

A Different Type of Dictatorship

Introduction:

My regular correspondent recently wrote, "I was really interested to hear your report about 'prison politics.' How would you describe it, a benign dictatorship?" I was intrigued by the question and flattered by his repetition of a term that had been coined by another inmate in my Cognitive Thinking and Anger Management class. I took the bait and wrote this essay.

My main role as a recently transplanted prison inmate from Vermont to Mississippi is to compare and contrast the incarcerative conditions between these two very distinct states. During the first three years of my sentence, I resided in three separate public prisons located in Vermont. I spent a majority of my time at the Southern State Correctional Facility (SSCF) in Springfield, Vermont. Now I am living in a private prison called the Tallahatchie County Correctional Facility (TCCF), which is located in Tutwiler, Mississippi. It is owned and operated by the Core Civic of America (CCA) Corporation.

Overall, Vermont state-run facilities function as benevolent dictatorships in my experience. On the other hand, this private prison operates more like a malevolent dictatorship.

The most apparent differences between Vermont and Mississippi prison staff are the ethnicity and gender of the majority. Medium security prisons that house adult male inmates in Vermont are staffed primarily by white males. This private prison in

Mississippi employs a majority of black females. Both guards and personnel managers display a clear preference for black inmates, in terms of social influence and employment opportunities. An African-American inmate recently reminded me that Vermont staff members demonstrate an obvious priority for white inmates. I agreed with him that both systems are racist.

Mississippi, however, is characterized by something that Vermont **lacks**: the cultural baggage resulting from the terrible history of American slavery. Most of the staff members here are the direct descendants of enslaved people. Now that black people are in charge of this state, they seem to want to take revenge on white people in general. A private prison is a perfect venue for acting out animosity, because most staff misconduct can be easily hidden from the public view.

Staff Organization in Vermont:

The staff hierarchy at SSCF is relatively transparent. During my last three months there, I obtained a handout listing both the first and last names of roughly two dozen staff members, by position. A new arrival to Mississippi recently helped me update that list. Some of the staff members have changed their job assignments during the past year, but most of the names on that list are still the same.

The section entitled, "Organizational Structure" in the SSCF Resident Handbook (page 5) outlines five primary categories of staff members with whom an inmate may interact directly. The upper management team consists of one superintendent and two

assistant superintendents. I personally saw three different superintendents during my relatively short tenure of two and one quarter years in Springfield. The first superintendent actually came to visit me in person at my cell door in a segregation unit (The Box). The second superintendent was more secretive. He was rarely visible and generally inaccessible to inmates. He usually communicated with the prison population by distributing facility-wide memos, which was effective but impersonal. The third interim superintendent was both gracious and personable. Unfortunately, she was quickly replaced by a male superintendent. Perhaps the Vermont Department of Corrections (DOC) is sexist as well as racist.

I interacted directly with two concurrent female assistant superintendents during my time in Springfield. One, whose attitude towards inmates was somewhat condescending, was frequently visible in both the outdoor recreational yard and the living units. Even though she appeared to be younger than I, she admonished ^{me} to address her as "Mrs. M." after I had called her by her first name. The other assistant superintendent was rarely visible to inmates, because she spent most of her time doing paperwork in the front office.

The Security and Operations Supervisor (SOS) was the most totalitarian type on the SSCF roster. He did respond to any general request forms that I sent him through facility mail, but his responses were invariably negative. For example, the SOS forbade me from receiving outside packages from an unapproved vendor. (Access SecurePak was the only approved out-

side vendor at that time.) You can imagine my surprise when my regular correspondent from Brooklyn, New York, successfully sent me a ream of typing paper through Staples Office Supply. As a result of my extreme gratitude and mild confusion, I donated the entire ream to the Inmate Law Library (ILL). Regarding the SOS, perhaps his bark was worse than his bite.

The Living Unit Supervisors (LUSs) occupy the highest level of direct supervision of inmates in the SSCF. Each LUS ^{ees}oversaw four living units, housing roughly fifty inmates each. My LUS approved a special visit from my parents on the day before my birthday, but a Correctional Facility Shift Supervisor (CFSS) turned them away after they had driven three hours from New York State. Whereas the SOS effectively allowed something that he had previously forbidden, the CFSS denied something that the LUS had previously approved in writing.

Each separate living unit in SSCF has a uniquely designated Correctional Services Specialist (CSS) a.k.a. caseworker. Even though individual cas^eworkers switch their respective unit assignments quite frequently, they generally stay on the SSCF payroll for a long time. Therefore, the inmates can get to know the caseworkers and effectively choose their preferred CSS by moving between living units.

The correctional officers (cops) are on the front line of inmate/staff interaction in Springfield. Individual cops are usually assigned to the same position for several months or even multiple years. I had some deep conversations and even shared one of my poems with an older female CO in the Golf Unit. The

chow hall cop was generally harsh but fair in his dealings with inmates. One cop busted into my cell at 2:00 AM and took my Keep On Person (KOP) medication for no legitimate reason. Not all of the cops wanted to be the inmates' friends, but at least they were consistent. That way, inmates could learn which cops they could trust and which ones to avoid.

General Organization in Mississippi:

In contrast to Vermont, the Core Civic staff can be characterized by general ineptitude and a lack of accountability. The organizational structure here in Mississippi is much more opaque and intentionally obfuscatory. I have deduced that the top managers here are the warden and the assistant warden. I spoke to the male, white warden once from inside the small outdoor recreational yard. He seemed approachable but aloof. He never responded to my written request to admit sandpaper through the property room for the exclusive purpose of wood-crafting. I have only seen the assistant warden's signature on my completed educational certificates. I assume that she is a black female, but I have never met her in person.

Captains are on the next level of authority at TCCF. I met a male captain when I got dragged to the Main Building for no apparent reason one evening. He was inquisitive, but he seemed generally suspicious of me. I have seen a female Latina captain in passing. I greeted her in Spanish, but she responded to me in English. The word around the day room is that she is a corporate big wig who seems to focus her attention on recruiting

and training new cops.

There are three living units in the M-Building where I currently reside. Each individual unit houses roughly one hundred men. Two units are dedicated to Vermont out-of-state inmates. The other unit is occupied by detainees of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Agency.

The same unit manager oversees all three units in this building. The most reliable interaction I have with her occurs when she calls me into her office to approve my monthly Law Library Use Request Form. She denied my general request for a monthly Scrabble tournament with prizes in the MB Unit.

Each living unit in this building has two unique case workers. Actually, there is one Case Manager (CM) and one Correctional Counselor (CC) assigned to each unit. Their job descriptions in the TCCF Handbook (page 4) are exactly the same, except the CM provides "case management" services, and the CC provides "counseling" services to the inmates. Their jobs are effectively interchangeable, and they seem to compete with each other for who can accomplish the least amount of work.

The Case Manager tends to make promises that she does not keep. Because she forgot to fax my Approved Visitors' List to the Vermont DOC in mid-December, 2018, I received a letter from the central office requesting a copy of my visitors' list in mid-February, 2019. Since then I have communicated with my Vermont Out-Of-State (OOS) caseworker directly via snail mail.

The Correctional Counselor is the exact opposite of the CM in that she will claim she cannot do something then do it

anyway. Their respective handling of my requests for pictures provides a good example. Inmates in this facility are allowed to purchase "Photo Tickets" from the commissary list. Each photo ticket can be redeemed for one printed photograph that we can send to our friend or family member. I had to wait six weeks for the CM to take my picture for the first set of phototickets that I had purchased. On the other hand, the CC took my photo within one week after I had purchased a second set, even though she had claimed that she did not know how to do it. Even though neither of them give honest answers, I would prefer to deal with the CC, because she actually knows how to get things done.

The cops rotate through the living units so fast here that by the time we can get to know them, they move on to the next unit. On average, any given cop is assigned to the MB Unit for about two months. Ms. H. was very interactive with the inmates, which is rare in my experience here. One spring day, when our regular outdoor recreation period had been cancelled, Ms. H. joked with me that recreation periods can also take place in the day room. Later that afternoon, during her regular rounds, Ms. H. visited the table where I was playing Scrabble with another inmate, and she seemed genuinely interested in our game. Ms. R. was both friendly and funny. Once I asked her if she spoke Spanish, because she has a Latin last name. She answered, "I only speak English and Bullshit!" Now Ms. R. is working in the J-Building with ICE detainees. Sometimes I greet her from the small recreation yard, but there is

always a fence between us.

Ms. W. was a sweetheart. She worked in the MB Unit for the overnight shift from 6:00 PM until 6:00 AM. One evening, she convinced my former bunkie to take his daily anti-seizure medication when he claimed that he did not feel like getting out of bed. When I first met Ms. W, she performed a cursory cell inspection ^{of} in our room. When I asked her for a copy of the Cell Search Receipt, she actually filled out another form by hand and gave it to me for my records. Ms. W. is the exception to the rule. By contrast, Ms. B. asked me to sign an already completed Cell Search Receipt before she had even entered our room. In general, the cops here do as little work as possible. They often just sit behind the front desk and bark orders at us. They usually do mail call by last name and medical trips by cell number. Most of the cops here are impersonal and do not make an effort to get to know the inmates as individuals.

Aberrations at TCCF:

I have personally witnessed three instances of staff misconduct in Mississippi that cannot be explained away by a lack of organizational skills or sheer negligence.

The unit manager's job description in the TCCF Handbook (page 4) states that she is "responsible for all matters pertaining to the units, including case management, security, programs, safety, and sanitation." When I first arrived in the MB living unit, the cleaning tools and supplies were always available to inmates in the cleaning closet adjoining the day

room.

room. One morning, I found the door of the cleaning closet locked. Then I noticed that a unit porter was removing the cleaning materials, including the dustpan and broom, from the unit. He claimed that he needed to refill the spray bottles with cleaning solutions. The unit porter actually stored the cleaning tools and supplies in a separate closet attached to the main exit corridor of the M-Building.

When an MB day room porter complained that the cleaning supplies were sometimes not available during the morning headcounts, the unit manager decided to make them available only during the daily headcounts. Now that the availability of the cleaning supplies has been arbitrarily restricted to headcounts exclusively, it is impossible for regular inmates to clean our cells, because we are locked in during headcounts. According to the TCCF Handbook (page 6), "Inmates are responsible for the sanitation and order of their assigned cell and all items within their living area."

I received regular visits from family members and friends about four times per year in Vermont. In Vermont prisons, an approved visitor can visit a specific inmate during his regular weekly visiting hours without informing facility staff in advance. I have been living in Mississippi for more than nine months, and I have not yet entertained a single outside visitor. Part of the reason is distance, and part of it is policy.

The regular visiting hours for out-of-state Vermont inmates at TCCF are Saturdays and Sundays from 9:00 AM until 4:00 PM. According to the "Visitation" section in the TCCF Handbook,

(page 20), "The inmate must have the visitor's name, address, relationship to the inmate, and date of the intended visit on the request form." The correctional counselor explained to me in no uncertain terms that if an approved visitor's name does not appear on the visiting room roster for a specific date, that approved visitor will be denied access to the facility. Yet there is no blank line designated, "Date of the Intended Visit" on the Inmate Visiting Request Form for Vermont Inmates at TCCF-MS. It is basically just a copy of the Vermont DOC's Inmate Visiting List form, where the date of a regular visit would be irrelevant. I have concluded that any approved visitor would have to call ahead to inform the record supervisor of the date of the intended visit.

In addition, the SSCF Resident Handbook (page 37) requires, "The visiting list must include the exact address and dates of birth for all visitors." Because I did not have the visitors' dates of birth, I have missed two potential opportunities to receive a visit here in Mississippi.

In early May, 2019, I received an unexpected letter from a pair of second-year law students at the Vermont Law School in South Royalton. The man hails from Mississippi, and the woman originates from Minnesota. They were looking for a "service project," and news of the recent transfer of Vermont inmates from a state-run facility in Pennsylvania to a private prison in Mississippi caught their interest. They had written in their introductory letter, "We are traveling to Mississippi on May 17th and 18th. We hope to visit you at Tallahatchie County."

They sounded serious to me, and May 18th fell on a Saturday, which is a regular visiting day for Vermont inmates. I submitted a Visitor Request Form including their full names, the relationship to inmate (correspondent), and the date of their intended visit. I did not know their dates of birth (DOB), but DOBs are not specified as necessary at TCCF so I entered N/A on that line. My Mississippi case manager returned a faxed copy of my visitor request form after the date of the intended visit. My Vermont caseworker had inscribed on the form, "Denied for lack of DOB's."

My regular correspondent attempted to arrange a visit from his cousin and nephew ^hwo live in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, which is located near the Gulf Coast. He filled out a Visitor Request Form with all their information except their respective dates of birth, and I submitted it to my case manager. They recently took a trip through the Mississippi Delta region, where Tutwiler is located. After their trip, the cousin wrote to my correspondent via e-mail message, "I was not able to visit Bruce during this trip for two reasons: (1) I called and determined that Vermont inmates can receive visitors only on Saturdays and Sundays; (2) I am not in their files as an approved visitor. I know you sent some paperwork on my behalf, but the place did not seem like a model of efficiency when I called." Apparently, I am not the only one who is frustrated with the administration at TCCF.

The TCCF administration does not seem to empathize with the loneliness of the exiles from Vermont. Many inmates in this

group have not seen their loved ones for many years, since they first left Vermont. Lack of clarity in the rules, and lack of consistency in interpreting them, when added to the distance from Vermont, make visits very rare if not impossible.

The differences between the resident mail delivery systems in Vermont and Mississippi illustrate the respective levels of organization and the resulting care for inmates. In Vermont, the daily mail is delivered to each living unit during the third shift between 10:00 PM and 6:00 AM. The third shift unit officer sorts the mail alphabetically by last name and posts a written list on the podium. After breakfast, inmates check the mail list for their names and can request letters at their leisure. Legal mail is distributed outside the living units by the Shift Supervisors.

Here in Mississippi, both regular mail and legal mail are delivered to the living units sometime in the afternoon. Inmates need to sign for their legal mail at the front desk. Some cops distribute facility mail and personal mail by going door-to-door from cell to cell, but they will not deliver mail if the resident is absent from his room. Most cops call out names randomly from behind the front desk, but the acoustics in this cavernous building are very poor. The inmates who are waiting for their mail at the front desk are expected to notify other inmates who cannot hear the announcement of their names. In order to receive his mail, an inmate must report personally to the front desk. No inmate is allowed to collect the personal mail for another inmate.

One evening in mid-May, a female cop informed me that I had received a letter from my father. At the time, I was standing next to the microwave oven 50 feet in front of the cop's desk. There were only 30 seconds left on the microwave timer. I asked the cop to hold onto my mail until I was done heating up my food. When I approached the front desk, the cop refused to deliver my letter, because I had not reported to her immediately when she had called my name. After shift change, a male cop distributed my mail when I asked him for it.

Conclusion:

The pervasive attitude among the prison staff here is that prison life should entail suffering and punishment. Therefore, they are not motivated to solve inmates' problems or improve resident morale. All three levels of staff who interact directly with inmates have proven themselves to be both vindictive and dysfunctional.

Overall, Vermont prison staff are more organized and compassionate. Therefore, Vermont public correctional facilities do function as benign dictatorships, as my correspondent suggested. Because of staff antipathy, inefficiency, and negligence, however, this private prison in Mississippi operates more like a malevolent dictatorship.