

Race Theories Running Riot in U.S. Prisons

In Which Our Correspondent Explores one of the Dangers of Diversity

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NEW YORK — One need not look as far as the Balkans for evidence of the destructive passions of sectarian hatred. The American prison system is deeply riven by racial and ethnic hatreds that will only worsen as fashionable theories of separatism in the general culture find a dangerous home behind bars.

Already, many penitentiaries allow "racial identity" programs — such as the one that brought Leonard Jeffries to Rikers Island several weeks ago. This is particularly disturbing in light of recent evi-

dence suggesting that the racially driven quest for separatist identities was behind the 11-day siege at the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility in Lucasville.

Diversity Watch

It was there that 400 rioting Lucasville inmates took control of an entire wing of the maximum security facility, killing nine prisoners and one of eight guards taken hostage and making Lucasville the bloodiest prison uprising since 1983 when 33 people died at the New Mexico State Penitentiary. Fed by racial tensions between the white Aryan

Brotherhood and the black Nation of Islam, as well as by calls on the part of the prison's black Muslims for greater cultural recognition, the Lucasville incident underscores the danger that ethnic and racial separatism holds for the nation's prison system. Maintaining control over violent and incorrigible inmates is complicated enough, prison experts say. But the added tension produced by sharpened tribal passions within the inmate population only makes incidents such as Lucasville all the more likely.

During the stand-off, prison officials...
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Officials insisted that race was not a factor, despite the fact that of the 10 dead, eight were white. These included six white inmates savagely clubbed to death almost as soon as the takeover began, as well as one white guard hanged five days later to force authorities to give inmates direct access to the media.

Control of the Drug Racket

Now that the siege is over, though, some Ohio officials contend that prison authorities may have downplayed the race angle in order to reduce pressure to put the rebellion down with force. According to Shirley Pope, a senior analyst with the Ohio State Legislature's Committee on Corrections Inspection, both the inmate population and the guards at Lucasville had become intensely polarized along racial lines, and in the last three years, violence had taken an increasingly communal cast. This is largely due to competition between members of the white Aryan Brotherhood and black gang members, many of them operating under the cover of the Nation of Islam, for control of the prison's lucrative drug, gambling and extortion rackets. A 1988 federal court order that mandated that prison officials follow a policy of forced integration of cells has played a divisive role too, and has drawn objections from both whites and blacks.

Officials still don't know for certain whether the riot was planned in advance, and whether it was a collaborative effort on the part of both whites and blacks, as some have

claimed. Nor do they know what exactly triggered it and what its intentions really were. But according to the black guard who, after he "submitted to the Nation of Islam" was released halfway through the stand-off, the takeover was staged for Easter Sunday as a protest on the part of black Muslim inmates over a plan to test them for tuberculosis, which has exploded in most of the nation's prisons.

Such testing, said Muslims, violated their religious beliefs because the procedure involved the drawing of blood and allowed alcohol into their systems through the disinfectant used on cotton swabs. Further citing oppression of Islam inside the prison "that was worse than death," Muslim inmates also demanded a variety of special cultural rights. These included the right to have prayer beads and to wear full Islamic robes including prayer caps, as well as the rights to have a full-time imam, a kosher diet and an Islamic burial. They also called for prison officials to provide them with their own cultural center, including an office, a clerk, supplies, a copying machine and permission to invite outside Islamic speakers into the prison. In addition, they joined white inmates in calling for an end to forced integration of cells.

The prisoners also insisted that there be no physical retribution for the takeover, as there was against inmates who took over New York's Attica prison in 1973. If there was, said inmate Abdul Saman Mumin, who was allowed to make a live television appearance during the siege, the rebels hoped that all Muslims

around the world would make those responsible "taste the wrath of Allah by whatever Islamic means necessary."

Gang Insignia

While corrections officials noted that Islam in the prisons is often a stabilizing force, they wondered whether calls for the right to wear distinctive Islamic garb and religious insignia were a sincere sign of religious devotion or a way of circumventing strict measures imposed to crimp gang activity. To make it harder for gang members to recognize each other once inside the prison and to organize, Lucasville

authorities had recently banned tattoos, special haircuts and other recognizable gang insignia, and had been trying to limit inmate contacts outside of small controlled groups. This is why, with the exception of promising a review of TB testing procedures, and a review of bi-racial celling policies, authorities rejected all of the inmates' other religious demands. "The question is," said Peter Davis, director of the Ohio Legislative Committee on Corrections Inspection, "is the Nation of Islam genuinely trying to practice its faith or are they a gang masking their criminality behind religion?" Added one cynical prison chaplain, "This group of Muslims is no more Islamic than David Koresh was a Seventh Day Adventist."