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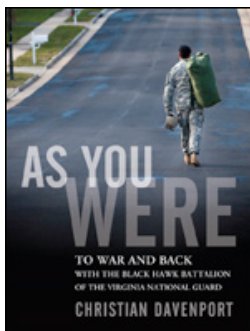
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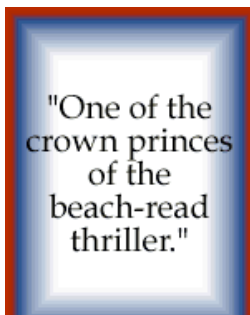
What happens when part-time National Guard service becomes a long tour in Iraq that disrupts jobs and families?

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New From NYT Bestseller



Former Black Panther: "There Are Political Prisoners in America as Well"

By [Emily Wilson](#), [AlterNet](#). Posted [May 26, 2009](#).

What an Irish hunger striker and a former Black Panther can teach us about prisoner resistance.

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Prisons are, or can be, places to raise political consciousness, says Dennis O'Hearn, the author of *Nothing But an Unfinished Song*, a biography of Bobby Sands, the 27-year-old who died leading a hunger strike in Long Kesh, a prison in Northern Ireland. A new movie about Sands' final days, *Hunger*, recently won an award for first-time filmmakers at the Cannes Film Festival.

Sands, who was serving a 14-year sentence for possessing firearms, demanded the right to be treated as a political prisoner, says O'Hearn, who appeared at an event about political prisoners in San Francisco with Andrej Grubacic, a professor of sociology at the University of San Francisco and the co-author of *Wobblies & Zapatistas: Conversations On Anarchism, Marxism, and Radical History*, and Robert Hillary King, one of the Angola 3. King spent more than 30 years in prison before his conviction was overturned in 2001, and he has written a new autobiography about his experiences, *From the Bottom of the Heap: The Autobiography of Black Panther Robert Hillary King*.

King says he, like Sands, became an activist in response to the oppression in prison.

"Prison is another way to perpetuate slavery," King says. "They're connected. A lot of people think legality and morality are the same thing, but they're not. Prisons are immoral."

While in Angola, a Louisiana prison built on a former slave plantation, King joined the Black Panther Party, with the other two members that make up the Angola 3, Herbert Wallace and Albert Woodfox. King says they felt morally obligated to do something about the conditions in Angola, considered in the 70s the worst prison in the country.

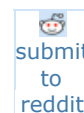
"There were 72 of us in a space made for 40," King says. "There were rats, roaches and horrible food. There was a system of sexual slavery that was accepted. Just because you're in prison doesn't mean you're not a human being."

King says because he, Wallace and Woodfox tried to organize other prisoners, they were seen as threats to the administration and framed - he for the murder of a fellow inmate, and Wallace and Woodfox for the murder of prison guard Brent Miller. They were kept in their 6 by 9 cells for 23 hours a day.

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In spite being separated, King says they talked to one another from cell to cell and kept trying to educate themselves and others. He says their efforts led to changes in how prisoners were fed. Officials had been sliding the food under the door or leaving it outside in the hallway. King said this was dehumanizing and through hunger strikes got the prison officials to cut a hole in the bars to slide plates through. Also, King says, once they became politically conscious, they resisted the guards' standard anal searches. They filed a writ and the court ruled in their favor that these searches were unjustified.

"There are many parallels between Bobby Sands and Robert," O'Hearn said. "The strip searches and the inhumane conditions."

Like King, Sands and his fellow prisoners communicated with one another even though they were locked in separate cells. O'Hearn says they told stories, sang songs and learned the Irish language orally.

"It's so important the joy of the struggle, not just the hardship of struggle," O'Hearn said.

Grubic, an anarchist from the Balkans, says he is interested in how people organize themselves in prison. From his co-author on Wobblies and Zapatistas, Staughton Lynd, Grubic learned about the Lucasville 5, a group that took over a prison in Youngstown, Ohio, for 11 days. The group was made up of black militants and members of the Aryan Brotherhood, who spray painted slogans such as "Convict race" on the walls of the prison.

"Some of the most beautiful examples of American democracy are not found in and around the White House, but in Lucasville," Grubic says. "Convicts developed a system of democracy to fight for a different world."

The discussion focused on political prisoners was part of a week of events discussing various revolutions throughout the world in 1968 and the legacy of those movements. O'Hearn, who along with the biography of Sands, wrote the introduction to Grubic's book, said prison activists were part of the shift in perspective in the 60s.

"The old idea was wait till you overthrow the state and take power," he said. "But in the 60's social activists felt the important thing was to create kind of state they wanted."

Ramsey Kanaan founded PM Press, the publisher of King's book, From the Bottom of the Heap. He says King's experiences as a Black Panther are an important part of the struggles of the 60s.

"Talking about '68 is kind of a metaphor," he says. "Sixty-eight was part of a river that didn't appear out of nowhere and didn't disappear into nowhere. Prisoner struggles are part of that stream."

Kanaan points out that the prison population in the U.S. has more than tripled since the 60s.

Rose Braz, director of Critical Resistance, which advocates for prison reform, says prison is a way for the state to crack down on dissent.

"I think the reality is the U.S. has used prisons as a catchall response to social and economic problems," she says.

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The way to change that is not just to talk to people with different points of view, but to listen as well, says Grubacic. Grubacic says he and others from the university in Belgrade, who opposed the former president of Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosevic, went to talk with factory workers in the south who supported Milosevic.

"We exchanged ideas, we exchanged skills and experience," he says. "Listening is a political tool. This is the way to build a movement."

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Emily Wilson is a freelance writer and teaches basic skills at City College of San Francisco.

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Sounds like the start of a bad joke

Posted by: Daito on May 26, 2009 9:07 AM

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'So what did the Irish hunger striker say to the black panther when he dropped the soap in the prison shower'?

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Thats not what a political prisoner is.

Posted by: rickiey on May 26, 2009 10:00 AM

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A political prisoner is one who is put in prison for their political actions or viewpoints.

He was an armed robber, who also escaped. He was fairly convicted of those and was a criminal.

It is nice to see that he has reformed and made something of himself, and obviously the prison system is in need of some serious reform, but to call him a political prisoner is an insult to those who have been unfairly imprisoned for their political views or actions.

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» **RE: That's not what a political prisoner is.** Posted by: miked

» **RE: That's not what a political prisoner is.** Posted by: stoptheloathing

» **RE: That's not what a political prisoner is.** Posted by: RoxanneGreschner

What????

Posted by: RoxanneGreschner on May 26, 2009 4:56 PM

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I knew Bobby Sands and some of his friends. There is no comparison between Bobby Sands, the IRA and the Black Panthers. Anyone who goes to prison in this country is a POW. We have many wars against the people here. From the war on poverty to the war on terrorism. Bobby Sands was a hero to his people. He died for his political belief systems. How many of the Black Panthers have??? Little Bobby Hutton was not a prisoner but he died as a soldier who was young and political. Think about what is being said here? The oppression of the Irish people has very little relationship to the Black Panthers in this country. Unless one believes that oppression is oppression no matter who is being oppressed. I believe that but the Irish struggle for independence is far more political than the Black Panthers ever were, we should understand that war is an example of the fight for freedom at times especially when that war is being fought in a country that has been colonized. Think about the agenda being brought forth here. Bobby Sands was a hero.

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» **RE: What????** Posted by: stoptheloathing

» **RE: What????** Posted by: clvngodess

» **RE: What????** Posted by: RoxanneGreschner

» **RE: What????** Posted by: RoxanneGreschner

Intriguing Interview

Posted by: dumdummy on May 27, 2009 3:28 PM

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It makes me want to get the book.

It also reminds me of another political prisoner who became a Black Panther while in prison: George Jackson.

Food for thought: if Bob Dylan's sentiment, as expressed in his song "George Jackson," that "Sometimes I think this whole world is one big prison yard / Some of us are prisoners and the rest of us are guards," is true, then what does that say about the notion in this article that slavery is still alive in this country, in prisons?

Thank you for posting this.

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What can we LEARN ABOUT THE IRISH MOVEMENT?

Posted by: BlueBerry PickN on May 28, 2009 7:34 AM

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The US spent MASSIVE privately gleaned money FOR TERRORISM upon another nation.

Just like the US does ALL OVER THE WORLD.

What does this tell us?

It means that Americans have very little regard for any manner of dissent UNLESS IT MEANS SOMETHING FOR AMERICAN POWER.

That groups like the Irish & Black Americans could figure out the power of violence-free dissent...

isn't the 'genius' of the United States culture... its OVERCOMING the culture's rather creepy fetish with dominance, abuse, disrespect & blatant violence.

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