

Emancipation Comes To the Pribilofs

MARY ELLEN LEARY

UNNOTICED and unacclaimed, a civil-rights bill of sorts did get passed in the last session of Congress. Because it affected only 650 Americans, babies to old people, who could hardly be more remotely situated, little notice was taken of the fact that the remedial bill lifted from their lives a set of constrictions so severe as to invite the public charge that they had been kept in servitude. Whether or not the term "servitude" is accurate "is not to be answered with a simple yes or no," according to the report drawn up by an investigator appointed by the state of Alaska and presented at Congressional hearings in September, 1965. But the investigator had to admit that it came close. And only fifteen years back, he reported, these U.S. citizens were living in what was commonly considered "utter bondage."

The Americans concerned are natives of a remote cluster of volcanic islands, the Pribilofs, three hundred miles off the coast of Alaska in the wind- and fog-swept Bering Sea. There are four islands in the Pribilof chain, but only two—St. George and the largest, St. Paul—are inhabited. These two are forty miles apart and, since neither has a harbor, all cargo and passen-

gers arriving by ship must be lightered ashore. The people who live on them are direct descendants of Aleuts enslaved by the Russians and taken to the islands after they were visited by Gerasim Pribilof in 1786. Because of the vast seal herds that congregate there every summer to bear their young and the Aleuts' unique skill at catching, killing, and skinning the animals, the Russians compelled the islanders to remain on the bleak outcroppings and deliver up the annual bounty of pelts that proved so lucrative for the Czarist régime.

IN THE eighteenth century, seal fur was one of the most profitable commodities in world trade. It is estimated that there were three to four million seals in the Bering Sea two hundred years ago. The Russians are said to have taken more than two and a half million pelts from the Pribilof Islands alone between the time of their peopling and the sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867. (Perhaps another two million were taken by pelagic sealing, the killing of seals from boats on the open sea, a method now prohibited by international agreement except to natives using traditional methods.) Twice the

Pribilof herds came close to extinction, a fate that struck many seal rookeries within fifty years after the first experimental cargo of pelts was shipped from the South Pacific in 1784.

For all northern fur seals, the breeding ground is now limited to the Pribilofs, the Commander Islands at the Siberian end of the Aleutian chain, Robben Island off Sakhalin, and some of the Kurile Islands stretching north from Japan. About eighty per cent of all northern fur seals are from the Pribilofs, though it has been shown by tracing tagged animals that there is a certain amount of intermixture. Strict conservation controls are now enforced by agreement between the countries concerned with sealing in northern waters—the Soviet Union, Japan, Canada, and the United States.

Seals are great distance swimmers; only the bull seals winter in Alaskan waters. The rest frequent areas well offshore along the Pacific Coast, swimming as far south as the Santa Barbara Channel Islands off southern California. They rarely go ashore but often travel in small groups, feeding and resting through the winter months in the ocean. Sometimes they are seen floating on their backs, fast asleep, with all four flippers peacefully folded over their bellies or idly stretched in the air.

In the spring and summer, they habitually return to the rookery where they were born. The bulls come first, arriving in order of age. Once they are ensconced, the older females go ashore. Throughout the years, the seals have kept the same cycle, so that it can be said with certainty that the mid-point for the arrival of four-year-old males is between July 13 and 18, for three-year-olds between July 20 and 28. Yearlings come last, though they may only play in the waters and not go ashore at all. The females usually give birth the day after their arrival, and mate once more five days later. All summer the mother seals nurse their pups, one per mother, swimming out for a week or more at a time for food. In November the mother then swims off for the winter. The fat pup is abruptly weaned and left to learn for itself how to follow the schools

of fish south. Between disease and disaster, as high as eighty-five per cent of one season's pups may be lost before they reach the age of three.

Long before the Russians found the Pribilof Islands, the Aleut was attuned to this pinniped cycle and adapted his life to it. No one has been able to match his skill in coming upwind upon the seals in their resting areas, blocking their escape to sea, herding them inland—not too fast, for their hundred-degree body temperature rises quickly outside the ocean and they die from too much exertion on land—and then killing them with one decisive blow on the head.

From the time the Pribilofs were taken over by the Russians until 1910, when the United States government took over the management of the annual slaughter, the lives of the islanders hung precariously upon the ability of the herds to survive the ruthless exploitation to which they were subjected. In 1867, the first year of U.S. possession, before any controls were established, 300,000 skins were taken in the greedy rush to the newly available source of wealth. The government reacted quickly. It prohibited sealing altogether, set aside the islands as a protected reservation for the animals, and then in 1870 established a leasing system that forbade the killing of females. In the first twenty years the lessee, the Alaska Commercial Company, took nearly two million skins; the second twenty-year lease yielded only 342,651, indicating the degree to which the herd had shrunk. At the end of the second lease, the Federal government placed the management of the herd and the taking of skins first under the Department of Commerce and then under the Secretary of the Interior, through the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The law provided that only the natives of the Pribilofs could execute the annual catch and do the work connected with it—a guarantee not wholly prompted by generosity, since non-natives, as the Russians had discovered, only botched the job. Responsibility for the seal herd and for the Pribilovians themselves (all, by then, a mixture of Aleut

and Russian) still rests with the bureau.

Austere Arrangements

Under the direct supervision of the U.S. government, the seal herd has thrived: in 1911 it had been reduced to about 200,000 animals; today it is estimated at 1,500,000. Each year's catch is regulated by such factors as the number of pups born the previous year and the number of breeding females. Harvesting is now largely limited to three- or four-year-old males forty-two inches or more in length, though females are included when the population is large enough.

As for the human charges of the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries, it would be perhaps unfair to say that the residents of the Pribilofs have



evoked less concern over the years than the animals for which the preserve was created. The bureau was made responsible for "their comfort, maintenance, education, and protection," and it supplied houses, food, furnishings, education, and medical care superior, in most cases, to what was obtained by the natives on the mainland. Admittedly, "comfort" is difficult to arrange on remote islands where storms and fogs are the normal weather. The austerity of life on the Pribilofs is conveyed by photographs of the uniform and utterly unadorned wooden houses set on uncompromisingly barren tundra between gray sea and gray sky. The steep roofs of the houses are the only upward thrust from among rocks, dunes, and tundra grass. The impression is of an early Maine town moved to Mars. But the austerity of life on the Pribilofs extended to other areas over which the bureau had more control. In many respects it continued the prac-

tices the Russians had instituted. Until 1950 it did not pay wages—only cash bounties for those who killed the seals; if islanders left their jobs and their homes, even temporarily, there was no guarantee that either would be waiting for them on their return; they had no choice of jobs, they had no choice of food, clothing, housing—they made do with government handouts; their houses and furnishings did not belong to them; they had no voice in their own affairs whatsoever. No one—not the governor of Alaska himself—other than officials of the Fish and Wildlife Service was allowed onto the islands without special permission.

Even without allowing for the fact that the Pribilovians have returned to the U.S. Treasury more than three times the sum (more than \$25 million) paid Russia for all of Alaska (\$7.2 million), these arrangements seem less than generous.

DURING the Second World War, when the Federal government moved them to an island closer to the mainland, the disparity between their lives and others' became apparent to the Pribilovians. There for the first time they made more than casual contact with people whose lives were not totally geared to such a primitive trade. They learned that people who worked received wages. They learned about opportunities for education and found that the children of other Alaskans remained in school until they were eighteen. They realized for the first time that other Alaskans had great freedom in conducting their own community life. But probably the most poignant discovery they made was that other Americans were free to come and go as they chose, to own property, to change jobs, to leave home when they liked and to return when they liked.

In 1950 the Pribilovians were granted their first pay, niggardly though it was. The islands' 166 workers were given an average of less than \$1,000 a year in addition to the government provision of housing, fuel, water, and so forth.

Although rumors had circulated in Alaska for years about a small group of people living under con-

ditions of extreme hardship on the Pribilofs, it wasn't until 1960 that the Department of the Interior woke up to what it had been doing and charged its newly appointed director of the Seattle-based Pribilof operation, C. Howard Baltzo, with improving the lot of the islanders. Workers on the Pribilofs, accordingly, have been paid since 1962 on a scale comparable to that of other Federal employees in Alaska. In other ways, the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries has been trying to make improvements. But not all of their efforts have been welcomed by the islanders and none of them have assuaged the ancient grievances. The Pribilovians were still government wards.

A Flurry of Charges

The extraordinary barriers that have persisted between the islanders and the exercise of their full American rights was brought to public attention two years ago by a deceptively simple event. A mainland merchant running for a seat in the Alaskan legislature chartered a plane and flew out to the Pribilofs to do a little stumping for votes. To his astonishment, he was immediately ejected; he had no permit to enter.

Outrage at his rebuff and its clear indication of Federal paternalism would not normally have swept Alaska as it did, nor have been felt in Congress with such impact. But a wave of self-assertion that is a reflection of the Negro's reach for equality had been building up among the natives who make up nearly a fifth of the population of the Far North. It has been perceptibly quickened by the concern for civil rights in the "Lower 48," as Alaskans often refer to the continental states.

A coalition of Eskimo and Indian interests has been spurred along by a lively little weekly newspaper, the *Tundra Times*, edited in Fairbanks by a couple of irrepressible if sometimes ungrammatical zealots with impeccable news sense, Howard Rock and Thomas A. Snapp. When the airborne candidate was barred from his soapbox on the Pribilofs, the *Tundra Times* was ready and waiting with the story. "Most people think slavery in the United States was abolished with the Civil War and the Emancipation

Proclamation," Tom Snapp wrote in the November 23, 1964, issue. "Yet today in the Far North, in Alaska, slavery still exists, in milder form perhaps than existed in the deep south, but slavery nonetheless. The Aleuts of the Pribilof Islands are today living in servitude to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service."

It was this story that inspired two investigations, with a great flurry of charges, alibis, explanations, apologies, and pledges of good faith for the future and led finally to passage of a remedial bill sponsored by Senator E. L. (Bob) Bartlett (D., Alaska) last October. "All my life," said Senator Bartlett, "I have heard accounts of their problems. All my life I have heard, too, official reassurances that Pribilovians are being well and fairly treated. And yet the problems continue."

The hearings of the Senate Commerce Committee he conducted on

full of pathos provoked by their long status as government wards.

THROUGHOUT the reports and the subsequent hearings runs the testimony of a chronically apprehensive people. It is impossible to be sure how much of this sense of insecurity grew out of current practice and how much was a carry-over from the bad old days before 1950. The most haunting evidence concerned the Pribilovians' feeling that they were not free to move. If they left, they feared there was no going back. To a people so long isolated, so bereft of other contacts, so singularly dependent upon village relationships, this fear has far more shattering emotional implications than it would for other Americans.

"Times have changed," Senator Bartlett told the Pribilovians. "These evil things cannot be done to the people of the islands any



St. Paul Island on September 9, 1965, and in Washington on February 18, 1966, verified many of the facts behind these ancient rumors. So did the report of Alaska's Human Rights Commissioner Willard L. Bowman in March, 1965, and a subsequent report of September 3, 1965, by a special commission appointed by former Governor William A. Egan.

As the reports make clear, the Pribilovians are a remarkable people. Their ancestors were the first native Alaskans to become Christian, the first to learn to read and write. Inevitably, in their isolated communities, there is intermarriage between close relatives, yet they have marvelous physical endurance, great warmth and a bubbling natural happiness, good minds and aptitudes. Their lives, however, as the Congressional hearings disclosed, are

more, because there would be such a loud public outcry that it wouldn't be tolerated." But the past was still vivid. As village council president Iliodor Merculieff testified at St. Paul: "Up until 1950, we were not paid fair compensation and we were allowed just very little food, and shelter of course . . . plus the fact that if we didn't co-operate with the bureau, you used to be laid off. You had to do what the island manager said. . . . In the old days, they used to lay them [those who criticized the bureau] off. Or else if he asked for a vacation or stayed out for about six months, when you came back, you wouldn't get into your old house. So anybody was afraid to go out for more than six months."

Merculieff testified further: "For groceries, they used to allow us for one family, man and wife, a dozen



eggs for a week and no meat.”

One Gabriel Stepetin testified: “During sealing season, they used to eliminate all canned foods—salt fish, salt beef. We lived only on seal meat. Some of the sealers, due to this inadequate food . . . would get tired and when they made a complaint they were threatened that they would be expelled from the island.”

And he added: “For most of the people here the government had provided the home furnished. I don’t know what that means, ‘furnished.’ They never were furnished. Probably they gave you a bed, a dresser or something like that. The residents of the islands themselves have painted, have kept the houses. . . . Like myself, I spent over \$3,000 to make what my house is today. Not counting my labor.” He went on to ask whether the islanders would get credit for improvements if the houses were later sold to them.

Another villager, the Reverend Smile Gromoff, asked how they could be sure the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries wouldn’t move them all off the islands, even then, and let them hustle for work wherever they could find it, to return only for the sealing season. The sense of uncertainty over the future, the fear to trust in the continuation of reforms, runs through every page of the hearings.

Indeed, the most extraordinary disclosure the Pribilovians made was that in its efforts since 1960 to bring efficiency and good management to the Pribilofs, the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries had instituted a policy that only exacerbated the insecurity of the villagers. It decided that maintenance of two villages on two widely separated islands with duplicate water, power, and sewage systems was absurd. Shipping is excessively costly be-

cause bad weather often compels vessels to lie off days at a time before unloading. St. George, with its some 180 people, lives many months without outside contact, dependent only on mail drops from the air if weather permits. A medical emergency in wintertime calls for heroism. The Coast Guard has to fly to St. Paul with a dismantled helicopter, put it together, and then either fly a doctor into St. George or fly the patient out. St. George’s grade-school children might join with the larger group on St. Paul for a more adequate program. In all, the bureau thought, it was doing the St. George residents a favor to propose consolidation on St. Paul.

Over the last few years, therefore, the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries has been urging and inviting (but *not*, it insists, compelling) residents of St. George to move to St. Paul. A few have done so. And as they moved, their homes on St. George were de-



stroyed. The bureau says that they were the oldest homes and that the government could not afford to maintain them empty, which would involve keeping them heated in winter. But to the villagers who beheld the destruction, the significance was shattering. When Senator Bartlett held his hearing at St. Paul, seven islanders from St. George came by boat to plead for their homes and their village.

In fact, the advantages of moving are apparent to few outside the government bureaucracy. Housing

in St. Paul is so crowded that it is already causing “intense dissatisfaction.” The resulting lack of privacy and difficulties in family life were repeatedly testified to. The bureau’s plan to provide additional housing on St. Paul has not materialized. Even as a plan, it is an irritant, since some new buildings would go to outsiders.

But the employment situation on the Pribilofs is even worse than the housing, and this problem, too, has arisen from the effort to bring a modern way of life to the islands.

Toward a New Order

In pre-pay days, all the men were on a par, living on gratuities from the government. It was servitude, but it was the common lot. Now, however, the men of the community are divided sharply between those with permanent full-time jobs (seventy) and those who work only temporarily in the sealing season (185). Permanent jobs bring status as civil-service employees, with civil-service retirement benefits. Temporary jobs, like all Federal temporary employment, have only Social Security benefits. Permanent workers are generally maintenance men, warehousemen, engineers, or equipment handlers. (Neither the Weather Bureau nor the Coast Guard hires Aleuts on their Pribilof stations.) All permanent men have assignments during the sealing season as well. But harvesting sealskins, including preparation and cleaning up afterward, takes only four and a half summer months.

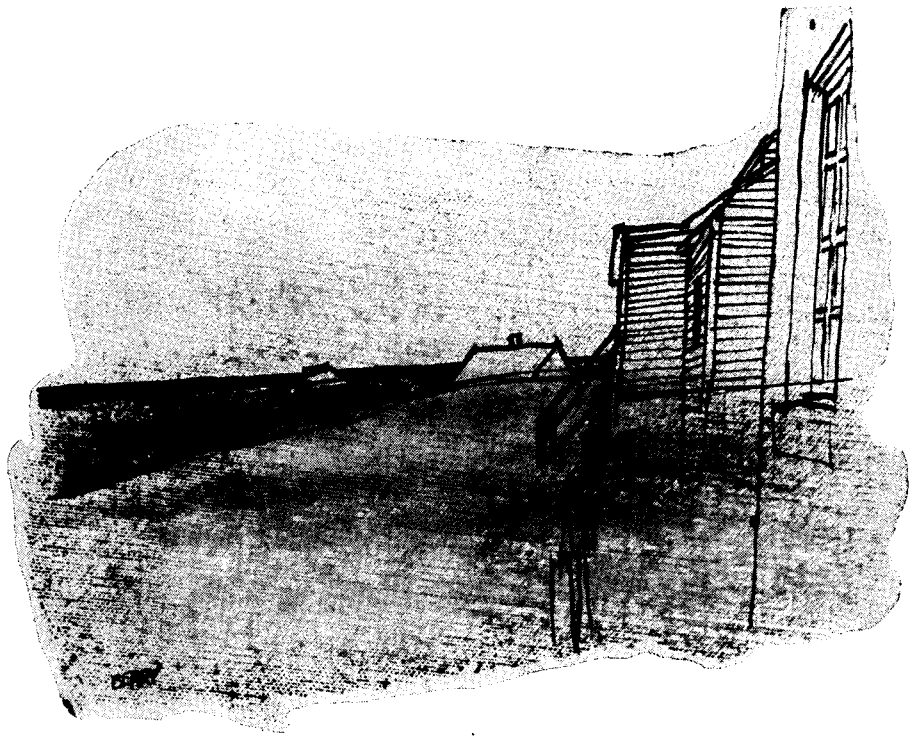
“While prolonged unemployment of the outdoor labor force is all too common in Alaska, that explanation brings no solace to those . . . unemployed people of these two villages who have lived in close-knit kinship for two centuries,” the report of the Alaska investigating commission reads. “For certain persons . . . to be on the year-round ‘permanent’ payroll while about half of their kinsmen are on a five-months ‘temporary’ labor payroll and then on unemployment compensation is a disruptive influence for which economically feasible remedies must be found. The sense of community which has existed for so long has been rent asunder by the painful separation. . . .”

The report points out that since the villagers were quite able to see that the savings achieved by consolidation of the two villages depended largely upon reduction in the total of permanent year-round jobs, their fear that the bureau's "emancipation" was moving too fast was wholly logical.

"The average income for the . . . temporary workers is about \$2,900 a year, based upon the laborer's wage scale of \$3.28 per hour . . .," the report reveals. "This creates a hardship for the temporary employee, for even if he draws [unemployment compensation] for twenty-six weeks, it still leaves him with a gap when there is no income for his family. To fill this gap the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries extends the families credit at the store. Since the bill is paid when the men return to work, there are those who find it increasingly harder to get out of debt each year. Most admit this is the fault of the people concerned; yet all agree the problem is there with no solution to date."

The commission pointed out that a rising standard of living simply could not be achieved with over half the population having only four and a half months' work each year. It made strong recommendations for creation of a harbor at St. Paul and development of Bering Sea fishing from this base. The state of Alaska is strongly favorable. A U.S. Army Engineers' report on the feasibility of building a harbor is expected to come out soon. Reportedly, it will be adverse—the plan is too expensive. But Alaska is hoping that intensive fishing by Russia and Japan in northern waters may prod this country into quickened concern for a share in this resource.

Awaiting the possibility of a fishing center, the bureau moved last winter to carry out some of the commission's recommendations by making it possible for thirty Pribilovians to work in the king-crab industry at Adak and Unalaska—without worry over loss of their homes while away. A long-range program to open other winter employment has begun, greater emphasis has been put on adult vocational education, and the bureau has agreed to make it feasible for tourists to



visit the Pribilofs in summer months, providing the seals are not disturbed. All of these belated efforts are directed toward eventually freeing the people of the Pribilofs from government supervision.

THE LAW proposed by Senator Bartlett and passed by Congress last fall ensures that the proposals for change in the lives of these remote island people will be carried out. The law includes the first opportunity for Pribilovians to own their own homes and create and govern their own municipality. It anticipates a chance for them to start up private businesses and to develop recreation areas. It calls for frequent and natural communication between the Pribilofs and the rest of Alaska, abolishes the "permit" system completely, and proposes that tourists be invited to the islands to view the seals.

The new law makes up for the old injustices by recognizing the years the islanders worked prior to 1950 and admitting such service as credit toward retirement pay. This right has been won for seventy-one men—over the protest, it must be acknowledged, of the U.S. Civil Service Commission.

In carrying forward the mandate to bring the Pribilovians out of paternalism into an independent life, the current good faith of the

Bureau of Commercial Fisheries has not been questioned, but whether this agency has the time, the long-range plan, or the capability to cope with the difficulties of transition has been questioned. It is not going to be easy. It is the state of Alaska that will have to provide the vigilance needed to guarantee the reforms promised by Senator Bartlett's new law.

For various reasons, some Federal agencies balked at Senator Bartlett's plan to give the Pribilovians a chance for full title to their own homesteads, full rights of self-government, and full benefits in retirement. Moreover, it would appear that these simplest of all freedoms have been assured to the Pribilovians by the last Congress only because more sophisticated efforts to extend equality threw the Pribilof policy into such shocking focus.

To concern oneself in these busy times with a handful of islanders who are far off and usually forgotten may seem an exercise in irrelevance. But the story of the Pribilofs is counterpoint to the civil-rights movement, starkly simple in the quality of freedom with which it deals. It is sobering to consider that while carrying out valiant missions elsewhere in the name of freedom, this nation has been content, right up to the present, to tolerate a little slavery of its own on the side.



A European's View Of the Vietnam War

J. H. HUIZINGA

THE DEBATE on Vietnam, as Harold Wilson has said, is characterized by "great passion, great feeling, and great emotion." The British Prime Minister referred to the worldwide indignation aroused by United States actions in that unhappy country. Believing as I do that the purely emotional protests against the war in Vietnam do not deserve the respect they often receive, I shall no doubt be accused of having a heart of stone. And it is true that when I went to Vietnam last year and took part in an air strike against the Vietcong guerrillas, I felt not a twinge of guilt.

There was a moment, however, when even my cold heart was moved to protest. "You gotta work over the area good and proper," the briefing officer instructed my pilot and his three colleagues. I was shocked; the man talked as if it were a question of plowing a field rather than of dropping napalm. Yet I remained silent, for on reflection I recognized my indignation for what it was: self-indulgent sentimentalism. The target was a Vietcong concentration in

a stretch of uninhabited jungle: war is war, and fire is one of its oldest instruments. These men had a job to do; one might indeed call it a chore, for they went out on these missions five days a week. They were bound to talk about their work in this businesslike way.

This is not to exculpate myself from the charge of insufficient compassion; on another occasion, I felt that it was justified. This was soon after my arrival in Vietnam when I spent several hours on one of its huge air bases, taking shelter from the blinding sun under the wing of the military transport that was to take us from Saigon to Hué. With clockwork precision, an endless stream of fighting machines, miraculously avoiding collision with the incoming traffic, roared into the shimmering air on missions of death and destruction. Still new to the war, I should have felt a sense of horror at the thought of what they would let loose on paddies and villages in the green land beyond. But no such pictures came to mind; I saw only a superbly organized death

factory at work. Just forty-eight hours after my arrival, the identification with "one's own side" had become so complete that everyone on the receiving end of the factory had become fair game.

It was here that my failure of feeling showed most clearly, for the tragedy of the Vietnam war is, of course, that so many people on the receiving end are *not* fair game. The average South Vietnamese peasant is in no way responsible for the miseries visited upon him. He is not to be compared to the German civilians who could be held largely responsible for the fate that befell them during the Second World War, but rather with the civilians in German-occupied territory. Indeed, he has even more claim to compassion than the occupied populations of wartime Europe. Like them, he is bombed "for his own good" because there is no other way of liberating him from his "liberators." But unlike the German captives, he has some reason to doubt whether the kind of liberation he can look forward to is worth the price.

THIS BEING SAID, questions about the emotional opposition to U.S. actions in Vietnam remain: How legitimate is its indignation? How pure is its inspiration? First, it should be a chastening thought that one hears very little of this humanitarian protest among Vietnam's neighbors, such as the Thais. They know that if the United States were to settle for disguised or phased surrender, Thailand would be next in line for a "war of national liberation." It is a little too easy for people in the West to demand that the sufferings inflicted on the Vietnamese be brought to an end, whatever the cost to the Thais or Laotians. These critics should ask themselves whether they would be equally ready to advocate withdrawal if the United States were bombing Germany to stop Ulbricht's guerrillas from advancing to the Rhine.

Secondly, those who take the line that anything is better than a continuation of the war are guilty themselves of a lack of compassion and imagination. Before denouncing President Johnson for inhumanity, they would do well to reflect on the inhumanities that would result