

Michael Smith: Eyewitness to the Attica Prison Uprising

(Originally edited by Andrew Lutsky and edited for the classroom by Cari Ladd. The longer interview is available at: http://www.pbs.org/pov/disturbingtheuniverse/interview_smith.php)

On September 9th [1971] I was working in the metal shop on the second floor in one of the buildings in the rear of the facility where they painted lockers, metal lockers for state institutions. I was in charge of about thirty inmates and, uh, several civilian instructors were also in that area. And the prison whistle sounded. And the only other time that I'd ever heard the prison whistle sound was when an inmate had escaped.

And, uh, training ... there was very little training. It was, it was on-the-job training in the truest sense of the expression, uh, to be a correctional officer at the time. And there was no manual to follow as far as what the blast of the siren meant. One blast, it's lunch time. Or three blasts, there's a riot. There was no indication why it was sounding and there was no manual to follow as far as what it might indicate.

The late sixties and early seventies was a time of political unrest and protest. We were protesting the war in Vietnam, protesting for equal rights, and prisoners across the country were protesting for better conditions in the prison system. And that spring was very tense. It was ... you could just feel the tension. And anyone that worked there, uh, knew it was present. The inmates were aware of it. And it was just a very tense time for everybody that was there.

I was aware that prisoners at Attica, inmates, were not ... they wanted change. They wanted change within the system. They wanted improvements, and primarily in areas that struck me as, uh, mostly humanitarian. Um, food, wages, education-- those were the primary areas. At that time there were no black staff. There were no Hispanics. No one spoke Spanish. The inmates felt that the training was inadequate as far as equipping them for when they got out of prison to find work and have a productive life. So those were some of the areas that I was aware of that they wanted changed.

At the time of the riot I was twenty-two years old. I had been married that previous August and we had our first daughter, she was just a few months old.

So the whistle continued to sound, and I went to the phone located in the front of that room and tried calling the Administration Building. And the phone was dead. Then I tried calling anywhere in the institution, but it was an antiquated operator telephone system that had already been disconnected. So I couldn't communicate with anyone. And the prison whistle continued to sound. And on the south side of that room you overlook the first floor of the garage area, and the inmates that were in the room rushed to those windows along that wall and they were watching something going on outside. And when I went over to the windows and looked myself, you could see inmates running around in, uh, an unusual manner, and conducting themselves in a way that wasn't typical.

They were arming themselves, uh, with anything that they could use to protect themselves. Some had football helmets on. And the inmates that were in the room with me thought that it was some type of gang riot within the prison. They feared for their own safety and tried to find hiding places and take up weapons to protect themselves. I locked the civilian instructors in their offices in the rear of that room and locked the entryway doors to that room, and then just stood there and waited to see what would happen. What would come next.

A lot of the inmates found hiding places, and they were scared. And at the time I had a baton in a holster, if you will, at my side, and I also had my keys there. And you could hear a lot of commotion downstairs, and the inmates were ramming the metal gates with some type of mechanical tow motor, or some type of device they got out of the metal shop downstairs in an effort to break the gates down, which eventually they did.

The rioting inmates ... it was like this huge flood of human emotion burst into the room. And, um, they eventually broke into the area where I was, and, uh, they beat me, uh, upon entry. And two inmates, Don Noble and Carl Rain, came to my protection when I was lying on the floor, when I was being beaten against the wall. And both the inmates protected me in kind of a spread eagle fashion and put their bodies over mine to protect me.

And the other inmates went to the rear of the room, broke into the offices and took the civilian instructors hostage. And this huge wave of emotion that broke in went back out, and they left me lying on the floor along with Don Noble and Carl Rain. And Don and Carl tried to come up with a plan to get me to safety, and initially they thought about hiding me but thought that may not be a good idea. So they tried to escort me through the tunnel system, through B Block, through Times Square, and through A Block to the administration and safety. And they helped me through B Block and through the tunnel, and when we got to Times Square, the intersect where the four main tunnels in Attica intersect, the inmates had set up a perimeter across the A Tunnel and directed that all hostages be taken to D Yard, one of the four recreation yards. And so I was taken to D Yard, and that was Thursday morning, and was held there as a hostage until the prison was retaken the following Monday the 13th.

Under the circumstances I was treated very well while held as a hostage. It was a very chaotic first day with the with the initial chaos of the takeover of the prison, and there were several hostages hurt in the process. All the hostages had been taken to D Yard, and upon our arrival all the hostages were gathered into one area. And the, uh, Muslims set up a protective guard around us, and I can recall that first day the head of the Muslims told us, "Just sit tight and we'll protect you, and don't worry, your people will be in to rescue you shortly." And that didn't happen. It was interesting watching what you thought was this formidable fortress falling as easily as it fell. And as the inmates organized, uh, I couldn't help getting the feeling that they were organizing much more quickly and effectively than ... than our people were on the outside.

I can recall that one of the inmates' first demands was for not a negotiator but an observers committee, a civilian observers committee. And as they indicated who they wanted I was quite struck by the people that they were asking to be there-- um, Tom Wicker, um, Bill Kunstler-- and that they wanted it witnessed by a civilian observers committee, not to negotiate. I didn't get the feeling that they wanted the observers committee to do anything beyond observe, and I was impressed with that. And also that they invited the press in and wanted them to be witness to, and the outside world to be witness to, this process. That indicated to me that the inmates were requesting that ethical and moral issues and real issues be addressed in the prison system and that they wanted the world past the wall, surrounding Attica, to be aware of it. You know, people on the outside. I think that the inmate population felt that they were not only locked up but that anything that goes on inside a prison is locked up and locked away from the outside world. And they wanted them to see this process and see that it was a reasonable request and how they were conducting themselves in this process so that the whole world could judge them.

Having civilians involved was a good idea as far as I was concerned, uh, personally. And the negotiations seemed to be headed in a positive direction initially. It appeared as though the state was agreeing with and going to go along with a lot of the inmates' demands. However,

um, Saturday, with the announcement of Corrections Officer Bill Quinn's death, that was a completely different aspect thrown into it, and it went south from there. The negotiation process definitely started to break down.

With the announcement of Quinn's death, any inmate that was involved in the riot could be potentially convicted for murder. After that point the inmates were very aware of that, and amnesty became the biggest issue for both sides. Amnesty was something that the state at that point couldn't offer, and it was something that the inmates had to have. So when the observers committee came in and Mr. Kunstler said, "Look, this is as good as it's gonna get," the inmates had a negative reaction to that, and it made their job more difficult.

Until the announcement of Bill Quinn's death I was hopeful that there'd be a peaceful resolve and an end to the riot, and it seemed to be headed in that direction. With that development, by Saturday night, a peaceful resolve was looking less likely. On Sunday the situation seemed to be more demanding. Negotiations seemed to break down more, and by Sunday night, uh, the state of New York allowed a priest to come in and administer last rites to the hostages. And, uh, that to me indicated that a peaceful resolve was not likely, that the state was not anticipating a peaceful resolve to the situation.

Uh, Sunday night I still had my wallet and I took some papers out of my wallet, some business cards and some paper money. I borrowed a pen from an inmate, uh, wrote a goodbye note to my family, put it back in my wallet, and put it back in my pocket.

Sunday night the hostages' wrists were bound and our ankles were bound, and we were on mattresses all in one small area of the yard. And I can recall-- I think that it was a general feeling among the hostages-- a pretty bleak outlook as far as what was going to happen. And, uh, I thought that something may happen in the darkness of ... of the night. However, the night went through without incident, and Monday morning the negotiation process was still at a standoff.

The inmates, in kind of a last-ditch effort, had randomly chosen eight hostages from the hostage circle and assigned inmate executioners to each. And they escorted those eight hostages, elevated them to the rooftop of the tunnel system, called the catwalk-- it's kind of an observatory area that's elevated from the yard-- and I was one of those eight hostages that was randomly chosen and taken to the catwalk, uh, to be executed. I don't think anybody was thinking rationally anymore at that point. I mean, I had the impression that the inmates thought, "Well, we're gonna take these hostages and use them as a last bargaining chip and threaten to take their lives and bargain with the balance of the hostages left in the yard," which was totally irrational. And at the same time the state was saying, "No more negotiating. Release the hostages unharmed and put down your weapons." So it seemed to be a standoff at that point.

When I was taken to the catwalk I was assigned three inmate executioners. And it was probably what you'd envision as a typical hostage setting. They brought me a chair at one point to, uh, make me more comfortable. I was blindfolded and I had three executioners—one on my right with a hand-fashioned spear at my chest, one behind me with a hammer, and an executioner on my left with a knife at my throat. And the executioner on my left was Don Noble. And Don had made it a point to be there that morning and be one of my executioners. And, uh, Don and I had a serious conversation that morning. We made a mutual promise to contact each other's family in the event that one of us didn't make it out, or one of us did make it out, and express our love. And we promised each other that we'd do that. I asked him an additional

request, and that was that when the time came that I didn't want to suffer. And Don promised me that he knew what he was doing, and when the time came or would come I wouldn't suffer.

Shortly thereafter the state of New York sent a helicopter over the wall. Uh, gas was discharged. There was a large popping noise, and the discharge of the gas and the popping noise seemed to happen at the same time that the, uh, retaking force opened fire. And there were the retaking force: the New York state employees, New York State Troopers and Corrections Officers. The shooting went on ... it seemed like forever but I guess in reality it was about ten minutes. Uh, when they started shooting it seemed like all hell broke loose, and you could identify all kinds of weapons: handguns, large caliber, small caliber, shotguns, rifles, semi-automatic weapons and automatic weapons. And, uh, it was just like they indiscriminately shot everyone.

And it seemed that we fell like dominos. Um, one of the executioners fell down over my legs, and Noble fell on top of the cement catwalk and he laid parallel to me. And we laid there, and the shooting just went on and on and on. I was also shot once in the right arm, probably with a handgun. And I can recall laying on the catwalk, and the shooting just seemed to go on and on and on. And bullets were hitting all around. You could hear people crying, people dying.

I was shot with an automatic weapon. The weapon issued at Attica at the time for the tower was the AR-50, which is a fully-automatic 223-caliber machine gun. Um, one very similar to the M-16 that the military uses. Uh, when I was hit ... I have four entry wounds, and they're in a vertical order, and they start just below my navel. So whoever shot me was an excellent marksman; it was intentional because the pattern was in a vertical and not a horizontal. And the bullets exploded on impact and, uh, damaged a lot of stuff inside, several organs inside me, and expanded, leaving shrapnel and exit wounds out my back. I was taken directly to the hospital because of the extent of my injuries. Um, I was in and out of consciousness for several weeks, but it was very disturbing to find out what the outcome of the event was. And ... and that so many people had lost their lives in the process, not just the state employees but inmates also.