

*Copyright © Journal of Prisoners on Prisons (1995)
All Rights Reserved. Cite this article as the Formatted Online Version
(2006)*

“Runaway Prison or Mr. Smith goes to Harrisburg”

-Victor Hassine

* * *

Prison overcrowding is the screeching raven of catastrophic change, a change so profound it transforms the very structure and operation of an entire prison system, not just individual prisons. This mutation in turn gives rise to the formation of a renegade bureaucracy with a singular goal of maintaining its own uncertain existence.

To better illustrate the nature and extent of the change prison overcrowding promises, consider the following analogy.

Imagine you're standing on the boarding platform of a train station waiting for your train. As you stand waiting, you take for granted that the train will come to take you to your destination. Experience has led you to rely on the train as an efficient means of mass transit.

Your train finally arrives. You board one of its cars and take your seat among a carload of other commuters. As the train travels you can feel it moving faster than usual. This does not alarm you, but you stop reading your newspaper, take a look at your watch and then peer out one of the train's fixed glass windows. You notice the countryside whizzing past you at an alarming rate. Suddenly you observe the train speed past your station stop.

Now you are alarmed, but a voice over the loudspeaker apologizes for the inconvenience, assures everyone everything is under control and promises the train will stop at the next station. You are now annoyed as you anticipate being late for work. The train continues to accelerate.

Soon, you watch as the train speeds past yet another station stop and you begin to realize that something is seriously wrong. You get out of your seat to find a conductor or anyone in authority and you get caught in a crush of passengers who have decided to do the same thing. You hear the voice over the loudspeaker, but because of all the confusion you can't make

out what it is saying. In any event, you no longer trust the announcements. The train continues to accelerate.

The crowd, the uncertainty and the noise causes panic and it is at this point that the train has changed from a vehicle of mass transit to a machine that does nothing more than generate fear, panic and anger among the passengers who now must face an uncertain future.

As the panic and confusion persists, you and your fellow passengers eventually become accustomed to this life on the edge and desperation sets in. No one cares anymore about jobs, schedules or the future. Everyone is thinking about right now and how they are going to survive the madness. Every human intuition has surrendered to the primitive instincts of "survival of the fittest". The passengers are no longer passengers and the train is no longer a train.

Now imagine yourself the train engineer. You were the first to realize the train's acceleration problem. Because you are a trained expert you felt certain you could fix any mechanical problem you discovered. You radio the home office and inform them of the problem. You then pull out your repair manual and go about trying to fix the engine. As you attempt to make repairs, the train continues to accelerate and refuses to respond to any of your efforts. At this point you begin to worry.

As you work feverishly to return the train to normal operation, you begin to hear the passengers banging on the door that separates the engine room from the passenger cars. The frustration of your failed efforts, the loud high-pitched hum of the uncooperative engine and the panicked cries of the passengers combine to unnerve you. You angrily take a moment to bark over the loudspeaker, "Everything is under control passengers please remain in your seats". But the banging and screams intensify as the train continues to accelerate. You need help but you know you're not going to get any.

As you relentlessly try to fix the engine, you realize the longer you are unable to stop the train's acceleration, the more problems you are forced to fix. Weaknesses in design and construction of the train has caused additional mechanical failures. You find yourself reacting to a multitude of new emergencies which gives

you little or no opportunity to address the original acceleration problem. You are convinced that unless this acceleration is stopped, there will likely be some catastrophe in the form of a collision or derailment.

It is at this point that you are no longer a trained professional making sure train schedules are kept or that the train engine itself is operating properly. You have become a reactionary crisis control manager who no longer cares about where the train is headed. Your sole function has become to avert a catastrophe. Meanwhile, the train continues its acceleration.

Now imagine yourself another commuter waiting for his train. You're standing on the loading platform and all of a sudden you watch and feel your train speed past you. You manage to spy some passengers banging on the window of the passing train. You notice some of the passengers are holding up signs which you can't make out because the train is moving too fast.

This causes you some concern until you hear an authoritative voice over a loudspeaker apologize for the inconvenience and announce everything is under control. You are instructed to wait for the next train which will arrive shortly to take you to your destination.

Though annoyed, you are a bit relieved that you will be able to reach your destination, albeit late. It never occurs to you that once you board the next train the same thing that happened to the sign waving passengers you just saw could happen to you.

In July of 1981, as I entered the Pennsylvania State Correctional Institution at Graterford (SCIG) for the first time, I became like the man who boarded the runaway train.

When I first entered SCIG, I expected to find myself in a rigid, structured environment designed to deter and punish. I hoped to discover that prisoners were, in fact, being coddled in prison as the papers and TV reported so often. In any event, I believed everything was under control and that my prison home had a definite purpose and end. However, within the first few weeks I realized something was very wrong. Fights were breaking out everywhere, the sale of drugs and contraband was rampant and it seemed as if everyone was carrying a weapon.

After only three months I watched a man in the cell across from mine catch on fire in his cell. The solid steel door of his cell was locked but I could see him through the fixed glass window at the top of his cell door. His muffled screams for help and his banging on the steel door could be heard as smoke squeezed out of some narrow openings in his cell. It took some time for the guards to isolate and respond to his cries. As the smouldering man was finally carried out of his cell, I remember telling myself, "I had, better never need any help in this prison."

About 30 days later, with the image of the burning man still on my mind, the prison was locked down while prisoners with pistols and shotguns had a shootout with State Police in a botched escape attempt turned hostage taking. As the drama played out over the next few days --I stayed in my cell watching heavily armed State Policemen rushing past, back and forth. "My God, how did these guys get guns?" I asked myself and that is when the panic set in.

In the months and years following the hostage crisis at SCIG, things got more violent, more uncontrolled and a lot more crowded. I was in such a continuous state of panic that I stopped being scared and became desperate. I lived every moment as if it were my last and I began to believe I would never survive. I watched as prisoners beat and stabbed other prisoners and guards alike. I also watched as guards beat prisoners. I watched as gangs of prisoners robbed and stole with impunity while staff smuggled in contraband for sale on the black market. Rapes were common as were sexual contacts between prisoners and staff members. Then there were no less than three riots in a 12-month period, all precipitated by electrical failures which caused blackouts on the housing blocks at times when all cells were unlocked.

Like the passenger on the runaway train, I had entered a system which had changed into a relentless generator of despair, corruption, and violence. I had become a "moment dweller" with no thought of a future.

In 1984, I filed a conditions of confinement suit in Federal District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, *HASSINE v. JEFFES*, 896, F.2d 169 (3rd Cr. 1988). It was my way of banging at the window and screaming for help. But like the all too common nightmare scene in a

low budget "B" horror movie, no one around could hear my loud cries for help.

Prisoners, experts, guards, the warden, and even the Commissioner of Corrections Glen Jeffes testified at the trial. The judge listened intently, but nevertheless in the end all he heard was the Department of Corrections' (DOC) claim that everything was under control and that they would spend \$40,000,000 in capital improvements. Like the runaway train's engineer, the DOC felt it could fix the machine, all the while ignoring the hapless sounds of the passengers banging on the engine room's door. The judge accepted the DOC's promise to repair and ruled in their favor. In the summer of 1986, three months after the trial, I was transferred across the state to SCI Pittsburgh, (SCIP).

SCI-Pittsburgh was one of the first Pennsylvania state prisons to begin double ceiling prisoners in 1983. My suit at SCIG delayed double ceiling in that institution until 1988, so when I arrived SCIP was in fact more crowded than SCIG. Also, Commissioner Jeffes had caused to be constructed a 500-cell Federal style housing unit right on the grounds of the existing SCIP main yard. The plan was to move all the prisoners into the new units and then tear down the old housing units to make room for a new yard. Unfortunately, the DOC never did tear down the old cell blocks, so 2,100 men lived in space designed for 1,000 and there was now no exercise yard.

Violence and despair were a way of life at SCIP, and corruption had become institutionalized. My first day at SCIP I witnessed a Lieutenant beat a prisoner over the head with a blackjack right in the middle of the cell block. Thirty days later there was a riot at SCIP. The auditorium was set on fire, two guards were seriously hurt and many prisoners were beaten and/or raped. I witnessed many atrocities which demonstrated to me that human beings can very easily revert to prehistoric savagery. I realized that my transfer to SCIP never took me off the runaway train, it just moved me to a different passenger car.

After the riot, things only got worse at SCIP. In 1987, I filed another conditions of confinement suit, *TIUERY v. OWENS*, 907 F.2d 418 (3rd. Cir. 1990).

At the *Tillery* trial in 1989, there was testimony from more prisoners, experts, another warden and the new Commissioner of Corrections, David Owens. Conditions at SCIP were so extreme that the judge found living conditions at SCIP violated the constitutional ban against cruel and unusual punishment. Nevertheless, the DOC continued to claim that everything was under control. The judge appointed a master to oversee court mandated repairs, which totaled more than \$70,000,000.

In January of 1989, the random violence of SCIP hit me. I was mysteriously assaulted and nearly killed by another prisoner. I was hospitalized for three months and then transferred to yet another institution -- SCI-Camp Hill (SCICH). SCICH was the jewel in the DOC's crown. It was a fenced institution that loomed adjacent to the main offices of the DOC. In fact, one of the upper story conference rooms in the DOC had a large picture window which overlooked all of SCICH. If the DOC was in fact a train, then SCICH was the first class car that lay directly behind the engine.

It was during my first day at SCICH that I met Richard C. Smith who was then the Deputy Superintendent of Operations for SCICH. He was the youngest man in Pennsylvania history to be appointed to the position of Deputy Superintendent. A ruddy, stocky man, he worked his way up through the ranks, starting as a Correctional Officer I at SCIP in 1977. His meteoric rise to power promised him the possibility of a commissionership sometime in the future.

I spoke, in depth, several times with Deputy Smith and he never hesitated to tell me he neither liked me nor wanted me in his prison. He told me I was just a manipulative inmate crying wolf for attention or sympathy.

He assured me he ran a tight ship and he did not want me to start any trouble. He rejected my claims that it was the conditions and not me that had cost the DOC so much money in repairs, and he certainly did not want to hear my claims that the prison system was out of control.

Mr. Smith transferred me to SCI-Rockview (SCIR) in August of 1989, unwittingly sparing me the consequences of one of the greatest catastrophes ever to hit the Pennsylvania DOC.

SCIR is a medium/minimum security prison which was considered at the time the Allenwood of the Pennsylvania state prison system. So as I lay in my cell still recovering from my serious injury and adjusting to my most recent transfer, I began to think about all the prisons I'd been in and all the prison managers I'd met who, like Mr. Smith, had portrayed me as the problem. I knew that until Mr. Smith and men like Mr. Smith acknowledged that there was a serious problem with the functioning of their prisons they would never be motivated to find solutions capable of fixing the problems.

Like the engineer in my example, Mr. Smith was so caught up in the day-to-day crisis management of his overcrowded prison that he could not (or would not) see the underlying problem. His passengers (prisoners) no longer meant much to him, because the runaway prison left him no time to consider them as anything other than a nuisance.

I began to think nobody in the DOC would ever acknowledge the truth about the runaway prison system, that is until Mr. Smith went to Harrisburg.

1989 proved a particularly disastrous year for the Pennsylvania DOC. In March of that year, a small riot broke out at SCIR, then in October a small riot broke out at SCI Huntingdon (Pennsylvania's most secure prison at the time). Then on October 25, a little more than a month after Mr. Smith had transferred me, SCICH had the largest and most costly riot in Pennsylvania's history. SCICH housed about 3,000 men at the time and for four days the prisoners controlled the whole institution. Hundreds of angry and desperate prisoners burned down buildings and destroyed property. Many prisoners and guards were savagely beaten and raped. In the aftermath of the riot the prison was almost completely destroyed before the Pennsylvania State Police managed to regain control. The lead car of the runaway train had derailed and Mr. Smith was the man in charge.

Shortly after the riot, Mr. Smith was fired, bringing his promising career to an abrupt end. On February 21, 1990, the Pennsylvania Senate Judiciary Committee conducted an open hearing to investigate "Recent incidents at Pennsylvania State Correctional Institutions". Mr. Smith was asked to give sworn testimony at the hearing.

In a diatribe lasting some 162 pages, Mr. Smith attempted to explain why the riot was not his fault and why his firing was not fair. Instead, Mr. Smith, for the first time ever, gave an insider's view of what was really happening in the DOC as overcrowding caused the prison system to race out of control. Mr. Smith became the Joe Valachi of the Pennsylvania DOC as he graphically and methodically outlined incident after incident of corruption, violence, drug dealing and incompetence by his former DOC bosses, co-workers and subordinates. These shocking and sometimes horrifying accounts gave outsiders a real understanding of how overcrowding changes each and every aspect of a prison system. However, one should never forget that if Mr. Smith had not been fired, he would have continued to keep his secrets in accordance with some mafia-like vow of silence. He only decided to share his experiences with the public after he felt he had been jilted.

It remains to be seen how the SCICH riots and Mr. Smith's testimony will impact on the future development of the Pennsylvania DOC. I am certain that if more people examine Mr. Smith's "Tell All", problems could then be identified and proper repairs made. Unfortunately, as it stands today, I am still a passenger on a runaway train. Whatever you do, don't listen to those reassuring voices on the loudspeaker, instead listen to Mr. Smith. He knows the real deal.