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Rhetorical Analysis

Writing for the Rights of the Wrong

When Wilbert Rideau wrote the article, “When Prisoners Protest,” that was published by the *New York Times* on July 16th, 2013, he did so in response to the ongoing protests of 30,000 inmates in the California prison system. Prisoners had begun protesting by way of a hunger strike on July 8th, 2013, with the aim of bringing change and reform to a broken penal system, especially regarding the use of isolation as a punishment for inmates.

Prison reform was something Rideau had been fighting to reform for decades, due to spending twelve years of his own life in solitary confinement within the Louisiana Department of Corrections. As a nineteen-year-old, black man, Rideau was convicted of murder after a botched robbery and sentenced to death by an all-white, all-male, Louisiana jury in 1962. Rideau appealed his conviction, and in 1963 the US Supreme Court ruled to throw it out, calling his last trial nothing more than a, “kangaroo court.” Rideau went on to be retried twice by all-white, all-male juries, resulting in two more death-sentences and, eventually, two more overturned convictions by higher courts. Finally, in 2005 Rideau received a fair trial with a jury of mixed-race and mixed-gender, and his murder conviction was replaced with manslaughter. The judge gave Rideau the maximum sentence of twenty-one years, sadly, Rideau had already served forty-four, thus his release was finally granted.

After serving forty-four years for a crime with a maximum sentence of less than half of that, with twelve of those years spent in solitary confinement, Rideau left prison with a desire to prevent others from meeting the same fate, as Rideau points out on his website, www.wilbertrideau.com. Since his release, Rideau has spent his time fighting to reform the justice and prison systems through his work on the Board of Directors of the Capital Appeals Project of Louisiana, where Rideau and other Board members oversee the appeals of every death sentence in the State of Louisiana. Rideau is also a journalist, writer, and member of the Board of Advisors for a group invested in minimizing the use of solitary confinement known as Solitary Watch, among being a part of numerous other groups and organization aimed at creating positive change in the justice and prison systems throughout the United States.

Rideau uses his article, “When Prisoners Protest,” to further his agenda for prison reform, and begins by outlining the likely outcomes of protesting, highlighting that unless conditions were truly deplorable protesting wouldn’t be worth the risk prisoners take due to the inevitable consequences. “The typical inmate doesn’t want trouble. He has little to gain and too much to lose: his jobs, his visits, his recreation time, his phone privileges… The ways even a bystander to the most peaceful protest can be punished are limited only by the imagination of the authorities,” Rideau explains. He goes on to detail the mental anguish that comes with serving your time in solitary confinement for years at a time, not knowing when, or if, you will ever return to the general population. He also cites, “paranoia, depression and sleepless,” nights as some of the likely disorders to accompany one’s time in solitary confinement. He goes on to say that prison reform is not just a problem of those serving time. It is a problem faced by everyone. Rideau states that everyone is ultimately effected by the outcome of isolation and prison reform, because those who are serving years in isolation will one day be released and return to society along with the mental illnesses acquired there. They will then be free to interact with the other members of that society—us and those we love.

Through the use of logos, ethos, and pathos in his article, “When Prisoners Protest,” Rideau effectively communicates the importance of reforming the use of solitary confinement, however, due to the time he spent in prison, Rideau faces challenges with ethos. From the beginning of the article, Rideau employs use of logos. When he states that we all live in, “a world where authorities exercise absolute power and demand abject obedience, prisoners are almost always going to be on the losing side, and they know it,” he is appealing to our logic. He wants us to understand how bad conditions must be, conditions so deplorable that the prisoners, whom have the most to lose and least to gain, wouldn’t take to such means unless they believed it to be the only way. Rideau conveys the urgency felt by inmates to create change by highlighting that prisoners wouldn’t take to protesting unless the situation truly called for it, due to the fact that they will lose every comfort they now have just to make a point.

Rideau continues by emphasizing the sheer number of protestors, “30,000 inmates in the custody of the California Department of Corrections, went on a hunger strike to demand improvements in prison conditions. For this many inmates to put it all on the line, logically, we know a significant problem must exist. He goes on to point out that the protests didn’t take place in just one prison, these protests, “involved almost two-thirds of the State’s penal facilities.” Communication between prisoners is extremely difficult and also strictly forbidden in any formal way, such as writing or phone calls. “Men from cellblock X can’t just stroll down to see the inmates in cellblock Y. Strategizing must be done furtively, usually through intermediaries, anyone of whom might snitch.” This leaves us to deduce that for inmates to have found the motivation to engineer a protest by means so complicated, calculated and volatile, the situation must have truly had them in a state of fear and unrest. Fed-up with of unfair punishment, they connected thousands of inmates, across multiple facilities spanning the entire state of California in a large-scale protest—an impressive feat to say the least.

As readers, we have to ask ourselves, as Rideau intends, how bad would conditions have to be to cause a chain of events to take place involving this many prisoners in this many facilities? Rideau drives the argument home through his compelling use of logos by emphasizing that not only inmates who are currently serving time in isolation are protesting, but also, “thousands of inmates not directly affected by solitary confinement,” joined ranks as well. “Their biggest complaint was the runaway use of solitary confinement, the fact that thousands of prisoners are consigned to this cruelty indefinitely, some for decades…” Why?

Humans don’t go out on a limb for those who don’t deserve it. Oftentimes we don’t do it for those that do, so why would the most immoral of society take a stand for someone besides themselves? For fear that these unjust punishments could be doled out to them, as it had with those around them. It is because of this, Rideau argues, that these inmates banded together in an effort promote change within the penal system. Even as laymen in the arena of prison affairs, Rideau’s clear appeal to our logic forces us to conclude that the system is flawed and punishments unjust. For no other reason would a population such as this wage a war that couldn’t be won.

Rideau goes on to further his argument for reform of isolation punishment through his appeal to the reader’s ethos. He states, “I know something about solitary confinement, because I’ve been there. I spent a total of 12 years in various solitary confinement cells. And I can tell you that isolating a human being for years in a barren cell the size of a small bathroom is the cruelest thing you can do to a person.” By telling us that he has been there and done that, we know that he truly understands the heart of the matter and the consequences that come with it. In admitting his past, Rideau creates a double edges sword that he must inevitably swallow. On the one hand he has the knowledge and experience only someone who has walked that road can have; on the other, he is an untrustworthy ex-con.

By stating that he believes isolation is the cruelest form of punishment you can force on a person, he is appealing to our pathos. Both appeals are effective, however by stating that he has spent time in prison he creates a problem for himself that he must later remedy.

Although Rideau has lived a life that included experiencing prison, he has moved on and done great things with his life. By advocating for inmates through an article in the *New York Times,* Rideau shows that he has moved on with his life since leaving prison. The humanitarian work Rideau has went on to be a part of helps to put to rest any reservations the reader might have in reference to his motives and/or credibility. In addition to that, more than ten years after his release, Rideau is still advocating a *peaceful* resolution to a *legitimate* problem. Thus, although an obvious challenge in regards to whether or not Rideau can be trusted exists due to his former criminal-career, he is able to overcome those reservations through what he was able to accomplish since leaving prison, such as being published in the New York Times and advocating for those who can’t do it for themselves.

What his stay in prison takes from his credibility, the extended length of stay in solitary makes up for in its appeal to the core of the reader’s humanity. Also, the

Rideau goes on to appeal to the ethos of the reader when he cites two other men that have spent decades in solitary confinement. “There are men like Thomas Silverstein, in the federal prison system, who has been in solitary for 30 years, and Albert Woodfox and Herman Wallace, who have been in Louisiana cells for some 40 years each.” Regardless of their crimes that landed them in prison, and their offenses for which they’re serving time in isolation, forty years is far beyond what any decent human being would consider an acceptable punishment. This gives further credibility to the claim that isolation without guidelines is a major problem.

Rideau’s reference to number of years spent in solitary by Silverstein, Woodfox, Wallace, and himself serves a purpose beyond showing the lack of logic used by those who condemn prisoners to decades without any human contact. He also uses these inflated and extreme periods of isolation to appeal to the reader’s human decency, and uses that to overcome any doubts that readers might have due to the fact that these men are not upright members of society. He includes their cases and their years spent alone in a cold cell to pull at the heartstrings of his audience. And it works! By bringing the readers’ emotions into the mix, Rideau’s appeal to ethos gives way to pathos. Rideau appeals to the compassion and humanity found in all of us, and paves the way for the reader to arrive at the conclusion he intended: sanctions involving isolation are far too long and damaging, and reform is needed.

Rideau assists his appeal to pathos by choosing not to discuss the reasons behind his, Wallace, Woodfox, and Silversteins’ solitary confinement. He does this in hopes of preventing the reader from being swayed by the ugly truth found in the details of their criminality, that they are criminals, placed in prison for serious crimes. By limiting the information he gives in reference to these men, he is able to more successfully appeal to our pathos. And although there is a clear problem in regards to the credibility of both Rideau and these men, Rideau is able to conquer any doubts the reader might have by establishing a connection with the soft, benevolent and forgiving underbelly that exists in all of us. He creates an byway that readers can take, in order to ignore their crimes long enough to admit that no one deserves to be completely cutoff from all human contact for forty, twenty, ten or even five years. Two wrongs don’t make a right. Although what these men did to land in solitary was obviously wrong, that doesn’t make using cruel punishments acceptable, and spending years completely isolated is definitely a cruel form of punishment.

Rideau goes on to outline the effects of long-term isolation on prisoners; stating that even he, with only 12 years of isolation, lost his, “feeling of connectedness to the world… [and] ability to make small talk.” He went on to describe one living in solitary confinement as living, “entirely in your head, for there is nothing else.” He even went as far as describing how he continually, “counted the 358 rivets that held [his] steel cell together, over and over… every time the walls seemed to be closing in.” He describes the madness that comes from being separated from all other human beings, which undoubtedly stirs up sympathy in all those who read it. He drives the point home by telling the reader that, “every year men from California’s Pelican Bay and other supermax prisons around the nation are released directly from the vacuum of their cells into a free society, to live and work among you and your loved ones.” This last appeal is the ultimate appeal to pathos. Rideau closes with these thoughts knowing that there is nothing human beings hold dearer than the lives of those they love, knowing that people will do almost anything to save those lives, and knowing that fear drives people to action.

Through reading Rideau’s essay, it is not a difficult to arrive at the understanding that a problem does exist in the corrections system of the US, and that solitary confinement, without clear guidelines as to what warrants its use and limits as to how long it can be implemented, is a major problem within the penal system. Rideau uses real life examples of when the use of solitary confinement moved from punishment to cruelty, and also showed us that protestors wouldn’t have taken issue with the system if the problem hadn’t already reached the point of infringing on human rights. He also used his own experiences as a prisoner in isolation and his credentials as an activist, journalist and advocate of change and reform in the justice system to give the readers reason to believe that he is, indeed, credible and thus gives credibility to his argument. It is through these means that Rideau employs logos, ethos, and pathos to successfully argue the importance of reforming the current use of solitary confinement as a punishment in his article, “When Prisoners Protest.”