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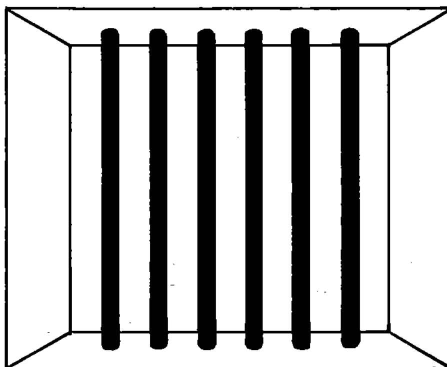


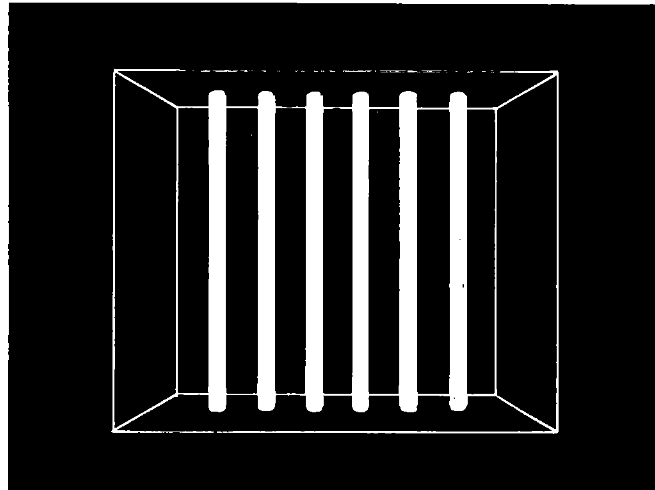
The View from the Inside

by

Stephen G. Cary

Number 160074: The View from the Inside

by Stephen G. Cary



YOUR HONOR, Mr. Cary can speak for himself."

My court-appointed attorney was nonplussed to find a middle-aged agency executive among the assortment of young revolutionaries, black ministers, ghetto residents, Indians, Mexican-Americans, and Appalachians who constituted General Abernathy's Army of the Poor. Our army had been defeated the day before in a symbolic march on the Capitol to petition Congress for the redress of grievances.

We now were before the bar of justice, charged by the District of Columbia with unlawful assembly.

The judge turned to look at me.

"All right, Mr. Cary, you may proceed."

There was much I could say, but I was the tenth case, and it was a hot day.

I spoke of my respect for the law and my reluctance to break it. I told the court that I thought it was intolerable that any child go hungry in affluent America, and since I had tried to protest this travesty through legal means with no effect, I was forced by conscience to engage in civil disobedience. I said I believed that if white America did not respond to the just demands of people who crusaded for change in peaceful ways, we might soon face those who believed in violence.

The judge was young, and he listened attentively; but, as he pointed out, it was his job to uphold the law.

"Fourteen days," he said.

Twenty-eight hours earlier I had stood with some two hundred and twenty-five fellow demonstrators on the sidewalk outside the Capitol grounds while Ralph Abernathy made his demands. Several hundred policemen blocked our entry, and we were warned that if we continued to mass in front of them we would all be arrested.

Those of us who wanted to make our protest stayed where we were. In due course we were processed, one by one, in what must have been surely one of the most peaceful and orderly mass arrests in history.

I learned a lot in the twenty-eight hours between my arrest and my trial.

I learned what is to be nobody.

I learned the frustration of the powerless in the face of arrogance of petty authority.

These are good lessons for an affluent white American to learn. They convert him quickly to the cause of police reform.

There were thirty-five or forty of us in the police van that took us to the precinct house, where they took our valuables and booked us.

I was locked in a cell with four others. Soon two more were added. Seven of us then were in a space five feet by seven. Four sat on a metal bench. Two sat on the floor. One stood. We rotated positions as the hours passed.

We were lucky; our toilet worked. In some other cells it did not. It was more than ninety degrees outside. A bright spotlight aimed at each cell intensified the heat. We stayed in these quarters for nine hours, alternately cursed by the sergeant and pitied by a black patrolman, who moved down the cell block with a pitcher of water and some paper cups.

At ten in the evening a police van took us to a courthouse, where we were lodged in a large, brightly lighted basement cell of about thirty-five feet by eighteen feet. The sixty-four men in this cell remained there for the next fourteen hours. As many as could stretched out on the marble floor and tried to sleep. The rest sat along the wall. Some dozed. Some talked. Some sang. We were taken to court at noon; at three my trial was held.

This first day I repeatedly sought permission to call a lawyer and was repeatedly refused.

Finally, exasperated, I told the police guard I had a constitutional right to make a call and demanded that my right be respected. That was a mistake.

"Mister, you son of a bitch, when you're on that side

of the bars you don't talk about rights. When I hear 'rights' I shut my ears." He walked off.

Nor was I allowed to telephone from the courthouse before I was tried. After conviction, while I was being taken to a cell to await transport to the District of Columbia jail, my police escort agreed that I should be able to notify my wife of my situation but said he had no authority to permit a call. He inquired of the turnkey, and when he disclaimed authority, the policeman got exasperated and said, "Oh, hell, just step over there and use that pay phone on the wall." I did—twenty-eight hours after my first request.

Another problem of my first day was food. From Monday morning, when I was arrested, until Tuesday night at eight, when I was processed into jail, our only food was bologna sandwiches and black coffee, provided once in the precinct house on Monday evening, when the bread was so moldy I could not eat it, and once for breakfast in the large courthouse cell, when the bread was edible. Two servings of bologna sandwiches in thirty-four hours seemed to me inadequate fare even by poverty standards.

The first thing I learned in jail was that time is cheap. My van load of prisoners entered the jail at four-thirty Tuesday afternoon. Six hours later we were lodged in cell block four, having done nothing more during that time than take our clothes off, submit to fingerprinting, turn in our valuables, dress again, have supper—and wait, wait, wait.

The only air-conditioned area in the jail accessible to prisoners was the room where we stripped naked to be examined and fingerprinted. This process took forty-five minutes, and we all shivered in the drafty cold. Everywhere else we roasted. But we were lucky. One demonstrator told me that his group shivered in this room for two hours and was not assigned to its cell block until four in the morning.

I learned also that prison labor, being cheap, is also inefficient. I discovered during fingerprinting that my name was listed on the form as Corey. I pointed out the error. From then until I was released from jail two weeks later, I protested the misspelling with vigor, since it caused problems with visitors, mail, and other essentials. But nothing could be done. The last morning, when I answered the roll call to walk out the door to freedom, I answered to the name of Corey. Once your name is entered on the official records of the District of Columbia jail, God Himself cannot get its spelling changed.

This error meant that my colleagues in the American Friends Service Committee could not find me for forty-eight hours. Bombarding the authorities with inquiries produced no result until a United States Senator was enlisted to telephone the jail. When that happened, I was in the superintendent's office in ten minutes. Nobody deliberately ignored me. Prison officials were courteous enough before and after the Senator telephoned, but a bureaucracy is a bureaucracy, and its prison manifestation is particularly virulent.

Because of the mix-up over my name, and the efforts of lawyers and others to reach me, I was removed from the list of prisoners to be transferred eighteen miles south to the minimum-security workhouse at Lorton, Virginia. When I was off-loaded there, my valuables were not, and all my friends were shipped south.

Statement Before the Judge of the Court of General Sessions, Washington, D. C., June 25, 1968

YOUR HONOR, I want to say first of all that I respect the law and do not take casually a decision to violate it. This is in fact the first time I have done so.

There are two reasons that compel my conscience in this case.

First, I consider it absolutely intolerable that in this rich country of ours any child anywhere under any circumstances should have to go to bed hungry. The Secretary of Agriculture can advance his legalisms, and the Congress can talk righteously about refusing to be coerced, but the fact remains that it is wicked and wrong that food stamps are not made available without charge to those who have no funds to pay for them. The rich are subsidized with crop payments; the rich can coerce Congress with their lobbies; our nation can pour thirty billion dollars a year into destroying a poor peasant culture ten thousand miles away, but the poor in America must continue to starve. This is wrong, Your Honor, absolutely wrong. I have tried to protest through legal channels; now I must make my protest more visible by making it more costly. It seems to me a responsible citizen can do no less.

Second, I believe that the options are running out for our country. There is not much time left for us to redeem the American promise to our poor and our dispossessed, for they are not disposed to wait longer.

We who are white and affluent must therefore either stand behind responsible leadership who crusade for change in peaceful, nonviolent ways, or we shall shortly be confronted with irresponsible leadership who crusade for change with revolutionary violence. When this happens—and if we fail now, I deeply believe that it will—our choice will be between repression and insurrection, and neither of these is to me a viable option for a free society.

Therefore, Your Honor, I feel compelled to identify myself wholly and without reservation with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

The nation honors Dr. King in death. I must honor what he stood for in life.

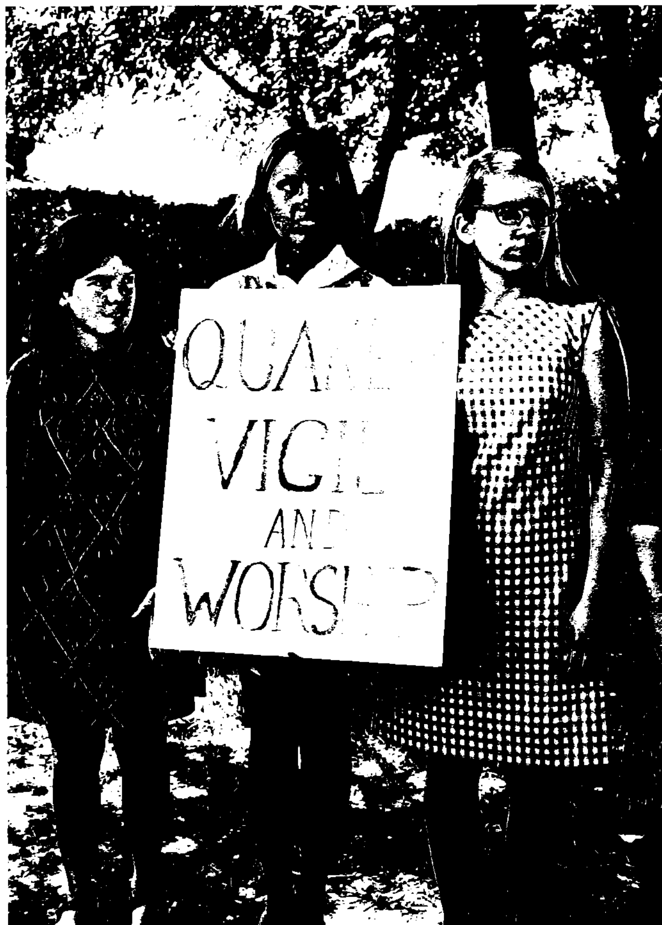
STEPHEN G. CARY

It is bad to be without funds in jail, where coupons to the canteen are a man's best friend. They may be purchased against the credit of funds turned in on entry, but when I lined up for my coupon book, five days after my sentence, I was told I had no funds and hence would receive no book. During those five days I was not able to get even a toothbrush and had begged envelopes and a few sheets of paper from a guard. Once I wrote to my wife on the torn out flyleaf of a book I found on the floor.

The day sergeant recognized my problem. He offered to get me a coupon book and advised me that in the meantime if I would indicate I had no funds I could get a toothbrush, stationery, and stamps.

After seven days, I got my coupon book, on the day the canteen was closed for its annual inventory. My transfer to Lorton was on the tenth day—the day the canteen was to open again for customers. The other essentials I did acquire without charge included toothpowder; the label on the container said it was made in 1943.

I learned also in jail that it does not pay to be black and poor, especially if you have any kind of record. The jail was full of looting suspects who were caught in the police dragnet during the King riots of early April and who, in July, were still in jail. They never had been to court or seen a lawyer. They had not been able to make bail. Many of them probably are guilty. The courts are clogged. The volunteer defenders are overworked. Nevertheless, the fact is that people are held for months because they lack influence or the resources to get out.



Photograph by Roland Freeman

Most of the time we were reasonably well treated. The guard made half a dozen prisoner counts each day, but they left us alone.

But the heat. My quarters were right under the roof. The exhaust fan that was supposed to draw air through the dormitory broke on the second day and was not repaired. In the humid heat of the Washington summer, our discomfort often was acute. In our steaming dormitory, night was as bad as day. One day the thermometer went to ninety-seven degrees. I was called down to a lower floor to receive a visitor and was locked in a narrow booth with a glass front, through which I could see my friend as we talked over a telephone. It was oppressively hot in the booth, and when my conversation was over at ten minutes to four and my caller had left, I stood at the door with the two other occupants of the booth, who also had ended their visits. The guards ignored our knocking.

After fifteen minutes we were soaked with sweat. Feeling faint, I attracted the attention of the Catholic chaplain and appealed to him over the telephone to get us out of our oven. He said he was sorry but the prisoner count at three-thirty had not come out right and a recount had to be made, during which all inmates were frozen in their locations.

I pointed out that our release from the booth would not distort the count, since the visitors' area was sealed off from the rest of the jail and constituted a counting unit. All we wanted was to escape our booth and be permitted to sit quietly in the visitors' area, where a dozen prisoners were consulting with their lawyers (who have the special privilege of face-to-face contact).

The chaplain tried his best, but to no avail. The guards only shook their heads. We would have to stay where we were. The rule book said so.

We stayed for one hundred fifty minutes. It was a terrible time. Only the adrenalin of rage kept me conscious until our release at six-thirty. By then I was so angered that I forgot my nobody status and lashed out at the guard, saying that the place wasn't fit for a pig, and if he didn't believe it, he ought to try it. When he threatened me with the hole, I decided I was better off with a closed mouth than with an open one.

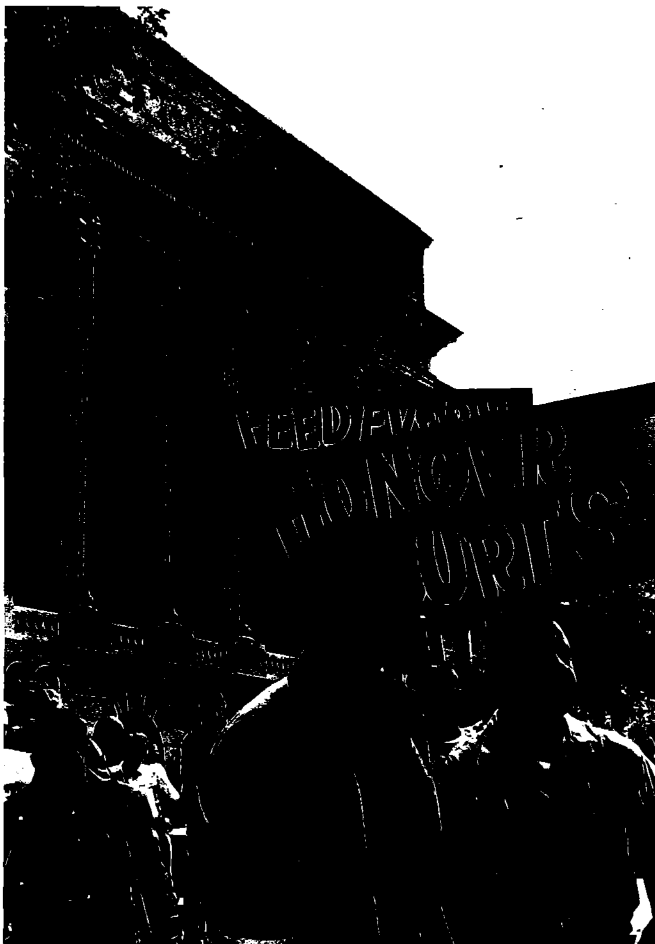
A second source of discomfort to me was the television at one end of our dormitory. It operated at full volume from seven o'clock in the morning until eleven at night. For eating, we each had a large tin spoon and an aluminum tray, on which the food was ladled from tubs.

Heat. Noise. Lack of privacy. Each of us had his own mattress and maybe a cot. On this we could lie and read a book—the dormitory boasted an odd three-shelf "library" of such things as an illustrated study of Byzantine silver coins and the *Hornblower* books. Or one could read sitting up in bed. There were no chairs and no tables in our dormitory. Reading, playing cards, and watching TV were the only options. There was thus little to do and plenty of time to do it, since we were roused each morning at five and the lights were not dimmed until eleven at night.

One night as I was standing in the chow line I heard a familiar voice. There was another Philadelphia Quaker, and another, and another.

Altogether, some twenty-five Quakers had been arrested for unlawful assembly. They had decided to identify themselves with the Poor People's Campaign by holding a meeting for worship on the Capitol steps, where groups are not allowed to congregate, even in the presence of God.

The first group of demonstrators to be arrested, along with me, had been given varying sentences, depending on the mood of the judge who heard their case. Some got suspended sentences; some, ninety days. Members of this second group were all heard by two judges and were given more consistent sentences—generally five to ten days.



Photograph by Bill Wingell

It was shortly after I was joined by the Quaker reinforcements that the transfer to Lorton materialized. We had been told that the new facility was minimum security, "practically a country club," and we looked forward to the cooler breezes of the country and the added freedom of the workhouse. We were disappointed.

We went through three hours of reverse processing. Then we were handcuffed together, locked in the police van, and driven southward, tailed all the way by a station wagon with an officer riding shotgun, presumably to kill any Quaker desperate enough to make a break for it to shorten his five remaining days of jail. At Lorton, an army of guards awaited our arrival. As our handcuffs were removed, two guards stepped forward to grasp each man's arms, and we were led through a line of guards to a low structure.

Once in the barracks, we were thoroughly frisked, pronounced "clean," and escorted down a long, cell-lined corridor. I was thrust into my cell, alone, and the guard moved up the corridor to ready the next cell for its inmate. In the cell were a cement floor, a toilet, and a washstand. Nothing else, not even a bench or a mattress. I sat on the floor. The guards said we would be there at least until the following morning, and "maybe for your full stay." Later, through the bars, came a mattress, sheets, blanket, soap, and supper.

Several hours later we learned the cause of our unexpected reception. Our two hundred brothers from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference were on a work strike, and the management thought that a show of toughness with us might make us more amenable to accepting the various privileges that went with working: Outside exercise, visitors, sports equipment, television, and so on.

The superintendent, when he arrived at our cell block, permitted us out of solitary to participate in a meeting in the barracks corridor. Here he told us of the work and the institution's viewpoint regarding it, which was not complimentary.

Since the next day was the Fourth of July, when nobody worked, we were permitted to go to a dormitory and were given twenty-four hours to decide what we were going to do. Our decision baffled the authorities. As long as we were kept separate from our brothers, we would not work, but if we could be moved in with them and share their lack of privileges, most of us were prepared to work. The superintendent, remarking aloud that the Quakers were "the most cooperative, uncooperative inmates" he had ever had, permitted us to move.

Most of us worked cutting grass, because we had no scruples against working and felt that cooperation to the

point of conscience was the best path to the mind of our captors. The others disagreed, and they had a good case, built on their experience with what they saw as a double standard and as an about-face on the matter by the authorities. This difference produced a four-hour dormitory meeting, which in retrospect takes on the characteristics of a teapot-tempest, but at the time seemed like a hurricane.

Two factors emerged from the discussion. One was that the work-nonwork issue was exaggerated beyond all proportion. Nothing else could be discussed, and much else needed discussion. The other factor was the false image that was beginning to emerge among the guards and the rest of the prison staff, who divided us into two categories: The "good" Quakers and the "bad" demonstrators. This was intolerable. It led me and most of the rest to stop working and join the strikers, a decision that, I must say, was taken in rather good grace by the prison officialdom. Thus we passed our last two days in fresh idleness, punctuated by dormitory-organized workshops and worship services.

Prison was a demoralizing and difficult experience, made tolerable by the astonishing morale and high spirits of the poor, who were my companions.

Every great movement is sustained by its own music, and the Freedom Movement is rich in this dimension. Everywhere we were together — in the precinct house, courthouse basement, police vans, dormitories—we sang or chanted slogans.

Music bound us together, especially when a new load of demonstrators entered the jail courtyard. We could hear their singing a block away. All over, the inmates began to sing, clenched fists and V-signs appeared through the barred windows, and men kept shouting, "Keep the faith, soul brother." In our dormitory in the workhouse, we all locked arms and sang freedom songs before going to bed.

I suppose the Poor People's Campaign will be judged to have failed. Certainly, it has not produced the jobs and income that were its goal.

But it did prove three things: It has made poverty in America visible, and never again will it be possible to pretend that it is not real. It created a coalition of the poor. It has improved the administration of existing legislation and stimulated new legislation in which the black, the red, and the white, the person from the ghetto and from the reservation, the miner from Appalachia, and the migrant from the San Joachim Valley have all seen for the first time the common nature of their problems and have joined together to deal with them.

And then there was Charlie Jones.

Charlie lives in one of the worst ghettos in America. He has little education and training and few skills. His language is blunt. He has an engaging personality. In jail he stood out as a leader. The last night we were in jail, Charlie sat down on the edge of my bed and we began to talk.

"Steve," he said, "I'm not going to bed tonight."

"Charlie, why not?"

"I'm too excited. I want to enjoy myself and talk to people. This has been the damndest two weeks of my life. When I come to Resurrection City, I said I coming down for SCLC, but I really come for ol' Charlie Jones. I heard things were good and sounded like a good deal. Anybody as't me for cigarettes I tell em hell with it, get your own.

"You know what I did this morning, Steve? I sat out at that table with their lousy tobacco they give us and spent an hour rollin cigarettes. When I got all done I left em on the table for all guys to take who wanted a smoke.

"You know why I did that? Because in the jailhouse I learned people can live together. I've never known before in my forty-one years and it's great to learn, and I'm going home and tell my kids about it. Tonight I'm going to celebrate."

When I went to sleep at one-thirty, Charlie was still playing tunes on his comb through a piece of toilet paper.

Charlie and I did not change the world by going to jail. Maybe if four thousand instead of four hundred had joined us, we might have; but, as it was, it probably made no difference at all to the world.

It made a difference to us. It made us more understanding human beings. To Charlie and me, it is worth the price we paid.

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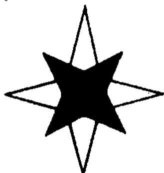

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