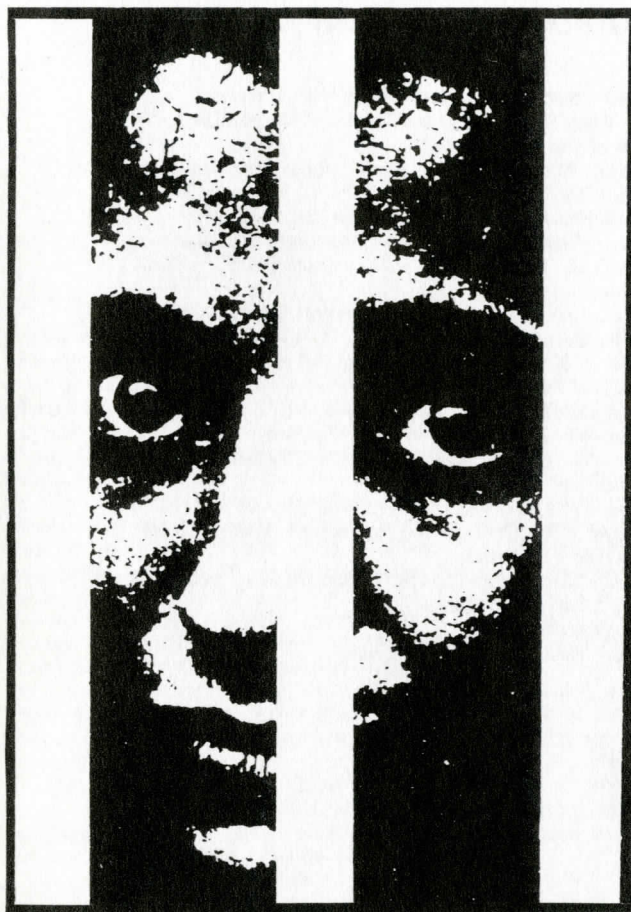


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# **RACISM IN FEDERAL PRISON**



**by James Wessner**

from the summer catalog 1977:



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FREE TO PRISONERS

Peacemakers, in particular those involved in the struggle to integrate prisons during World War II and those of us with more recent or impending experience with prisons, are concerned about the racism still prevalent in federal prisons despite a quarter century of official integration. Although a year's stay at Ashland Federal Youth Center has provided me with an inexhaustible supply of anecdotes about both staff and inmate racism, I will describe in this article only a few events which illustrate how racism at Ashland functions to the advantage of staff and disadvantage of inmates, and then offer a critical appraisal of our response, as political prisoners, to prison racism.

Because of the composition of its inmate population and staff, Ashland could be expected to have more racial conflict than other prisons. In many prisons integration extends to the staff as well as to prisoners. At Ashland all the guards were not only whites; they were also from the most openly and proudly racist segment of American society, the white working class of the Midwest, Appalachia, and the South. In many prisons more than half the inmates are black, a proportion which

encourages good behavior on the part of white inmates and guards. At Ashland less than a quarter of the population was black. The majority of inmates had the same social origins as the guards, and few were inhibited about expressing their prejudices.

In many prisons older convicts have a mitigating influence on any kind of conflict because they want to do their own time as quietly and pleasantly as they can. As Ashland the oldest prisoner was 26 and he was three years older than the next oldest. Most prisoners were at a stage of their lives when they desired, not to do their own time but to prove themselves in conflict. However, the immaturity of the inmates, the small black/white ratio, and the individual prejudices of guards and inmates can only partially explain the abnormally acute tension between

the races at Ashland.

The high tension prevailed primarily because the staff as a matter of policy went out of its way to foment racial strife. This policy was a slight modification of the old ruler's maxim "divide and conquer," to "divide the races and control the convicts," and was based on the correct observation that if op-

pressed people are fighting each other they will have neither time nor energy to fight their oppressors.

The big event of 1969 at Ashland, an attack on a guard, exemplifies the frantic use the custodial staff made of racism to maintain control during a crisis. One evening last winter a black prisoner bashed in the head of the guard on duty in the disciplinary section of the prison. Since the goon-squad was rounded up to haul the inmate off to the hole, everyone on the compound knew about the incident within a few minutes. Dormitory hacks immediately went into huddles with southern white inmates to talk about "what that nigger did." Next day the bosses of all-white work details (subtle collusion between bosses and white prisoners made blacks never quite work out on certain crews) gave 15-minute lectures on how to behave when "they" cause trouble.

White punks stood in line outside the captain's office to offer their sympathy for the guard with the dent in his head and to offer to testify against "that nigger who jumped him" even though they had been asleep in another building at the time. They got smiles and pats on the back for their interest in justice. Finally, a couple of white inmates were inspired by the racist solidarity the staff was showing with them to settle an old grudge against the black guy who slept in a nearby bunk and made too much noise at night. Both the attackers and the attacked in the resulting brawl were dispatched to the hole and put on the list for transfer to another institution, while the higher-ups breathed signs of relief and sat down at their desks to write reports on the "race trouble" they had had at Ashland.

Notice that this "race trouble" was initiated by a fight between an inmate and a guard, and that the inmate got the better of the guard. Recognizing that the event could readily inspire similar attacks on them, the dormitory guards played up their racist solidarity with white southerners by interpreting the fray as a conflict between black

and white instead of as a conflict between guard and prisoner. If they could sell their interpretation, they would at least gain a few white inmate protectors and possibly create enough tension between black and white inmates that the threat to themselves would be removed. The crew bosses' lectures the next day performed the same function of convincing prisoners to fight each other rather than the staff. The racial attack that was successfully instigated in this way set the whole compound on edge and effectively took the heat off the Man. By creating racial conflict, the guards and bosses averted a real physical threat to themselves.

Although the administrative brass were safe in their offices throughout the crisis, they also averted a danger to themselves by encouraging racism, as a little speculation about their reports to the warden and Washington demonstrates. Those reports did not have to describe the pettiness, meddlesomeness, and harassment that Ashland guards normally get away with because almost all the prisoners are young and have indeterminate Youth Act sentences (60 days to six years, dependent on the whim of prison staff), under which they must continually buck for parole. They did not have to point out that the inmate involved was beginning a long adult sentence and therefore was prepared to give the hack what he deserved and what most Ashland guards would get if they behaved the way they do in an adult prison. They did not have to admit that except for a basketball court, open from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., Ashland has no recreational facilities in the winter, no clubs, no activities, no open library, no musical instruments, none of the things that

prisoners pass their spare time with in other prisons. Nor did they admit that assigning one guard to keep peace in a dormitory of 50 bored young convicts is asking him to do an impossible job; all he can do is hope they fight each other instead of him. Rather than the faults of the institution and staff which actually caused the incident, the administration's reports probably de-

scribed a period of racial tension, citing the black inmate's attack on a white guard and the interracial fight the day after. It promised to solve the problem by transferring appropriate troublemakers and concluded that it is a shame that criminals are particularly prone to racism. The danger to the bureaucrats was recognition by the warden or Washington that they were doing a lousy job. By helping foment racial conflict among the inmates, they were able to interpret the entire crisis to their superiors — and perhaps to themselves — in terms of the inmates' faults instead of their own faults.

And what if the staff had managed to instigate a major race riot? Since the prisoners would have been fighting each other, the guards, at relatively little personal risk, could have fired into them to break it up. Besides a few dead and wounded convicts the immediate material result would have been a rash of promotions and bonuses for many men previously stymied in their jobs, while the excitement would have relieved the overwhelming dullness of all the hacks' jobs and convinced them that criminals really are so dangerous that their work is useful and morally justified.

Very seldom did an event as dramatic as an attack on a guard occur at Ashland, but the Man did not wait for crises to practice the technique of "divide the races and control the convicts." That the staff promoted racial friction on a day-to-day basis is illustrated by its treatment of Black Muslims. The year I was at Ashland all black inmates showing any interest in Islam or in ordering and reading Islamic literature were eventually transferred to other prisons after from three to six months' harassment. Their literature orders experienced mysterious delays and missing copies, they never got to see a minister, the warden lied to them about butter being used in baked goods instead of lard, and they often ended up in the hole for vague infractions usually having to do with "attitude." This harassment was undoubtedly motivated in part by the ad-

ministration's desire to force each inmate to request a transfer while it built a record of accumulated minor offenses against him with which it could rationalize a punitive transfer. Either result disguised for Washington Ashland's policy of transferring all Muslims. One effect of the protracted

hassling was to provide occasions almost every day in every dormitory for hacks to harass black inmates and incite white inmates against them, thus maintaining tension between the races.

The story of Ashland's black history course shows that the education department, the we-are-here-to-help-you guys, participated as much as the guards and administration in the control of inmates with racism. In the spring of 1969, after rumblings from black inmates, the warden decided to jump on the black history bandwagon; the education department dragged its feet but eventually went along. The course met once a week for eight weeks with the black student caseworker (Ashland staff was 100% white except during the school year, when a half dozen student trainees from a social work school came to practice at the prison. One of the trainees was usually female, one was usually black.), who expounded on Atlantis and astrology and showed filmstrips aimed at third grade suburban whites which explained that life as a black man in America is rough. Just what the class of black convicts needed to learn! When the graduate student's semester was over, a series of white teachers took turns trying to teach the class, including one I overheard claim he once registered at Antioch College but left after two hours because he saw a mixed couple in the dining room; and one who kept insisting that integration was necessary because black people could not do anything unless whites helped them and that some of his best friends were colored people. Finally, since none of the teachers meant to teach them black history, the inmates did some reading on their own in the books available and re-

ported at the next class on several aspects of the reconstruction period. The realization that black people might actually have a history, and the sight of a man whom the prison's tests and teachers had proven functionally illiterate giving a cogent re-

port based on college level texts was too much for the white teacher. The course was cancelled.

Interested inmates gave up pushing for black history as they became aware of the real effect of the course. The warden got credit with Washington and the public for being an enlightened and liberal administrator who ran a model prison that even had a black history course, while the inmates got nothing but astrology and confessions about some of the teachers' best friends. The course helped the staff control the inmates by keeping blacks thinking they might get something next week; by exposing potential troublemakers (in the Man's mind, anyone interested in black history is a troublemaker), who were later harassed and transferred; and by giving black inmates an apparent privilege which was then zealously denounced by teachers and guards to white inmates in order to set white against black.

The other we-are-here-to-help-you guys, the caseworkers, were generally more sophisticated and guarded in their language than teachers or custodial staff, but they were no less racist. Ironically, their favorite jargon phrase was "anti-white attitude." They were forever discovering that the root of someone's criminality was in his anti-white attitude and promising him parole if he would just learn to hate himself and black people instead. My caseworker's practice of the maxim "divide the races and control the convicts" was sublime. In the dormitory there was friction over television programming and the like among three major groups: blacks, Appalachian and southern whites, and middle class drug and draft violators. The caseworker took a weekly stroll from room to room; depending on which faction he was

talking to, he would ask if hippies and blacks had been causing trouble, if hippies and hillbillies had been causing trouble, or if blacks and hillbillies had been causing trouble. After a successful tour, he had collected information against everyone in the dormitory and had agitated the factions against each other sufficiently that they would be too busy fighting each other to make many demands upon his time.

The staff was generally so successful in fragmenting the inmates that I can think of only one instance of its reaction when faced with unity across racial lines. In the summer of 1969 a couple of black inmates showed up at a meeting of the gavel club, normally an all-white group, and started to speak about the institution and how it could be changed instead of the assigned topic of existentialism. The next day the staff advisor presented the captain with a list of all inmates present, they were interrogated, the club was disbanded, and its officers as well as the black "troublemakers" who had attended were transferred to other prisons.

If these examples of racism and its use by all levels and departments of the staff to keep the inmate population divided and controllable paint a discouraging picture of the possibilities for racial unity, then they accurately suggest the mood of the half dozen political draft refusers at Ashland during 1969. Our only active response to prison racism took the form of support for black prisoners.

There was rallying to the cause when someone was discriminated against in a blatant way, but such gestures were limited by the sense of futility we felt in the face of the staff's transfer power. If we demonstrated any support for a black inmate, he would be transferred, sometimes to Terre Haute, of which we had heard nothing but bad concerning treatment of movement blacks. Usually nothing would happen to us, since it was in the Man's interest not to create an interracial cause by pun-

ishing a group of white inmates for an action supporting black inmates.

Because white political prisoners had better luck getting literature orders through, and because any black prisoner who ordered something like **Muhammed Speaks** or **Soul on Ice** was subjected to harassment by the Man and eventual transfer, we ordered books and magazines for circulation. This support could be expanded with the help of outsiders who have time and money to send requested materials according to complicated and capricious prison rules. It would also be more effective if political prisoners arrived at prison well read in the history and literature of oppressed minority groups so that they could talk intelligently on the subject and suggest relevant reading. Since prisons are filled with the victims of the greatest crimes in history—the extermination and internment of Indians, the enslavement of Africans, the theft of Appalachian mountaineers' coal, timber, and topsoil, and the contemporary enslavement of Chicanos as migrant farm laborers—there is a large demand for demystified history and social analysis.

We also tried, without success, to find a young black person to work at Ashland for a year or so. The institution was, and still is, under pressure from Washington to integrate staff racially and sexually, so it is not likely that an applicant would be turned down. A recent college graduate could earn more as a teacher or caseworker on the federal than state level, and a male might be deferred from the draft. The mere presence of a permanent black staff member would help relieve the harassment of black inmates.

The more I became aware that racism worked to the advantage of staff and disadvantage of prisoners, the more I became convinced that our energies were misdirected and that the struggle against racism at Ashland and other prisons should go beyond our meager attempts to support black prisoners. As white politi-

cal prisoners we should explain the function of racial fragmentation to all inmates, especially to white inmates, but we can do that only if we break through the hostility that white working class prisoners feel towards us because of our middle class attitudes and actions. The soft white collar jobs, the "hippie" section of the chow hall, and the special relationships with the more educated staff members must go. Most important, our feelings of superiority towards working class youths, the attitude which brushes them off as "hopeless fascists," must go. When we repudiate our own middle class privileges in prison, we will be able to talk to other white prisoners about what a hoax skin privilege is. It gives whites somewhat better jobs, dinner with a hack's family now and then, and the smug feeling there is someone lower on the totem pole. If a large bloc of white inmates repudiated kin privilege, a united inmate population could demand and get amenities for Ashland that other prisons already have: clubs, more recreational facilities, musical instruments, an open library, better food, and less harassment from the guards. Working for unity across class and racial lines is of course not merely a tactic to obtain minor reforms in prisons; such a movement outside of prison is our only chance to bring about revolutionary changes in social structure that will eliminate oppressors and consequently their need for both racism and prisons.



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