

Prison Politics and Change

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The change process inside of a prison can be as treacherous as the most notorious of its inhabitants. The danger associated with navigating through the murky waters of jailhouse politics makes prison change extremely hard to control.

Change throughout society is inevitable, but in prisons, there are strong competing groups of differing interests with much time on their hands and a strong motivation to prevent particular changes. Within the dynamics of the struggles to control change dwells a prison's reality.

The soul of a prison is not reflected by the preciseness of its construction nor the orderly appearance of the uniformed staff. In the same way, the prisoners' calculated chaos and deliberately random violence does not expose the real belly of the beast. The battlefield of inevitable change is where you will find the naked prison existing in real time.

Much like soldiers in combat, prisoners and prison staff have little overview of the arena where their conflicts play out in its totality. They can only glean narrow glimpses of their place from the small pieces of turf they happen to occupy at any given moment during an engagement. So, in fact, prisoner and staff alike never have a complete view of the prison in which they live, work and often struggle.

In a prison, the parties of competing interests are represented by the prisoner population; the rank and file uniformed staff and the administration (management). The interaction between these three groups defines a prison at any given time.

Those few times when all three parties are in agreement with the need for and nature of some particular change within a prison, quick and effective integration occurs at its core. Accommodations by all the opposing parties will be made to better effectuate the agreed upon change. A contrasting situation occurs when all three parties in interest are completely united in their opposition to the nature of and/or need for impending change. Complete rejection is the result of this circumstance. In addition, unrelated and unexpected change might be experienced as a result of the tactics employed by the competing groups in their individual efforts to resist the change. But such unforeseen change is usually accepted by all parties as the cost of their resistance.

By far, the most volatile and common type of change in the modern prison is the begrudging kind which results when two of the three parties attempt to impose change over the objections and resistance of the min-

ority group. Even though the force of the majority will ultimately lead to the imposition of some form of the championed change, the resisting minority will nevertheless be relentless in its attempt to undermine that change. This results in the development of dysfunctional change where the conditions which brought about the need in the first place are worsened by the change in a state of resistance. Thus, the change intended is never fully realized while the appearance of fully integrated change is maintained to appease the majority group. Reluctant change is always more destructive than the status quo because jailhouse politics will make sure it retains the potential for ongoing struggle.

THE SERGEANT, THE MAJOR AND ME

It was a short walk from the Misconduct Hearing Room to B-Block. As I headed for my cell to begin serving 60 days of cell restriction for my part in an ill-fated hamburger caper. There was little time to think much less sulk. The way I saw things, I was being mistreated. After all, in the six to seven months that I had been in Graterford, I had seen an abundance of violence, rampant thievery, and at least one cell fire. There was even a two-week prison lockdown when gun wielding prisoners took hostages and shot it out with State Troopers in a foiled escape attempt.

Compared to all those acts of misconduct, my measly infraction was hardly worth mentioning. I understood losing my job and being charged for the burgers, but getting 60 days locked in my cell for 22 hours a day seemed unfair to me. But as I shuffled my feet, stuck out my chin and brooded over my mistreatment, little did it occur to me that there would be others who felt I had been treated too leniently. And even others, who wanted to thrust me into the murky waters of jailhouse politics.

Stealing food from a penitentiary kitchen is a serious offense despite my personal beliefs to the contrary. Theft of food from the kitchen offends no less than two vital concerns of prison administration; spending and control. The ability to smuggle food from the kitchen makes the statement that the prison cannot control the prisoner. If other prisoners similarly challenge the prison's control, the per day cost of feeding the population can go up drastically.

Ten pounds of bootlegged ground beef should have sent me directly to "Siberia," which is what prisoners appropriately nicknamed the special housing unit often known as the "Hole." The fact that I used the

Major of the Guards' bathroom in my plot to enjoy a grilled hamburger would have led to a doubling of my time in cold storage for the way I so arrogantly defied authority.

What did I know? I had not been in prison long enough to appreciate how seriously infractions of this nature were considered. At the time I could not see how my childish prank could ever threaten the security of the prison. Certainly this was far less serious than an attempt to escape.

When I finally arrived at my cell, I was unexpectedly greeted by the B-Block Sergeant. The Sergeant was a silent man with a strong presence who had great importance in my life. A man of military bearing, he stood a rigid six feet. His immaculate uniform was always clean, starched, pressed and precisely creased. He always stood straight with his eyes front, and the prison dress cap on top of his head gave height to his authority.

The Sergeant always had a cud of leaf chewing tobacco in his puffy clean shaven and ruddy cheek giving his southern drawl a lazier tone than anticipated. Though he was close to retirement age, that fact was as undetectable as his feelings.

When I saw him standing in front of my cell holding open the sliding door, I figured it was all part of the procedure of confining me to my cell for the next 60 days. I should have known the Sergeant did not turn keys.

"Didn't think I'd be seeing you back so soon," I heard the man say.

I assumed he was commenting on my having returned so soon from the misconduct hearing. Usually men given cell restriction took their time returning to their cell in an effort to extend their liberties.

"I got 60 days cell restriction, Sarge. Can you believe that?" I complained not realizing this was the wrong thing to do.

"(Spit) Boy, the way I see it you must be a real important inmate to have talked your way out of the BAU (Behavior Adjustment Unit -also known as Siberia). I don't like important inmates on my block so you just watch yourself because you can be right sure I'll be watching you." With that said, the Sergeant slid my door shut, double-locked me in and walked away like a general who had just reviewed his troops.

I was amazed at what I just heard. The Sergeant had just threatened me. Grippled by the paranoia that always permeates prison, I believed the Sergeant was singling me out and making it personal between us because I was Jewish. But that was far from accurate. My self-importance was

only in my own mind. The sudden “take-notice” of me by the Sergeant had to do with my former work supervisor, the Major, and the fact that he had intervened on my behalf to prevent me from serving my 60 days of confinement in Siberia.

The Major had only recently been appointed to his post by the Superintendent of Graterford who happened to be the first African American in Pennsylvania to hold that position. Similarly, the Major was the first African American to hold the position of Major of the Guard in any of Pennsylvania’s state prisons. As such, the Major was the first member of a minority to personally direct the actions of an historically, almost all white, uniformed guard force at Graterford. Additionally, the Major had been promoted to his post from the rank of Lieutenant which was not only unprecedented, but also caused a stir amongst the several Captains over whom he was promoted.

The Major was also a reformer which made the situation even more difficult. He was a compassionate and decent man who did not feel that militarism and physical force were the way to solve Graterford’s problems. This traditional style of prison management often led to the unfair treatment which had placed Graterford in crisis.

While the prison administration and the prison’s overwhelming African American prisoner population were hopeful of the promise held by the Major, the almost all white rank and file uniformed staff were not happy at all about the appointment. Not only had a longstanding race barrier been broken, but there was also genuine concern that the Major’s style would lead to giving the prison away to the prisoners. Governance by physical force, militarism and white leadership had been the way at Graterford for generations.

When the Major had decided that my actions were not serious enough to warrant sending me to Siberia, battle lines were drawn. Resistance to the Major had already been taking place in the form of mean-spirited and derogatory comments constantly being made about him by the uniformed staff. These slurs were often made in the presence of prisoners which only served to undermine the Major’s authority with staff and increase his popularity with the prisoner population.

There I was in the middle of all this and I did not even know it. I was not yet tuned in to the political undercurrents which were sweeping through Graterford. I just thought the Sergeant was picking on me and I resented him for that.

While on cell restriction, I was let out of my cell for two hours each day to roam around the block for recreation. And during this time, I found myself and my cell being searched by the block guards on a regular basis. They never found anything and the searches were not as intrusive as they could have been. But even one search of a man's cell or body is an intrusion into his sense of dignity and freedom and as such is deeply resented no matter how often either might be experienced. To this day, I still feel diminished every time I am involved in any type of search. There is no getting used to that kind of intrusion.

Naturally, this led my resentment and paranoia to grow with each search. I began to feel that every guard was out to get me. In the past I had avoided guards because I had little reason to communicate with them. I figured the less contact with uniformed staff the less likely I would be to offend anybody or to inadvertently break a rule. But now I began to hate these men in uniform and my avoidance was no longer a reasonable expression.

To make matters worse, some guards would ridicule and taunt me by calling me the Major's boy. At times they would even imply that I had avoided going to Siberia by being a snitch. Implications such as this being made by any guard in a prison similar to Graterford were potentially life-threatening.

I was helpless to stop what was happening to me so I just built up more frustration, resentment and anger. Then on the 59th day of my 60 days of cell restriction, I was issued another misconduct. This for taking a little more than two hours for my out of cell recreation.

I went to another Misconduct Hearing and was given an additional 30 days cell restriction. As I returned following the hearing, the Sergeant was there waiting for me again.

“(Spit) Boy, I don't know why you came to this block. You got no job and you just keep breaking the rules. (Spit) You must know some real important people. But let me tell you this. Let any of my officers catch you wrong again and nobody's gonna be able to save you then.”

I did not respond this time. In fact, I am certain the Sergeant could sense the hatred in my heart as he locked me in my cell and paraded out of sight.

It was that day that I felt I was no longer a part of the system or even the country. I was too young and inexperienced to realize that the Sergeant's malice was focussed elsewhere. The old soldier was just

trying to stop change or at least wound it. The black Major with his liberal notions was the Sergeant's real opponent. I was just someone who was unlucky enough to be chosen as the vehicle for the message.

By 1983, the Sergeant finally retired. I am sure he felt Graterford would fall apart without him. The Major was soon promoted to Deputy Superintendent of Graterford and a short time after that he was appointed Superintendent of Graterford where he reigns to this day.

Begrudging change in a prison builds up a great deal of resentment and malice. So much so that the end result is change so riddled with compromise and disregard that more problems are, in fact, created than solved. The beneficiaries of this kind of change can only be those who rejoice when systems fail. Now as a 15-year veteran of jailhouse political campaigns, I can only speculate on what could have been had the Sergeant cooperated with the Major. Could Graterford have become a better place? Could I have become a better person? Unfortunately, what could have been is now just a silent and unfulfilled prayer.