudices and emotions of staff and inmates, drew no attention, unless it was that of studied neglect. The staff aggravated racial tensions in many ways. A case in point was the sergeant in charge of the reception and release unit, who had the opportunity for contact with every inmate who passed in or out of the gates. He was a master of the "Hey you boy" derogation in addressing blacks. Some men on the staff chafed under the order from the director of the Department of Corrections forbidding the open use of any racially denigrating term, and found subtler but still effective means of communicating their hatred. Inmates reported certain officers making remarks to white inmates such as, "I hear the black boys are carrying their shanks [knives] today. What are you and your friends going to do about it?"

OTHER ROOTS OF VIOLENCE

Other factors were important in generating the explosive tensions which resulted in the January 13 triple shooting. The cultural setting of the prison, the Salinas Valley of Monterey County, is extremely conservative, dominated by the power of the wealthy retired, the huge produce farms and vineyards, and a vast military complex. Numerous retired military men, shaped into paragons of resentful submission by 20 to 30 years

of service, reside there, and many prison guards are drawn from these ranks. There are relatively few black residents in the county, and almost none in the immediate environs of the prison. The exploitation of Mexican farm workers has been openly condoned in the area for years, and continues to the present. All these factors contribute to making the surroundings of Soledad prison a bastion of right-wing conservative values, with strong racist undercurrents.

In addition, the role of Soledad within the California prison system maximized its problems. It is the one prison to which other institutions can relatively freely transfer inmates in the eighteen- to twenty-five-year-old group, probably the age group most willing to engage in violence. San Quentin is generally restricted to men over twenty-five years of age, usually those committed for the most serious crimes or considered to be security risks. Folsom is generally intended for the older inmates, often "burned out" and nonviolent, but still considered by staff to represent security risks. The California Institution for Men at Chino is only for minimum-security prisoners, and the Deuel Vocational Institute is for the teen-age offenders too difficult to manage in the Youth Authority complex. This leaves Soledad as the "dumping ground" for men eighteen to twenty-five, many of whom are identified as management problems at other institutions. Since, until 1972, Soledad operated a large adjustment center, it drew many inmates identified as the most troublesome, assigned for maximum-security isolation. All of this contributed to developing Soledad as the "School for Gladiators," the prison whose reputation spread far and wide and instilled fear in even experienced convicts.

Another root of violence was the ineffectual, ambivalent administration of C. J. Fitzharris, the superintendent for many years. His administration set the tone of the institution, characterized by uncertainty and unclear expectations, and generated a great deal of anxiety within inmates and staff alike. He disliked and feared inmates generally, and rarely came into direct con-

tact with them. His concerns about inmates seemed to be related to protecting them from what he deemed immoral influences, such as *Playboy* magazine. He would not take a strong stand on important issues, and tended to ignore divisions within the staff. Consequently, the usual conflict between custody and treatment, found in almost any prison, was even more prominent at Soledad. (Treatment is really a misnomer, for there was no meaningful treatment in the sense of psychotherapy. And as in any prison, considerations of custody took final precedence over any other.)

Another significant root of violence should not be overlooked. There is a psychiatric theory that in a relatively closed social system such as a mental hospital, prison, or even a family it is possible for a certain subject to cause other subjects to act out his conflicts and impulses for him. For example, if a guard had strong aggressive and hostile impulses which he had difficulty keeping under control, he might unconsciously manipulate an inmate so as to cause him to assault another person. The same theory has been applied to parents and children: that is, parents might unconsciously promote the "bad" behavior of their children as a means of keeping their own "bad" impulses under control. One of the means of causing this to happen is to repeatedly communicate to the child the expectation that he will be bad. Certainly in prison, inmates are subjected to massive doses of the notion that they are dangerous, untrustworthy, unreliable, and potential murderers. Some fulfill those expectations.

VIOLENCE AND CONTROL

Shortly after I began working at Soledad, I was impressed as I walked the quarter-mile-long mainline corridor by the fact that there were hundreds of inmates walking there, with only eight or ten unarmed guards in view. I suddenly wondered why the inmates submitted to the dreary regimentation, the oppressive power, the unreasonableness and arbitrariness of the

prison. Why didn't they just take the place over? At first I thought they obviously were cooperating, which meant they really wanted to be in prison. I had to reject that theory, since it seemed so patently ridiculous. Then I thought: It's because they are essentially passive and dependent people, brainwashed and conditioned. I had to reject that also, since I knew many who were not. Then I thought: They aren't and couldn't be organized because of the racial hatred, subgroup animosities, and competitiveness. But I knew there had been strikes and organized efforts of resistance recently, involving hundreds of inmates. It suddenly dawned upon me that the ultimate enforcer was the gunpower in the hands of the staff, locked in cabinets throughout the prison and at the ready in the gun towers. And everybody knew the guards would shoot to kill. All inmates knew that even if they succeeded in taking over the prison or a section of it, the vast police and military resources of the state, and the nation if necessary, would be brought against them. They knew that if they survived, they would be prosecuted, receive an additional sentence, and their parole date would recede into the distant future. I remember with what chilling confidence in his power and the righteousness of his position Ray Procnier had told me, "Give me a riot anytime—I'll know exactly what to do. We have the guns."

As I gained more experience at Soledad and my understanding of the institution and its inmates developed, I came to know the crushing weight of the total control which was exercised over inmates' lives. The only way to get an early parole was to submit totally to the prison regime. If an inmate didn't play the dumbness of docility but also didn't cause overt trouble, he would simply serve out many years of his indeterminate sentence and eventually be paroled. If he rebelled in minor ways—didn't cut his hair, wore his cap in the hallway, or spoke sharply to a guard—he would be written up for violation of a rule, ground through the arbitrary and unjust disciplinary procedures, and perhaps be sentenced to up to 29 days in the

hole. If a man were to rebel strenuously—write writs, denounce the system, refuse to work, get into physical clashes, flout the rules—he would be locked away permanently in the adjustment center. There his remaining humanity would be quickly eroded and he would become a living bomb of rage, hatred, and bitterness. And if he should, in addition, hold and speak radical or revolutionary views, he would be labeled a “dangerous racial agitator” and be accorded special isolating treatment.

It is perfectly clear to me now that the roots of violence at Soledad and other prisons reach deeply into the prison system itself. It is a system which renders a man impotent, denies his individuality, destroys his identity, and grinds him ceaselessly under a heavy yoke of uncertainty and injustice. Such a system generates rage and bitterness which in some men will be turned upon others, whether tormentors or brothers. Prisons, then, are generating the very behavior which they are ostensibly designed to eliminate. They are destroying rather than rehabilitating men. They are promoting violence rather than controlling it.

CHAPTER 9

A Chronicle of Three Years in the Hole¹

• *by Thomas Lopez Meneweather*

In 1965 I was transferred to San Quentin and associated briefly with several Black Nationalist groups. Guards accused me of being hostile because of my refusal to declare myself a member of any one group. I terminated all these associations when the Adult Authority stated that they would consider me for parole if I entered the prison school program, which I did.

On July 31, 1967, while returning to my cell to get my school books for morning classes, I was arrested by guards and accused of killing a Caucasian inmate who was thought to have stabbed a black. I knew nothing about this incident and told them so. The county prosecutor's office refused to prosecute me, stating that there was no evidence that I had committed the offense or participated in its commission; nevertheless, the prison insisted that I was guilty. The disciplinary committee told me that I would not be let out of prison until I had served my maximum term. They added that I should not plan on getting out even then because I would probably find myself going before an outside court for possession of a weapon, which would increase my maximum term to life. Or I could be killed by friends of the

1. This chapter was made available by the Prison Law Project of Oakland, California.