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From Attica to Abu Ghraib

A recent obituary in the New York Times told about Frank Smith, "who as an inmate leader at Attica prison was tortured by officers in the aftermath of the prisoner uprising of 1971 and then spent a quarter century successfully fighting for legal damages." Working as a paralegal after his release, Smith was a pivotal force behind a 26-year civil action lawsuit that won a \$12 million settlement.

Smith's life changed forever on Sept. 13, 1971 – the day New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller ordered 500 state troopers to attack the upstate Attica Correctional Facility, killing 29 inmates and 10 guards held as hostages. The raid wounded at least 86 other people.

The media coverage was atrocious. Outright lies were front-page news, "informing" the public that prisoners had slit the throats of hostages when the troopers' assault began. Corrective facts came later, with much smaller headlines, after autopsies revealed that no throats had been cut. Only when their claims were exposed as deceptions did top state officials admit the truth.

Smith, known as "Big Black," figures prominently in a full-length documentary that debuted on national television three years ago. "The Ghosts of Attica" includes grim footage and grisly photos that had been kept under wraps by the state government for decades. The movie also features interviews with people on all sides of the tragic conflict.

After previewing the 90-minute film, I wrote that it "packs a powerful wallop because of its deep respect for historical accuracy. Horrendous prison conditions prompted the Attica uprising, which began as an undisciplined riot and grew into a well-focused articulation of rage from men who chose to take a fateful step, fighting for human dignity."

The timing of the national premiere for "The Ghosts of Attica" on Court TV was unlucky – it aired just two days before 9/11 – and media followup was sparse.

Lighting up the film, Smith's clarity and humanism seem especially notable because of what he'd gone through. As the documentary explained, guards "tortured him for

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hours with cigarettes, hot shell casings, threats of castration and death, a glass-strewn gauntlet and Russian roulette.”

While the uprising was multiracial, most of the 1,281 prisoners involved were black, reflecting the prison population as a whole. In the film, Smith said: “Attica was about wants and needs. Attica was a lot about class and a lot about race.”

Although U.S. media outlets have rarely dropped a hint along this line, Abu Ghraib was also about class and race. From a global perspective, American troops – sent to Iraq by the richest nation in the world – serve elite interests in the United States. And anti-Arab racism made it easier for Americans to torture prisoners at Abu Ghraib.

Meanwhile, back in the USA, a third of a century after the Attica uprising, just about every jail and prison continues to be “a lot about class and a lot about race.” With more than 2 million people now behind bars – 63 percent black or Latino – the incarcerated population is vastly skewed toward low income and dark skin.

Journalists should not automatically view events from the perspective of prison management. Yet they routinely do.

Three years ago, the Attica documentary caused me to write: “Reflexively assuming that the powerful white guys in positions of authority would be truthful, reporters on the story got it backwards.” When covering Attica, this media bias meant badly misinforming the American public. But that was hardly an isolated incident.

Every day, brutality is a common reality for prisoners in every region of this country. But what goes on behind closed cell doors and thick walls rarely gets exposed to media sunlight.

“I do not view the sexual abuse, torture and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers as an isolated event,” says Terry Kupers, a psychiatrist who has often testified about human rights abuses in U.S. prisons. “The plight of prisoners in the USA is strikingly similar to the plight of the Iraqis who were abused by American GIs. Prisoners are maced, raped, beaten, starved, left naked in freezing cold cells and otherwise abused in too many American prisons, as substantiated by findings in many courts that prisoners’ constitutional rights to remain free of cruel and unusual punishment are being violated.”

Kupers adds: “In order for the abuses to continue, one group has total control over another; the victims feel they have no recourse and the perpetrators are confident they can get away with it; and the entire ordeal has to remain secret.”

That’s where the news media should come in – preventing such secrecy.

When the public learned about abuses at Abu Ghraib, there was outrage. But what’s going on behind bars in America today still cannot stand the light of media day.