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Drones, Sanctions and the Prison Industrial Complex

By Brian Terrell

April 23, 2013

Editor's note: Brian Terrell was arrested in April of last year for protesting drone warfare at Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri and wrote the following from Yankton Federal Prison Camp, where he is nearing the end of a six month sentence.

In the final weeks of a six month prison sentence for protesting remote control murder by drones, specifically from Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri, I can only reflect on my time of captivity in light of the crimes that brought me here. In these ominous times, it is America's officials and judges and not the anarchists who exhibit the most flagrant contempt for the rule of law and it is due to the malfeasance of these that I owe the distinction of this sabbatical.

As I share in the perspectives gained from residing in the federal prison camp in Yankton, South Dakota, it is important to disclose that as a political prisoner sent up on trumped misdemeanor charges for a few months, my situation is not the same as my fellow inmates – all nonviolent “offenders,” most are prisoners of the war on drugs and most are serving sentences of many years. I also try to avoid the temptation to exaggerate the hardships and privations I've suffered here. Certainly, doing time in a minimum security camp is easier time than in most other kinds of jails. If basic necessities are barely met, they are met. I am in good company and time is passing with little drama and without fear. For me, these months have been more a test of patience than of courage.

Still, this is a hard place to be in many ways and it would be wrong to minimize what people suffer here. Among these are the basic humiliation of being numbered and then counted at intervals through the day, frequent shakedowns, random frisks (stranger's fingers fumbling with

a lacerated heart, Solzhenitsyn remembered) and strip searches, separation from family and friends, severely limited visits, intercepted mail and interrupted phone calls, incessant noise and overcrowding, petty rules arbitrarily enforced.

The regime here is one of omnipresent and unrelieved bureaucracy. What I am experiencing over a few months as inconvenience and minor irritation, cumulative over years can amount to a crushing and ruinous burden.

“A concentration camp is the complete obliteration of privacy,” wrote Czech novelist Milan Kundera. It is “a world in which people live crammed together constantly, night and day. Brutality and violence are secondary, and not the least indispensable characteristics.”

At Yankton and in camps and prisons like it, the federal government has achieved the complete obliteration of privacy as the drug war has increased America’s already bloated prison population sevenfold over the last twenty years. No country locks up more of its citizens for so long sentences as the United States and it can be said, too, that the government is taking strides to extend the obliteration of privacy to the general population.

What the government has not been able to accomplish by locking up suspected drug users and dealers by the thousands is any reduction in addiction or in the sale and use of illegal drugs. There is little doubt that jailing drug related “criminals” causes more and not less drug use and crime and yet the so-called criminal justice system is expending an increasingly greater fortune in human and material resources on prisons, contrary to the ends of public safety or rehabilitation.

Before he retired, President Eisenhower warned of the emergence of a self-perpetuating “military industrial complex” producing weapons and provoking conflict for the sake of ensuring a market for more weapons. Likewise, America is increasingly in the grip of what some call a “prison industrial complex,” building and filling prisons for the purpose of ensuring fodder for more prisons.

The United States government does not run its foreign policy on any more enlightened or humane premise than it does its prisons.

The refrain “we are creating enemies faster than we are killing (or capturing) them” is a bit of truth that gets leaked to the media occasionally in recent years. Sometimes the sentiment is voiced by even the most senior military commanders and applied variously to any of several strategies, including night raids in Afghanistan, check points in Iraq, the prison at Guantánamo, and drone attacks in Yemen and Pakistan.

As with prisons, United States military and diplomatic policies run contrary to their stated objectives of peace and public safety and yet they persist with little question. Prisons and the military, America’s dominant institutions, exist not to bring healing to domestic ills or relief for foreign threats but to exacerbate and manipulate them for the profit of the wealthiest few, at great cost and peril for the rest of us.

One of many discouraging moments of the presidential campaign that ended just before I surrendered to authorities here in November, was in a debate where Mr. Obama stated that Americans need to “decide for themselves” whose sanctions against Iran would be “more crippling,” his or Mr. Romney’s. This was an obscene and unacceptable choice.

Sanctions are portrayed as a diplomatic alternative to war but in their application can be just as lethal – warfare by another name. Sanctions that extend beyond trade in armaments to include embargoes on food, medicine, educational materials, and other necessities of life can constitute weapons of mass destruction in themselves.

It is often said that such comprehensive and indiscriminant sanctions make prisons of the countries targeted with them. While the regime of sanctions against inmates here at Yankton is less severe than the brutal conditions I witnessed in Iraq in 1998 or that the United States imposes on the people of Iran or Gaza (by proxy), the comparison is apt. Sanctions and prisons are both about imposing economic and social isolation and both can raise levels of tension and fear when applied without conscience.

Meaningful employment, decent housing, support of loved ones, education and self-respect would be helpful responses to the scourge of addiction and the crimes that ensue from it. Providing these for people at risk would be a priority for a responsible society but all these are robbed from inmates in federal prisons. Threats of war and terrorism are provoked by sanctions and invasions and can be countered only by addressing root causes.

“What father,” Jesus asked, “would give a stone to a child who asks for bread?” We know the answer and it is to our shame.

“The choice is no longer between violence and non-violence,” said Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As resources dwindle, the climate warms and nuclear arms proliferate, even more clearly now than in King’s time, “the choice is between non-violence and non-existence.”

The quality of life and the very existence of all of us depends on the security and well being of each person, especially of those we label criminal or enemy. The admonition from the Hebrew book of Proverbs to give food to our enemies when they are hungry and drink to them when they are thirsty, echoed in the Sermon on the Mount and the universal Golden Rule to treat others as we would be treated is no romantic, unobtainable dream. “Love is the only solution” to the human predicament, said Dorothy Day. Love in our time has become a hard, pragmatic, gritty requisite for survival