

## The Unity Walk

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In the fall of 1991, at the maximum security Indiana State Reformatory (ISR), a series of events culminated in an unprecedented display of solidarity by the prisoner population. This, in turn, was followed by an unprecedented wave of repression by the Department of Corrections (DOC). Years in the making, days in the protest, and months in the punishment, the actions of the fall and winter of that year have consumed seasons of contemplation comprehending all that transpired.

To understand the forces that created the event, we must look ten years into the past from those halcyon days. At the beginning of the 1980's, ISR was largely populated by men sentenced to indeterminate terms.<sup>1</sup> The turnover of the population was slow but constant. The parole board and its flickering flame of hope a distinct presence in their lives. The way one did time then was to establish a pattern of aggressive rebelliousness early in one's term, followed by a gradual mellowing out towards the years of parole eligibility. That way one could demonstrate "rehabilitation" or "a maturing mindset" to the Parole Board. Depending where one was along the continuum of his sentence, the individual's reaction to any particular situation could be generally ascertained. The joint, while occasionally manifesting individual violence, possessed a stable and predictable air.

As those under indeterminate sentences were gradually replaced by those with determinate sentences, the relative quality of life began to change. Men with essentially longer sentences and less to lose<sup>2</sup> responded to the maddening frustration of doing time in the same aggressive, anti-social ways that landed most of them in the penitentiary in the first place. Coupled with understaffing, violent encounters between prisoners, and between prisoners and staff, increased.

As the environment became more unstable and unpredictable, various factions of the staff formed clandestine extra-judicial units (i.e., "guard gangs"). Organized beatings with wooden, ball bearing tipped, riot batons of men in lockup units became routine orchestrations. Prisoners were strapped naked to metal bed frames in open-windowed, unheated isolation cells in the dead of winter for hours on end. Brutal drenchings by firehoses were common experiences for those unlucky enough to be thrown into the hole.

In a period of two years, in the early 1980's, a series of major prisoner clashes took place between housing unit groups,<sup>3</sup> with custody

staff at times joining the fray, armed with their own previously stashed shanks, on the side of their housing unit's prisoner faction. Symbolizing the near-anarchy of the period, one cell house had "Dodge City" scrawled above the doorway.<sup>4</sup> After these mini-riots the institution would be locked down for a few days and the involved units a few weeks, undergoing thorough shakedowns.

The situation grew so out of control; sparked by the intense beating of an prisoner activist,<sup>5</sup> a handful of his followers conducted a running battle, attacking previously selected officers and those that unluckily happened to get in the way. Eventually seven officers were stabbed, three taken hostage, and a cell house with approximately one-hundred offenders was seized. The DOC reacted with an inadequately trained emergency response unit hastily assembled from other prisons across the state. After 12 hours, with death threats from both sides and on-site negotiations with state legislators, the hostages were released unharmed and the standoff ended peacefully.<sup>6</sup> The result was a one-month lock down for the entire reformatory, and a ninety-day lock down for the housing unit involved.<sup>7</sup>

Both sides had been scared by the near multiple-death event. Several sociological factors changed, affecting the milieu of the penitentiary. While security policies and procedures were tightened, draconian abuses were curtailed. In the latter half of the decade, personal appliances ranging from crock pots to radios and eventually televisions, were sold on the commissary, improving the quality of life in the spartan, cold water tap cells.

Overall, the staff, with a few notable exceptions, seemed to adopt a live and let live philosophy and did not go out of their way to hassle the prisoners. A measure of respect, and fear of the violent potential of each side, had been realized. This mediated the need for displays of extreme machisimo, reducing tensions and the flow of testosterone. During this period, because of the reduction in parole-induced turnovers as more and more men were sentenced to determinate terms, the population began to age. The average age rose from mid-twenties at the beginning of the decade to early-thirties by the end. With the parole of almost all those serving indeterminate sentences, and the lower turnover in the population, a period of peaceful stabilization seemed to exist.

In 1988, post-secondary education became a no-cost program opportunity.<sup>8</sup> Enrollment grew from 30 full-time students in 1987 to 150 by 1990, or 15 percent of the main line population. The ISR-Ball State

University college extension program was the largest single prisoner assignment/employer in any of the state's prisons.

Fights were not altogether uncommon, while serious blood spilling was. Disturbances involving more than a few men were random and isolated. In a sense, the population had matured. They remembered the turmoil and horrors earlier in the decade, seeing no value in returning to those times.

By the turn of the decade however, the environment had already begun to change. Young bloods; teenagers and young adults from harder times and meaner streets began to arrive. The beginning of a new generation gap developed: R & B met Rap; album rock clashed with acid head bangers. The young bloods came from a different America than the older convicts had. Life was starker and tougher on the streets. Crack, even worse poverty, and the widely held perception of the futility of the situation ever improving had devastated a generation of young men who quite readily expected to die before they turned 30. These prisoners were even more poorly educated than the previous generation, their understanding of others less, and their desire to comprehend a situation beyond their own limited perspective nearly non-existent.

The newer prisoners were also more angry and antagonistic towards the powers that were. Assaults on staff (though still relatively rare) and even more so between prisoners increased. A few rotten apples in uniform geeked the hot heads, creating minor dramas for no other reason than they had the power to do so. More unsettling was the amount of time the new fish were bringing with them. These boys, and they largely were boys, were routinely laden down with 60, 90, 120, even 200 year bits. Essentially they had no future beyond the walls, with nothing to lose by lashing out to kill momentary anger, boredom, or frustration. The stability of the old ways was disrupted and an air of uncertainty settled over the prison.

In the fall of 1991, a virulent rumour of the impending shipment of all the reformatory's lockup unit prisoners to the state's new maximum restraint unit<sup>9</sup> spread throughout the population. The young bloods, with many of their cohort in the lockup unit,<sup>10</sup> seeking drama in their lives and angry at the perceived unfairness of the mass transfer, wanted to riot, take hostages, and "burn the mother fucker down"!

The older convicts, who had survived the turmoil and mass violence of the mid-1980's, suspected such an action would play into the hands of the DOC, and moreover change nothing for the better. It was known that

the DOC had quietly, though not secretly, invested considerable effort in revamping their emergency response strategies and units. A repeat of the “February Takeover” of years past, it was feared, would result in a bloodbath - predominantly prisoner blood.<sup>11</sup>

As in most penal settings a substantial number of the older prisoners were respected, and had measurable influence with the younger offenders. Many of these penitentiary role models were by now also college students or even graduates of the liberal arts associate and baccalaureate degree programs. Knowing the destructive and ultimately futile action of riot, these men began to persuade the hot heads to cool their agitation, seeking a different means of response to their anger.

Inspired by readings from Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience*, as well as the tactics and the effect of Ghandi and King, a handful of college students reasoned a unique (at least for the penitentiary) though potent response. Beginning on a Friday in late October, taking place only during the first of the evening’s three sequential recreation lines and toward the end of the recreation period, men of all races and creeds commenced their demonstration. Approximately 300 men stopped their various personal activities and quietly, with dignity, assembled on their own volition and marched in rough formation around the large drill ground, completing the circuit by shaking hands and embracing each other. Then, without threat or rancour towards the guards, they quietly returned to their previous pursuits.

The custody staff naturally grew nervous over the unprecedented and apparently organized peaceful behaviour. Even more unsettling, as the men returned to their housing units, barely a word was said during the usually raucous line movement. The convicts were as nervous and unsure of the “screws” reactions, as the guards were of the prisoners’. With the superintendent out of the state for the weekend, the shift captain ordered the cautionary locking down of the participating units; the rest of the institution remained on regular schedule.

If the reasoning behind the partial lock down order was to dissuade any further demonstrations, the failure of that strategy became apparent the next evening. During the first recreation line on Saturday,<sup>12</sup> towards the end of the period the men, more than the usual number who went to recreation, repeated the now-called “unity walk” around the drill ground. Returning to their housing units, the same silence permeated the air. In accordance with the previous day’s decision, the shift captain ordered these units locked down along with the first two. On Sunday evening, the

same events transpired, with nearly every resident of the last two non-locked down housing units participating in the units' walk.<sup>13</sup>

By Monday morning, the superintendent returned to the prison to find it locked down. Not for violent altercations, but rather because the prisoners had walked in peaceful unit formations around the drill ground during the assigned recreation periods. Technically not a single DOC rule had been violated. The prisoners had issued no threats, demands, or continued any other action. Other than what informants might have told the administration, no official or organized explanation of what exactly the demonstration was in reference to was communicated. By lunch on Monday, the superintendent lifted the lock down, and the reformatory returned to its normal schedule.

At lunch on Tuesday however, the entire camp was once again locked down. This time it was to last for seven long, hard, punishing months. It was to become, at the time, the longest continuous lock down in the history of the prison and entire Indiana Department of Corrections. Only later, would we learn, that the punitive lock down was ordered by the DOC commissioner of the period.<sup>14</sup>

The official reason for the lock down was initially to investigate the peaceful demonstration. For two weeks, nothing happened. The population was confined to their cells and dorms, allowed no visits or phone calls, and fed three brown bag meals a day. Then the most exhaustive shakedown of the reformatory in 15 years was conducted. The month-long search culminated in a media dog and pony show by the DOC dramatically displaying some 50 "weapons" confiscated during the shakedown of the prison. Part of the problem with this "cache of confiscated weapons" was that a third of them were not weapons at all, but rather tattoo guns, scissors taken from teachers' desks, and screwdrivers removed from housing units' maintenance lockers. Another problem with the haul was that a third of the weapons had been confiscated months if not years before the massive shakedown occurred. Thus, after four weeks of the most extensive search of the 1,500-man maximum security prison in anyone's memory all the DOC had to truthfully show for their efforts was an odd assortment of 15 to 20 shanks, pipes and razors. Reality be damned, the shakedown had become the reason for the lock down and the confiscated items visual justification for the cessation of all prisoner activities.

As the Thanksgiving holiday came and went, and the penitentiary was still locked down, the DOC declared the continued action was "for the

protection of the staff and offenders.” Protection from what was never explained, much less questioned by the docile media. After the passing of the Christmas holiday season with no visits, phone calls, or canteen purchases, with the prisoners continuing to eat brown bag meals, the new year commenced with yet another rationale for the lock down.

The action was now to allow the administration to “identify and isolate prison predators.” Why these predators were not identified during the previous two and a half months was not asked or explained. Nor was it questioned how the alleged predators could be identified at this juncture in time when no contact between offenders had been possible for the previous weeks. All the media did was dutifully report the DOC pablum and dropped the story until the next press release.

Even a superficial check of the state’s main newspaper would have revealed some incongruities with the prison predator myth. Between 1984-1989, not a single employee had been killed in the state’s prisons. Moreover, less than a week before the lock down, the governor’s press secretary emphatically stated that “our incidence (of injuries in prison) is much below the national average. We do not have unusual problems.” These statistics indicate that in a period in which levels of violence in prisons had decreased (by half) nationally, rates in Indiana were still “below the national average.” What they reveal is a period of relative docility and peacefulness.

By mid-February, half of a 300-cell unit had been caged off into a separate unit and filled with questionably identified “predators.” Many of those so tagged were the very same college educated older convicts who had averted a potentially bloody, costly and violent riot with their persuasive reasoning for the unity walk. All the while the hot headed young bloods that agitated for anarchy were left in the general population. If the administration’s intelligence network could identify the peaceful organizers, they could also assuredly know of the agitators.

As winter bloomed into spring, the punishing lock down continued. By now, the media had completely abdicated any pretense in reporting on the story. Thousands of letters from the prisoners and their families had been sent to the papers, as well as hundreds of phone calls by concerned outsiders to television stations questioning the lock down and lack of coverage. All to no avail.

During the lock down, with only 12 percent of the state’s penal population, the reformatory had experienced six illness and suicide related deaths.<sup>15</sup> When compared to 1989’s total of seven male deaths from all

causes in the entire Indiana Department of Corrections, the reformatory was only one death shy in a seven month period of equalling all the deaths occurring in the state just three years before. All of which was information not reported by the Fourth Estate.

The first of June began with tentative easing of the lock down, as one hot meal a day was served in the chow hall. By the middle of the month, the lock down had been lifted and the shell shocked survivors emerged from their concrete caves and brick caverns into the light of day and fresh air, returning to their industry jobs, vocational and educational classes, and sparse therapeutic programs. Psychologically numbed by the overwhelming repressiveness of the punitive lock down, the population was in no mind to rebel further. The consensus of prisoners was that "we walked the drill ground and shook hands, and they locked us down for seven months. Hell, if we riot, they'll just walk down the ranges and execute us."

Interestingly, whether actually planned or not, the transfer of the lock up unit offenders never occurred.

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In retrospect it is amazing how much we accomplished. Not so much in what the unity walk prevented the DOC from doing, but in that the effort forced the DOC to overreact. Clearly if their intention had been to transfer the lockup unit offenders to the super maximum prison or elsewhere, they could have done so during the lock down with total impunity from reaction.

No, what the men of the reformatory accomplished was to terrify the DOC into gross over reaction to a situation for which they had no established contingency plan. Administration officials had never imagined that a majority of the diverse population could organize and carry out a continuous peaceful demonstration of their disquietude with the impending transfers. The DOC's efforts since the 1985 takeover hostage situation had been to refine their emergency response (SWAT-type) unit to react to violent situations. Nowhere in their arsenal was there a weapon to deal with a peaceful mass demonstration. As such tactics brought the British Empire to its' knees in India, the unity walk caught the DOC without a plan.

The assessment of the success or failure of the unity walk depends upon how encompassing a goal one projects for the action.

The effort was both a success and failure from the viewpoint of the prisoners. It was a success in that the unity walk was organized and carried out for three continuous days. To be fair, the unity walk was a failure in that nothing was accomplished to change conditions, with a seven-month lock down endured by the men, and by extension their families and friends. The sense of power from the unification of purpose permeated the population. For the first time the men felt they had some control, some say in the way their environment was run. They not only chose to be defiant, but chose a creative act that befuddled the powers that minutely controlled their lives. Such a feeling, however fleeting, was exhilarating.

Elements that contributed to the success of the unity walk were the critical mass of the experienced intelligentsia, no visible leadership, and simplicity of action chosen. Perhaps the most important element in the success of the unity walk as an alternative to rioting, was the older, penitentiary experienced, liberal arts educated convicts<sup>16</sup> who crafted and advocated for the demonstration chosen. These men, no more than 30, with an active central core of half a dozen, used their convict reputations to garner respect of the youngbloods, searched and debated their “collective educational experience” to craft an alternative effort, and utilized a mixture of street rap and speech communication skills to advance their alternative action.

By composing a loose collective to form an alternative to riot, no visible leadership was created. Spread throughout the housing units, the intelligentsia (for lack of a more definitive term) met, debated and resolved a synthesis of ideas at recreation, meals, and work assignments. Without a centralized plan, other than to avert a riot, this constantly merging and diverging group, developed by consensus the idea of the unity walk. By not establishing a hierarchical leadership, it became much more difficult for the administration to take preventative action by isolating the “leadership.” Such a designation of individuals was too elusive to determine.

The action chosen of forming a totally participatory, loose formation during the recreation period to walk around the drill ground was a plan of genius given the circumstances and limitations of the situation. Since each housing unit group sent to recreation would be the only units participating at a given time, the need for wider coordination was not required. This also simplified the organization of the march within the unit, with only a few persuasive individuals in each unit needed to start forming the action.



By choosing the end of the recreation period to walk, when most of the unit had completed whatever activities in which they participated, the greatest number of idle individuals could be persuaded by motive, reason, or peer pressure to participate.

These elements of a loosely formed core group of experienced, reasoning individuals, forming no visible leadership, choosing an easily enacted demonstration were critical to the success of the action. What is still debated was the lack of a manifesto of goals or demands. Should a collective list of desired changes or grievances have been presented to the administration? Perhaps so if any long-term change was the goal. By doing so, however, a vulnerable leadership would have been exposed to isolation if not retaliation.

With the only discussed goal being to avert riot while making a noticeable demonstration, the unity walk succeeded beyond the dreams of those orchestrating the action.

Finally, the success of the unity walk can be gauged by the reaction of the DOC. The initial befuddlement of the custody staff as to what was transpiring is understandable. The action taken by the population occurred without forewarning, transpired during recreation, and was followed by a reduced level of activity during line movement. The "rolling lock down" too is understandable as a precautionary measure until an ascertaining of the situation was made. The prolonged lock down, however, was not predictable given past actions, nor was it justifiable, especially with the constantly changing litany of "reasons" for the lock down.

The purpose of the continued lock down was to break the "spirit" of the population, to destroy the feeling of emancipatory power that the peaceful unified action had given the men. To this extend, the Department of Corrections succeeded. To the extent the prisoners of the Indiana State Reformatory shook to its foundation the administrative complacency of the DOC, the men succeeded beyond their wildest expectations.

#### ENDNOTES

1. In 1978, Indiana adopted a determinate sentencing penal code, dictating a range of set terms for offenses. The "goodtime" provisions in the code provided day for day, or more euphemistically called "two-for-one," time credits. Thus, for example, barring major disciplinary violations, an offender sentenced to a 20-year term would serve 10 years irrespective of "rehabilitation" efforts or lack of them, or "nature and circumstances of offense." The Parole Board gradually evolved into the Clemency Board. Clemency, the only earlier release mechanism currently available, was a joke

with less than one percent, and later under a democrat governor zero percent, of those applying receiving a commutation.

2. When the legislature adopted the determinate sentencing scheme, the term lengths for various offenses remained basically the same as before. With the two-for-one goodtime formula, however, prisoners served half the numerical value of their imprisoned terms, instead of the previous usual one-third of sentence under the indeterminate structure. Sentences for the same offenses were longer and without the possibility of good behavior paroles, thus that controlling safety mechanism no longer positively influenced behavior.
3. "Groups" is the appropriate term since, although superficially similar to, the organized and highly antagonistic gang culture of the "crips" and "bloods," that phenomena had yet to be imported to the prison to any significant extent.
4. Within this unit one could easily find two or three breweries, cat houses, gambling dens, tattoo parlours, and shooting galleries, a dozen stores and hot sandwich shops, out of the various 300 one-man cells.
5. Or gang leader depending on your perspective. His exact words shouted down the hallway were: "Go ahead and do your thing brothers, they are beating me to death."
6. The event was a national story covered by the networks, making the cover of a newsweekly, which labelled the Indiana State Reformatory the most violent prison in America. In actuality, while a dangerous place, the Reformatory was no more violent, and in some cases less so, than other prisons across the country. But media hype sells the sizzle of a story rather than the reality of the situation.
7. Several years later, various correctional officers were convicted of federal civil rights violations, and officially credited with causing the riot.
8. In 1987, an prisoner class action lawsuit resulted in prisoners being declared eligible to receive state-funded higher education grants. Coupled with federal higher education (Pell) grants, post-secondary education enrollment became a fully subsidized opportunity.
9. The Maximum Restraint Unit (MRU) at Westfield, Indiana, is only the second prison in the United States, other than California's notorious Pelican Bay facility, to be "condemned" by Amnesty International. During this period, in protest of the extreme conditions of the MRU, two prisoners cut off fingers, and attempted to mail them to U.S. Senators. Thus the fear of unwarranted transfer to the MRU added intensity to the concern over this issue.
10. Approximately 100 prisoners.
11. Some months after this period, at a new prison, a mile from the 70 year-old Indiana State Reformatory, a staff member was taken hostage by a shank wielding prisoner.

Within hours, the prisoner was negotiated to a position where he was killed by a strategically placed sniper, affirming the efficiency and lethality of the DOC's emergency response unit.

12. The reason the first line was chosen was that at this time of the year, the large drill ground was closed for the later second and third recreation lines due to the season's early darkness. To give all the units equitable access to the large drill ground and its facilities, the three recreation lines, composed of two housing units each, were rotated everyday. Thus once every three days a housing unit's residents had access during first line to the large drill ground.
13. On most occasions, only about half of a unit's residents would attend every recreation.
14. Ironically, this information came to light when the DOC commissioner received an award from some correctional association for the long lock downs he instituted first at the reformatory and then at the state prison.
15. There were four reported suicide attempts in addition to the successful suicide.