

The Chow Hall in Tough Times (by Kenneth Hartman)

*It's a real honour to introduce this post. Serving life in California, Kenneth Hartman is one of the best prison writers I've ever come across. I highly recommend his book, Mother California.*

The guards are lined up mere feet apart, ready to pounce on extra cartons of milk or stray, smuggled pieces of fruit. Since the news that the courts have ordered the shrinking of the bloated prison system in California, there's a harsher, more aggressive posture. These are tough times in the joint for all of us, on both sides of the fence, albeit for different reasons.

A short female guard motions to me as I walk out across their skirmish line. She appears to be particularly unhinged; probably from working too many overtime shifts, trying to make some extra bank before that becomes a lot harder.

The stress level in these encounters is high for the searcher no less than the searched. Occasionally, a prisoner can't take being muscled around any longer and spins on the offending guard. I've never done anything like that, not in my entire 32 years incarcerated, but I can see how it happens.

I'm over six feet tall so she has trouble reaching up high enough to pat me down. Frustrated, the little guard is now barking out barely intelligible orders to spread my legs farther out and straighten my arms, while she's pushing my waist around in front of her. I realize this isn't really a search. This is part of a plan.

In California, the guards are all part of a union that de facto runs the prisons. Traditionally, whenever a court

steps into their business and orders changes, the guards provoke some violence. It's always worked to hide the failure of the prisons behind a wall of chaos and strife.

Back in the early '80s, when I was at Folsom Prison, a federal judge demanded the practice of locking people up in the hole for alleged gang activities without any actual evidence be ended. In response to this usurpation, two tiers of cells were cleared out and 56 blacks and four Mexicans were put on one of the tiers with the reverse imbalance on the other. Then they cranked open all the cells at the same time with the gun post guards on the other side of the building. Mind you, this was during a hot war between these two groups.

After the entirely predictable results, the poor federal judge reversed his order.

This time around it's going to be harder because the U.S. Supreme Court doesn't often back down.

When she realized she couldn't get a rise out of me, she dismissed me in a huff, babbling some incomprehensible gibberish as I walked on back to the housing units.

All of this revved up angst and irritation on their part can be explained by two very human responses. The first being the old kick-the-dog-syndrome common amongst second graders after mom chastises them and public employees when they're getting kicked off the great gravy train of taxpayer dollars.

More fundamentally though, at the deeper levels, it's all about fear. Fear of an uncertain future. Fear of serious and consequential scrutiny. Fear of being exposed. The prisons in this state, and all across this country, have operated with virtual impunity for the past quarter of a century. Reagan's judges granted the system practical immunity from prosecution. The money poured in to pay for the biggest, most expensive, and least effective prison system in the world. Thanks to the Great Recession the dynamic has changed. This bottomless well of overtime and unfunded liability is, finally, getting capped. Punishment for the sake of inflicting pain is now too expensive to continue.

When I walk out of the chow hall and see them all lined up, primed and pumped up for a fight, I just imagine them standing in line at the unemployment office. Somehow, they don't seem so menacing that way.

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