Speech: A "Dangerous" Right?

Living in the supermax is hell. Not because we are strapped to the rack or subjected to thumbscrews as those things have long since been abolished. But oppression is alive and well at "the Vatican" as ADX Florence is derisively known among inmates.

When I say the word oppression, torture and cruelty are the common things that most people think of. Yet oppression comes in many forms, both subtle and overt. Here it is subtle but highly destructive.

Imagine for a moment being locked in a bathroom with an alarm clock you cannot turn off. The noise at first would be tolerable. Then it would become annoying. As you tried to ~~could~~ turn it off and realized it was a futile effort the buzzing sound would penetrate your brain, seep into your flesh and transform the clock into a maddness inducing device. One which you'd come to loathe with unspeakable intensity.

This is how prison officials drive you crazy. Like the clock, they won't flay the flesh from your bones but they will do things to drive you out of your mind. One of the favorite methods of such oppression is censorship. Letters to family and community organizations spend weeks in the clutches of prison staff being "reviewed". Many are rejected, rectification of which is impossible.

Examples of my mail which has been rejected are as follows: 1) Outgoing letters seeking to hire

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companies to type letters, court documents and conduct research, 2) a newsletter that urged prisoners into a hunger strike as opposed to violent protest. Why were these letters so "dangerous" to prison officials? Because to them, a prisoner exercising their first amendment rights is the worst form of mutiny.

Yet prisoners are allowed to receive erotic photos bordering on pornography; books which depict violence, murder, rape and yes, terrorism. Even the prison library is filled with books depicting all sorts of depravity. Now before one get's the wrong idea, I dont oppose these materials. What I oppose is the ever-increasing arbitrary and capricious restrictions on speech.

Just as the NYPD bans bullhorns to the "Occupy Wall Street" protestors, so too do prison officials ban instruments of expression such as typewriters and any attempt to have free citizens do such things as typing. The excuse is, it's an permissible restriction because we can still write by hand. But as any college student knows alot of time is saved using Microsoft Word rather than pen and paper. The reality is, these activities serve to amplify and facilitate speech. Speech being the telling of the cruelty, oppression and psychological torture being done by prison staff in the name of the American taxpayer.

For that reason "speech" is more closely monitored and regulated than the shanks, drugs and contraband that fills so many Penitentiary yards. Or so say the tyrants.

On Sept. 9, 1971 prisoners at Attica in upstate New York rioted over, among other things, restrictions on speech. When the tears, glass and smoke cleared 31 prisoners, 11 staff lay dead. In the years following this tragedy the courts made dramatic increases in the rights of prisoners. By the 1980's prison uprisings had largely subsided. In this moment of peace the Government began a rapid expansion in the number of prisons and prisoners, silently building modern day slave plantations. And next throughout the 90's the Supreme Court and Congress stripped and redefined prisoners' rights all but erasing the gains of the 1970's.

Now 40 years after Attica prison officials are once again forgetting that prisoners are sent to prison AS punishment, not FOR punishment and drunk with unchecked power find ways to torment and irritate prisoners at every turn seeming to forget that even the friendliest animal will strike back if poked enough with a stick.

As prisoners in first Georgia, then Ohio, now California rise up to protest such oppression and censorship I remember an old saying, "Those who forget the past are bound to repeat it." On the 40th anniversary of Attica I can only think one thing with sadness: Here we go again.

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