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SPEAKERS

Derek Collins

- D** Derek Collins 00:12
Bernard, convicted of murder at age 16, and Richard, convicted of kidnapping at 21, were ready to throw down. As inmates serving life sentences inside of the Illinois Stateville Correctional Center. They spent weeks preparing to face off. When the fateful day arrived, the two men in front of an anxious crowd held up their timers and began. After the 45 minute babble, a handshake and applause mark the end of the first ever ISCC prison debate.
- D** Derek Collins 00:46
Debate coach, Katrina Burlet, tells WTTW Chicago August 28, 2018, "the 14 member team looked forward to the class every week. They learned so much." After inviting state legislators to a public debate centered on parole reform, many expressed a desire to work with the team on legislation. However, this success was short lived. Parole, Illinois of May 17, 2018 explains on April 24, Gladys Taylor, the assistant director of the Illinois Department of Corrections terminated the class, banning any future meetings. The University of Pennsylvania Public Policy Initiative explains on August 17, 2017, 75% of released inmates will be reincarcerated within five years. But educational classes can reduce this number to 18%, a fact often overshadowed by America's preoccupation with punishment. So we ask, how does Gladys Taylor's justification for discontinuing the Stateville debate team reinforce the participants' subjugation?

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Derek Collins 02:05

To answer, we will turn to Dr. William Wiethoff's 2002 book, *The Insolent Slave*, which breaks down punitive communications between masters and slaves in the 17th, 18th, and 19th century. We will analyze Wiethoff's model, apply it to the debate team's dismissal, and draw implications of a past that still haunts this country. Wiethoff's work analyzes explanations members of the Southern gentry used to justify their coping with slaves' disagreeable exercise of discursive power. He argues, slave owners employed three key rhetorical justifications for punishing slave insolence: reinforcing hierarchies, maintaining managerial control and preventing insurrection.

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Derek Collins 02:58

First, reinforcing hierarchies of subordination. Masters often justified their punishment of slave insolence by appealing to plantation hierarchies. A slave's perceived importance influenced the degree to which insolence was overlooked, or punished. Lowly field hands were expected to remain absolutely silent, while house slaves, who are more valued, could speak up, and even express frustration amongst their peers. The lower the rank, the more justified the punishment became.

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Derek Collins 03:31

Next, maintaining managerial control. Wiethoff argues, that gentry kept slaves down in order to keep profits up. If a slave had a disagreement with their field overseer occasionally, they'd go over their head, appealing to the master and slowing down productivity. These slaves were punished harshly, not for the content of their utterance, but for violating the overseer's authority. Here, punishment is justified because disrupting managerial control negatively impacts the plantation's productivity.

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Derek Collins 04:08

Finally, punishing slave insolence was justified by arguing that it prevented insurrection. Wiethoff documents a master who flogged a slave because, "if I hadn't punished her so hard, she would have gone and done the same thing again tomorrow, and half the people on the plantation would have followed her example." Masters will lock slaves in outhouses overnight and even threaten to separate loved ones. All because they believe harsh punishment was critical to preventing further, more serious acts of insolence.

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Derek Collins 04:46

With a firm understanding of Wiethoff's model, let's apply his ideas to Gladys Taylor's justification for discontinuing the Stateville debate team. First, in justifying her disbanding of the prison debate league, Gladys Taylor established a hierarchy of subordination. According to an affidavit written by a member of the team, Taylor noted that the 2009 Crime Reduction Act only requires the prison to provide rehabilitative programming to 75% of residents. She argued that none of the debaters should be included because they're all lifers. Here, Taylor draws a distinction between the rights afforded to those eligible for parole and those who are not using rank to justify banning the team. Next, Taylor appealed to managerial control when she expressed outrage that prisoners attracted the attention of Illinois legislators, going over her head. The aforementioned WTTW Chicago explains, Taylor interrupted the class, warning them against further contacting state legislators. Arguing, "we don't need them thinking about your issues. We just need them to give us the money we need." In essence, appealing to legislators rather than Taylor negatively impacted the prison's productivity. Finally, Taylor was not afraid to punish prisoners if their efforts persisted. According to a lawsuit filed by former head coach Katrina Burlet, Taylor threatened the team in veiled ways. She questioned whether the team's members were appropriately placed in Stateville, insinuating that she had the power to transfer them to less favorable institutions located further from Chicago, away from their families. Debater Alameen was even sent to solitary confinement for six days. A message to the rest of the team: drop the issue or else.

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Derek Collins 06:50

So, how does Gladys Taylor's justification for discontinuing the Stateville debate team reinforce the participants' subjugation? By reinforcing a hierarchy of prisoners, emphasizing a proper chain of command and harshly punishing debate members in order to set an example. Taylor employed the same strategies used by slave owners for centuries, prompting two implications.

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Derek Collins 07:15



First, Taylor's dismantling of the prison debate league challenges our notions of rehabilitation in terms of why. Specifically, her reinforcement of hierarchies determines the prisoners' access to these resources based on potential societal contribution. The Atlantic of June 27, 2017 explains, policy circles tend to predicate the purpose of prison education on reducing recidivism and increasing post release employment opportunities. But according to that line of logic, investing time and resources into prisoners that will not be released is a waste. Taylor's dismantling of the prison debate league reveals that prisons are only concerned with reform if the reformed person can prove to be useful to society at some point, fully rejecting the notions of inherent worth.

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Derek Collins 08:11

Her argument boils down to this. Why should we provide them with resources? We'll never get anything out of it. Finally, Gladys Taylor's identity may play a role in the larger optics of the team's disbanding. Wiethoff explains, when slaves broke the chains of managerial control, they often appeal to plantation owners or, in this case, the legislators. Going over the heads of overseers, which in some cases, was another higher ranked slave. Gladys Taylor's justifications are complicated by the fact that she's a black woman, forced to come down hard on the overwhelmingly black debate team. Now, we may never know her true intentions. But the striking similarities to Wiethoff's descriptions are haunting, especially when considering her role at the IDLC: Assistant Director. She's not in sole control. Ultimately, the real prison owners are able to reinforce even larger embedded hierarchies in order to prevent insurrection. As those in power keep their hands squeaky clean, black bodies are forced to do their dirty work as we have for hundreds of years. Unlike many of us here today, the ISCC prison debate team isn't sure when their next tournament will be. After analyzing Wiethoff's model, applying into the debate teams dismissal and drawing implications, we have a better understanding of why they were shut down. Taylor's arguments were weak and hopefully a new set of judges will recognize that.