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IS REFORMATION POSSIBLE IN PRISON TODAY?

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The author has made several contributions to this *Journal*. The last, under the title: *Correctional Objectives Today* was published in 37(3).

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The opinions expressed in this article are personal to the writer, and are not to be construed as official or as necessarily reflecting the views of the Navy Department or of the Navy Service at large.

Throughout the literature of recent years concerning the philosophy of imprisonment, we often find one premise expounded as the cardinal purpose of our modern prison administration—that of reformation of the offender through institutional treatment. Let us, for the moment, more closely examine and ask ourselves: “Is it proper and just to fix responsibility for reformation upon present day prison management?”

The value of imprisonment as a reformatory agency at our present stage of penal progress has been greatly overstressed. We should become more cognizant of this fact and condition our thinking regarding the problems of prison management accordingly. If reformation of character does occur during imprisonment, (and this must remain, at best, mere assumption) then it has been effected in spite of the atmosphere and environment rather than because of it. It is true that some men can derive profit from any situation no matter what it may be. Rather, it would appear that the principal function of a prison today is more diagnostic than therapeutic and to assume otherwise is to affix upon prison management an unfair responsibility which, through certain inherent obstacles in the purely situational elements of a prison today and in the present day understanding of human behavior, is virtually impossible of fulfillment. The prison cannot be regarded as the beginning and end of treatment of the offender. It must be regarded as a clinic in the correctional system wherein, through an understanding of the problems involved, a framework, and framework only, of reformation can be begun for the use of the community agencies of supervision following release.

It must be realized that the very media of treatment, whereby the goals of reformation are attempted, are fundamentally un-

sound. Imprisonment is incompatible with reformation for imprisonment means punishment, the state of enforced removal from society for socially unacceptable behavior, and punishment and reformation are incongruous by their very definitions. Imprisonment necessarily involves a rigid regimentation and an outwardly imposed discipline which are predicated upon an unnatural state of fear and the medium of force. Those who feel that reformation is possible in prison subscribe to the premise that what a man is made to do, as institutionally acceptable behavior, he will wish to do even after the incentives of prison confinement are removed provided he is made to do it often enough. They assume, thereby, that repetition through force will change habits of thought which are basic for a change in character and reformation. They assume that habit patterns can be materially changed for the better after the age of puberty, that the essential nature of character moulded before this age can be altered. This thinking is not psychologically sound. From this system of thought, we can expect, at best, only outward conformity of behavior within the prison. Prison life, by its very atmosphere and pattern of routine, regimentation and control is different from life in the normal community and this adjustment, then, is not the test. True reformation, therefore, cannot be fostered in this atmosphere for reformation cannot be forced on anyone. It can come only from self-interest which, in turn, is governed largely by a constancy of outward stimulation to do so and the situational elements of a prison today are yet far from favorable for such motivation.

It must be recalled that prisons were not originally designed to reform their inmates but to replace certain outmoded forms of punishment and, to a large measure, capital punishment. The things they have replaced were never regarded as reformatory and neither, at first, were prisons which took their place. The thought that they might have such value was gradually evolved on a trial and error basis only and, as such, is yet subject to critical evaluation.

The ever-present element of force permeating all prison life in one form or another largely conditions the atmosphere of a prison as unfavorable for reformation. Force implies the absence of a common purpose, an incompleteness of cooperation between two parties and this is incompatible with the media of reformation; moreover, with force there is always an accompanying state of resistance. This state of resistance in prisons is self-evident from the almost perfect cleavage in thought and purpose we find between those who are confined and those charged with

responsibility of secure confinement. As involuntary members of institutional communities which they mutually dislike, usually rejected or ignored by society and well aware of this status, the inmates develop a strong sense of loyalty and sympathy for their fellow-inmates through their common experiences of trial and confinement. No matter how hard a few may try, they cannot completely and loyally identify themselves with the workers of the institution, their dictates and avowed efforts of reformation, when realizing that their primary function for which they are paid is to keep them securely confined. There is, then, a natural cleavage which is further fostered by the many rules forbidding fraternization between the two groups. Thus, there are in any given institution, at any given time, two clashing codes of thought and behavior—administrative and inmate. Under these conditions, it is all but impossible for any inmate to enter into any administrative measures designed administratively for his benefit and improvement without suspicion, apathy or natural reluctance. Little possibility exists, thereby, for the formation of any genuine comradeship or emotional bond necessary for the complete understanding which underlies reformation between the prison worker and the inmate, the reformer and the one to be reformed. This prevents the inmate from taking an active mental part in his own reformation and little, thereby, can be expected in the matter of moulding character. Reformation cannot be accomplished en masse, by impersonal contact or by treating everyone as though moulded in the same form irrespective of their individual differences.

It is a well-recognized fact, that in the overwhelming majority of prisons today, the relatively few prison workers of necessity are too concerned with the routine operation of the prison to find ample time and opportunity for purely reformatory purposes with other than a very few of the individuals confined. The mere installation of certain popular physical facilities designed for reformation is not enough. The reformatory processes of a penal institution are only as great as the philosophy, understanding, purpose and availability of the men who staff it.

Few will deny that, at our present stage of progress, imprisonment offers us today the best physical protection against the criminal class; if, however, we claim that reformation of the criminal is also to be accomplished by the prison, then the prison itself must be still further reformed. The idea of reformation, although over-stressed as a function to be fulfilled by a prison, must not, however, be abandoned. It is this principle which has

effected so many progressive and commendable changes in prison life and administration tending toward the improvement of the general welfare and happiness of the men confined; moreover, it has undoubtedly prevented many from becoming worse as a result of their confinement. However, we must recondition our thinking and realize that there are certain situational barriers as yet standing in our way to the realistic fulfillment of this ideal. A sound philosophy underlying a prison program will recognize these limitations and rather, emphasize those functions which the prison can perform adequately, leaving to the community agencies to have later contact with the offenders the role of supplementing these initial efforts more appropriately within their own setting.
