



From Public Enemy To Enemy of The State by Robert Saleem Holbrook

When I was a child I used to often walk past the old Eastern State Penitentiary on Fairmount Avenue in North Philadelphia and stare in awe at its high walls and ramparts seemingly towering into the sky believing naivety that the old prison was an ancient castle from the days of knights and kings. There were times myself and other kids my age used to try and scale the walls to get a glimpse of what was inside, how ironic it is that now for the past 18 years I've been trying to figure out how to scale out of the numerous prisons I've been imprisoned in since the age of 16.

I've often sat in my cell in total isolation and solitude attempting to figure out what bought me to this point in my life where at the age of 34 I've been imprisoned for 18 years with the rest of my life destined for the same thing. During 3 years of confinement in the state's control unit (Special Management Unit) at SCI-Greene I had the unique opportunity to actually back track practically every poor decision I made in my life that eventually culminated in my imprisonment. When you are locked down for 23 hours a day 7 days a week you have the ability to engage in such personal adventures in discovery.

The pivotal decision that culminated in my imprisonment occurred when I was 14 years old hanging out with some friends on the corner admiring a car a older guy from the neighborhood had.

He sold drugs and seemed to have it all and that's what I wanted. i.e. the girls, the clothes, the respect, etc. It wasn't until years later while in my early 20's that I came to understand the distinction between my wants and needs but at that moment I suffered from "reckless youth" and could only see the benefits that selling drugs provided. That admiration lead me to compliment his car and we struck up a conversation that culminated in me agreeing to sell drugs for him. It was that decision, combined with a series of other poor judgment decisions and circumstances that resulted in a LWOP sentence 2 years later for being a "alleged" lookout to a drug related murder. There was a time in this country when it was said that "youth were generally allowed mistakes". However that is not the case anymore unless we're talking about President George W. Bush who could blame his early cocaine addiction on "being young and a little irresponsible".

Little did I know but that decision to become involved in gangs and the drug trade put me on a collision course with not only other gang members and law enforcement but with the federal government's war on drugs. Overnight I had unknowingly transformed from a "kid" to "public enemy" in the eyes and perception of the public and government. For in order for the government to wage a war on drugs it must define someone as the enemy, it must identify and create "public enemies" the public can vilify and fear in order to justify its war and multi-billion dollar budgets to the people and congress. The enemies were identified. The government had declared war on a substantial segment of its citizenry, in particular youth of color i.e. "gang bangers".

As a "public enemy" it was therefore easy for the state to impose a Life Without Parole sentence on myself and countless other juvenile offenders caught up in the street wars. Despite our age we were the expendable casualties of the war on drugs. From my arrest, conviction and sentencing I was a "statistic" on the policy charts of law enforcement briefings to the media, politicians, government committees, etc. demonstrating law enforcement's "imminent" victory against street gangs and drug lords. Like the "body count" tallies in Vietnam and now Iraq my imprisonment was a slogan or prop for public consumption demonstrating the war is being won and the "bad" guys are losing.

Initially content with the government imposed "public enemy" Label I unwittingly played into the stereotype while imprisoned, accepting and conforming to the dog-eat-dog environment of prison. I didn't care about anything and sought to adopt, hone, and sharpen the criminal and predatory traits that dominate the prison system and contributes to the criminality of its inhabitants. I saw no need to change or evolve beyond my perception, this was part of the "game" and on another level beyond my perception part of the governments "script" for young public enemies.

In the controlled environment of prison the script is even more predictable. Act out, break the rules, be "disciplined" via the hole, be released and replay script. Like the script on the streets both sides pretty much accepted their roles in the script. Imprisoned we were society's "public enemies" and in the eyes of the guards it was their patriotic duty to imprison having been conditioned to believe they were/are manning the walls in the nations war on drugs. The institution of justice in this country, from the police, to the courts, to the Department of Corrections is built on a "war model" and its target is youth of color i.e. "gangbangers".

Somewhere in and around the 10th year of my imprisonment at the age of 26 I decided to stop playing out the "script". No one single event or incident bought about this decision rather it was a culmination of events, maturity, and experiences. For one I started to question why the white kid received 5 to 10 years for the same role in a murder I received a Life Without Parole sentence for- why did the white man that murdered a childhood friend of mine in 1989 by penetrating his skull with a tire iron receive only 5 years probation. There were a million of other "whys" that started to bombard my mind and subconsciousness that I could not escape by falling back into the "script". I started to read to satisfy my questions- I had always read during my imprisonment but now I started to take what I read seriously- I became angry as I became more aware of the injustice around me and the feelings of anger and rage that at one time was directed at opposing neighborhoods and prisoners was now directed at the injustices of the state that imprisoned me.

It became impossible for me to play the script once aware of the injustice of my imprisonment and the criminal justice system in general. I also could not just sit still and rage and condemn the system. I had to challenge and confront it as best I could from within the confines of the prison. I decided to become involved in activism against imprisonment and the government's "war on drugs". My politics and activism would spring forth from an "oppositional perspective". The state and I were opponents and the script was tossed out the window. This decision would give me a first hand experience to the response of the institution of government when its legitimacy is challenged and questioned by those it attempts to marginalize, define or ignore. Once again I embarked on a transformation based on a decision that led me on a collision course with a government campaign or policy. Overnight I went from "public enemy" to "Enemy of The State" in the eyes of the Department of Corrections

The consequences of this shift in personal consciousness and institutional "classification" was substantial and a lesson in the art of "institutional self preservation". Since tossing the script out the window that prisoners are expected to conform to I have remained misconduct free since 2001 . The 11 years preceding 2001 I had been kicked out of 7 different prisons and done (2) tours in the state's Supermax Control Unit for incorrigible behavior and had incurred dozens of misconducts-

Normally the D.O.C would reward or encourage such a turn around in behavior but in the eyes of the D.O.C. the behavior I was engaging in was far more serious misconduct than if I was running wild in the system breaking every rule on the books. What was this serious misconduct I was engaging in? Networking with activists on the outside challenging the injustice of the so-called criminal justice system, writing articles and pamphlets exposing the injustices of prison and most serious in the eyes of the D.O.C articulating a perspective of prisoners and prisons in opposition to the false perception of prisoners and the need for prisons the D.O.C. is articulating to the public. I have seized control of my image from the D.O.C. and dared to define myself, fellow prisoners and the D.O.C. itself. No longer can the D.O.C- at will define me as a gangbanger, murderer, public enemy, etc without a response to the contrary.

The D.O.C's reaction has been a lesson to the fact that you cannot challenge or protest government injustice, repression, etc without suffering the foot of the state wherever you are. In the past couple years my custody level has been upgraded to a "High Risk Prisoner" despite years of misconduct free behavior, all my mail is monitored and read due to "radical beliefs" and involvement with "questionable" publications i.e. publications critical of the government's war on drugs and terror. In 2002 I was placed in the hole for 14 months without charge because the prison thought I expressed sympathy with the terrorists the United States is at war with because of my grievances /complaints challenging institutional racism.

How was a connection to the "war on terror" made with prison activism? In response to a question I poised to a D.O.C. Security Captain about the need to monitor my mail I was candidly told "we live in a new world since 2001" and the government and the D.O.C. is concerned about this type activity". So not content with being on the front lines of the "war on drugs" the D.O.C. has found a way to muscle into the "war on terror" "hustle" by monitoring and containing prisoner activists and their supporters on the outside Just as the government has used the "War on Terror" to stifle anything outside of the "acceptable bounds of dissent" i.e. write or call your congressman, write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper, vent and get over it, etc the D.O.C. has manipulated the "war on terror" to suit its own means toward stifling internal dissent and criticism of its policies and practices.

Despite the repression and personal difficulties imposed by the D.O.C. in the end the transition from "public enemy" to "enemy of the state" has been worth it and I have no regrets other than I wish I had made the connection between the drug trade and the government's failed war on drugs and the transition prior to coming to prison as a juvenile offender. Life is about transitions and transcending one's limitations and sooner or later, for better or worst, we all make or miss the transition that will define who we are and most importantly choose to be. No longer will the state define me. I will dare to define myself.

"In any place in the world, anytime, any man or women rebels to the point of tearing off the clothes that resignation has woven for them and cynicism has dyed gray. Any man or woman, of whatever color, in whatever tongue, speaks and says to himself, to herself "Enough is enough!- Ya Basta!" -
Subcommandate Marcos

Robert Saleem Holbrook #BL-5140

SCI-Greene

175 Progress Drive

Waynesburg, PA 15370

5.30.08