

## **Fishing for Decency**

*By William DiMascio*

So, the question is: Does a fish rot from the head down or the tail up?

On a bright and balmy September morning in the East Yard of SCI Albion, prisoners lined up in the pit reserved for weight lifters to be strip searched by corrections officers. Scores of other inmates and officers, including at least one or two women, watched as the demeaning process bared the bodies and souls of one hundred or so incarcerated men.

What caused this incident is unclear. One report says that a correctional officer heard a cell phone; another, that a C.O. saw a prisoner with a knife. Despite the fact that either item could have been discovered with a pat search, the officer in charge ordered the men to get naked.

No contraband was discovered, but considerable damage was done to the psyches of the men. Wrote one of the victims: “The action taken by the officers/administration has caused me to feel very degraded and humiliated. I also feel extremely frustrated, ashamed and embarrassed over the entire situation.”

A flood of inmate grievances followed. An embarrassed prison administration responded to the grievances by labeling the strip searches “a mistake” and offered apologies. A source within the administration at SCI Albion said the staff made the decision to conduct the strip search without consulting management and “we’re not happy that it happened.”

Superintendent Marilyn S. Brooks in a later response to the grievances said it was “an error in judgment” to conduct the searches without privacy and without getting prior approval of the superintendent or her designee. As it happened, Superintendent Brooks was away from the prison at a training session on the day of the incident and one of her deputies was in charge.

She adds: “I have taken proactive steps to prevent future occurrences such as this. I offer my apology and assurance that these issues are being addressed through the appropriate means.”

Incidents such as this one are what led many people to draw parallels between the abuse of prisoners in the United States and those at Abu Ghraib in Iraq. Relatively few people have access to the day-to-day operations of prisons, so it’s difficult for them to make accurate judgments. One individual who knows plenty about how things get done behind the walls, however is former Corrections Secretary Martin F. Horn who, ironically, provided relevant comments in a speech delivered last June in New York.

He said:

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“The implication of Abu Ghraib for America’s prisons is that it can happen here. But we shouldn’t generalize from this situation to every prison and jail in America. It is possible to create an atmosphere in which brutality is the exception and where respect for law and civil behavior are modeled for inmates. It only happens when society demands that those in charge understand their responsibility and the bad outcomes that result from inattentiveness to this task and hold elected officials and prison managers accountable.”

The shameful episode at Albion presents an opportunity to engender the kind of atmosphere of respect and civility Horn referred to. The former secretary added: “If the culture is one that values human life, one that respects the individual and the rule of law and is based on integrity, the outcomes will be substantially different than if the culture devalues the individual. Only leaders can create such an atmosphere and that is ultimately their most important task.”

The candor from the superintendent’s office was a step in the right direction, but more needs to be done to address this situation and to reassure its victims. That means the investigation needs to go deeper into the ranks to get to the source of the misbehavior.

As members of society, we want those in charge to understand that dehumanizing conduct is inexcusable. We also want to know how responsibility for this blunder is assigned now that the people who hold others accountable for their mistakes are so clearly found to have made grievous errors of their own.

The union leader who is reported to have used the analogy of the fish rotting from the head was suggesting that management was ultimately responsible for the failings of staff. This often is the case.

But it also is true that disenchanting members of a staff can find hundreds of ways to make their bosses look bad. This, too, happens frequently and may have been a factor in what happened at Albion.

Whether the fish rots from the top down or the bottom up, the smell is still the same.