

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

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Jerry Sandusky
A Lesson On Abuse of Power

The report issued by former FBI Director Luois Freeh alleged that the failure to act by 4 top Penn State University officials was responsible for allowing Jerry Sandusky to commit repeated sexual assaults on young boys on campus for over a decade. The motive apparently being to avoid the consequences of bad publicity. For those of you who have no experience with an organization that is so powerful that it operates as a law unto itself, this may seem like a bizarre occurrence. Let me assure you, it is not.

Wisconsin Department of Corrections officials have engaged in similar cover-ups in the past, most notably a few years ago when a woman in Taycheedah Correctional Institution (the state's prison for women) was placed in segregation for lying about staff. She alleged that a male staff and another prisoner were engaged in an ongoing sexual relationship. Even when the prisoner became noticeably pregnant and officials acknowledged the sexual contact, the woman was left in segregation for lying about staff. It was only after the story was covered by the news media that the woman was released from segregation. If I remember correctly, the pregnant woman was also held in segregation - presumably so her pregnancy would not become known to the other prisoners and staff. It has been a while since I read about the incident so my details may be inaccurate, but the gist of the story is true (you can easily look it up in the archives of newspapers like the Wisconsin State Journal). This incident led to the state legislature criminalizing sexual contact between prisoners and staff. Curiously, since that law went into effect, only female staff members have been prosecuted for having sex with male prisoners. Apparently, no males have been having sex with female prisoners since the law went into effect.

I must clarify that I am speaking based on my personal knowledge as I remember it. Without access to the open records law I have no way of knowing for sure that no male staff have been prosecuted. All I can say for sure is that I haven't heard of any incidents and usually incidents like that become wide-spread gossip in prisons when they occur. Do the research for yourself and if any of my facts are incorrect, let me know and I will correct my statements and repost them.

But getting back to my main point - which is not about coerced sex with people incapable of giving consent - when an organization's leaders are given absolute power, they tend to develop "groupthink". Groupthink is a term psychologists use to describe an insular group of people who have a common belief about what constitutes reality and what the response to that reality should be.

Viet Nam was a notable example. American officials were all absolutely convinced that if they let Viet Nam fall, then all of Asia and eventually the entire world would be taken over by communists. It was a bizarre belief in what was termed "the domino theory", bolstered by ideology and unsupported by any facts.

Penn State officials had their own Viet Nam mentality, only in their case they had a common belief that anything was better than allowing the truth to besmirch the school's reputation. Even allowing a serial pedophile to continue to rape young boys on campus was better than staining the reputation of the school by doing the right thing and exposing Sandusky.

Corrections officials in Stanley are no exception to the groupthink syndrome that wielding absolute power creates. Thus far, I have not witnessed any egregious instances of abuse of prisoners. But I have been subjected to countless policies and decisions based on a paranoid (and in my opinion delusional) obsession with security. The restrictions in place in Stanley are in my opinion pervasive, intrusive, petty and pointless. The most amazing thing about this situation is not that some corrections officials choose to err on the side of caution to the point of ridiculousness. What is amazing is that they all agree on what is being done here in the name of security. A truly horrendous case of groupthink.

I recently spent 9 years in minimum security where this wasn't occurring. Having experienced how wide-open and relaxed a medium security prison can be, experiencing conditions at Stanley is mind boggling. I have commented in other blogs about some of the policies in Stanley so I won't repeat them here.

The DOC needs to stop promoting from within and recruit administrators from academia, mental health organizations and even out-of-state prison systems to purge itself of the groupthink that is making the Wisconsin prison system so bizarre.