

OP-ED

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## **When Prisoners Protest**

By WILBERT RIDEAU

THERE aren't many protests in prison. In a world where authorities exercise absolute power and demand abject obedience, prisoners are almost always going to be on the losing side, and they know it.

The typical inmate doesn't want trouble. He has little to gain and too much to lose: his job, his visits, his recreation time, his phone privileges, his right to buy tuna, ramen and stale bread at inflated prices in the commissary. The ways even a bystander to the most peaceful protest can be punished are limited only by the imagination of the authorities. Besides, logistics are difficult: men from cellblock X can't just stroll down to see the inmates in cellblock Y. Strategizing must be done furtively, usually through intermediaries, any one of whom might snitch.

And yet, sometimes things get so bad that prisoners feel compelled to protest, with work stoppages, riots or hunger strikes. On July 8, some 30,000 inmates in the custody of the California Department of Corrections [went on a hunger strike](#) to demand improvements in prison conditions. Their biggest complaint was the runaway use of solitary confinement, the fact that thousands of prisoners are consigned to this cruelty indefinitely, some for decades.

I know something about solitary confinement, because I've been there. I spent a total of 12 years in various solitary confinement cells. And I can tell you that isolating a human being for years in a barren cell the size of a small bathroom is the cruelest thing you can do to a person.

Deprived of all human contact, you lose your feeling of connectedness to the world. You lose your ability to make small talk, even with the guard who shoves your meal through the slot in the door. You live entirely in your head, for there is nothing else. You talk to yourself, answer yourself. You become paranoid, depressed, sleepless. To ward off madness, you must give your mind something to do. In 1970, I counted the 358 rivets that held my steel cell together, over and over. Every time the walls seemed to be closing in on me, I counted them again, to give my mind something to fasten on to.

There are men like Thomas Silverstein, in the federal prison system, who has been in solitary 30 years, and Albert Woodfox and Herman Wallace, who have been in

Louisiana cells for some 40 years each. These men become examples of abuse of power and sometimes a rallying point for their fellow prisoners, who know they could one day face the same fate.

The prison protests in California are on an unprecedented scale; amazingly, they involved, at their peak, about two-thirds of the state's penal facilities. At the beginning of this week, more than 2,500 inmates were still refusing food.

If prison authorities do not understand why thousands of inmates not directly affected by solitary confinement would join the protests, at great risk to themselves, they have only themselves to blame. They are victims of their own censorship.

If they were to listen to the inmates, they would understand that protests are almost always the product of what prisoners perceive to be officials' abuse of arbitrary power. They are generally done by men made desperate by the lack of options to address their grievances. At the heart of the problem is a lack of open communications and freedom of expression.

As a practical matter this is easy to resolve: institute mechanisms for authorities to meet regularly with inmates to discuss their problems without fear of reprisal. But this goes against entrenched attitudes, and too many officials see it as a surrender of their authority.

Too bad, because making responsible inmates partners in managing prison problems has worked extremely well in the Louisiana State Penitentiary, where the warden and sub-wardens have, for decades, regularly met with inmate leaders to discuss problems. It has gone from being one of the bloodiest to one of the safest maximum security prisons in America.

And if prison officials actually listened to inmates, they would find that their demands are often reasonable. It goes without saying that some inmates must be isolated for security reasons. And the California protesters acknowledge as much. They don't demand a total end to the use of solitary confinement, but only reasonable limits to who is locked up and for how long, as well as some simple improvements like more educational and rehabilitative programming for those in solitary.

Why should you be concerned about the inhumane conditions of prolonged solitary confinement, with all the social, emotional and mental deterioration that it entails? Well, every year men from California's Pelican Bay and other supermax prisons around the nation are released directly from the vacuum of their cells into free society, to live and work among you and your loved ones. As a matter of self-preservation, maybe we should all join the prisoners' request for rehabilitative opportunities that will improve the mental health of those in solitary.

*Wilbert Rideau, who served nearly 44 years for manslaughter, mostly at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, is a journalist and the author of the memoir "In the Place of Justice: A Story of Punishment and Deliverance."*