

Hunger Strikes at Guantanamo Bay

by

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The 20th century, like the rest of history before it, was marked with violence and conflict founded upon the grievances of many peoples. The 20th century also saw the rise of non-violence as a means of expressing such grievances. One of the most effective, empowering, and often controversial tactics of such resistance is the hunger strike. Hunger strikes put governments in a very precarious position, as they are forced to decide whether to ignore the protest and risk the repercussions of the almost inevitable martyrdom that would ensue if the protestor is let to die. For this reason, governments have often conceded to a hunger strike's demands. The most notable history of hunger strikes can be seen in Ireland, where many hundreds of these demonstrations have taken place in the 20th century, reaching their peak in 1981, with the deaths of 10 protestors. Very recently, the U.S. government has faced hunger strikes in the prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and has chosen to take what some would say to be drastic measures to combat the protests such as force-feeding the hunger strikers. By examining the history of the Irish hunger strikes, we can better understand the hunger strikes at Guantanamo and the U.S. Government's reaction to the protest. We can see how the outcome of the 1981 Irish hunger strikes have indirectly affected United States policy through the American government's attempt to keep the hunger strikes quiet and avoid the power of martyrdom.

Hunger strikes prove an especially powerful method, as they are more drastic than many other forms of protest. Seen as a last resort, they can result in complete sacrifice to a cause. Prolonged hunger can have devastating effects on the body and mind, giving the hunger strike its power. Especially during hunger strikes in the early 20th century, governments were unsure how long a person would survive before being seriously harmed or killed by hunger. This uncertainty has often led governments to concede to the protestor's demands with urgency, fearing the repercussions of that protestor's death and possible martyrdom.

But it is the severity of the effects of food deprivation, now better understood, that give the hunger strike such political power. Modern governments have a more acute knowledge of the science of the human body, and thus can take a more active stance against the detrimental effects of the hunger strike. Several prominent neurologists studied hunger strikers as a case study investigating the effects of prolonged hunger on the brain. A group of Turkish neuroscientists explained that in their research "[o]ur most significant finding was that the effect of hunger was more prominent on the central nervous system than on the neuromuscular system" and that "partial recovery of neurological, and neurocognitive signs in prolonged hunger could be a result of permanent neurological injury" (Basoglu et al., 1089). The researchers also reported that all of the prisoners participating in hunger strikes experienced altered consciousness for up to a month. This study illustrates the importance of modern science as it is applied to hunger strikes, and its findings have been evaluated by governments such as our own in their assessment of how to deal

with hunger strikes. Clearly, prolonged hunger can be very detrimental to one's body, both outwardly and visibly, from the many pounds of lost weight, and internally, from the multiple effects on the brain. It is in this sacrifice that hunger strikes find their power, for anyone has access to the empowerment of self-deprivation and immolation. .

A key center of hunger strikes used as a political tool has been the country of Ireland. The concept of such strikes, and belief in their empowerment, have existed in Irish society for hundreds of years. As Russell explained the early history, "In medieval Ireland, fasting against a person was part of the legal system. If a man felt you had wronged him and died hungry on your doorstep, you became responsible for his debts" (74). Since the English invasion in the 1600's, the root of the conflict between protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, Irish culture and history have developed a mythology that glorified ancient martyrs and self-sacrifice (Sweeney, 425).

In a culture thus prone to martyrdom, the hunger strike became a strong political tool, and the use of fasting specifically for social and political movements began to develop in the early 20th century. Thomas Ashe, an IRA activist, was accused of sedition in 1917. He went on a hunger strike and died soon after being forcibly fed (Sweeney, 426). The power of his martyrdom can be best described by his funeral, which involved a procession of "3000 uniformed members of the Irish Volunteers" that was "watched by tens of thousands of people as it made its way through the streets of Dublin" (Sweeney, 426).

The power of this one death gave power to hunger strikes in Ireland in the future as well. Governments feared creating this immortality that Ashe had

reached in death. Hunger strikes began again in 1919 by 50 Sinn Fein prisoners, demanding prisoner-of-war treatment. A common theme of hunger strikes in prisons is seeking recognition, and here the prisoners wanted their actions to be represented as more than merely criminal acts, but reflective of a broader political cause. The government not only responded by acknowledging their protest, but also conceded completely in this situation for fear of martyrdom and released the prisoners (Sweeney, 427).

This goal of seeking recognition is common to both the 1981 Northern Irish hunger strike and the hunger strikes at Guantanamo Bay, . In each of these situations, the immediate goals of the prisoners are caused by the efforts of the respective governments to suppress their broader political goals.

The 1981 Northern Irish hunger strike represents one of the first modern hunger strikes. By the early 1980s, the world had grown more interconnected, and with this globalization came an increased flow of information. With more reporting going out to more areas of the globe, the potential power of a hunger strike amplified and, in turn, increased the efforts by governments to take that power away. The British government's response reflects the heightened significance of this protest method, pronouncing its message firmly against the IRA strikers and defining them as "terrorists" (Mulcahy, 449). As Mulcahy reported, "According to legal and official doctrine, they...differed from other inmates solely in terms of gravity of their crimes and their generally dangerous nature" (449).

The protestors, from their side, called for recognition similar to that of the Irish strikes of decades earlier. The political goal they publicized was "the

unification of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland" (Mulcahy, 449). A government again faced two potentially ill-fated alternatives: give in to terrorism or let the prisoners die and have potential martyrdom. Here, Margaret Thatcher came out firmly against the protestors, upholding the principle that no crime is justified, arguing that "There is no such thing as political murder, political bombing or political violence. There is only criminal murder, criminal bombing and criminal violence" (Mulcahy, 449). She stood by these principles firmly, but unsuccessfully. Ultimately, ten prominent protestors died and became martyrs.

The enormous public reaction and extreme martyrdom that resulted illustrates the effect of the increased media flow. While the British government firmly opposed the goals of the hunger strikes, in doing so it gave the protestors both the recognition of media coverage and status of political martyr they had been seeking

After the death of Bobby Sands, the first and most well-known striker to die, several leading Irish-American congressmen spoke out against the actions of the British government. The hunger strikes in Ireland, and the governmental response, became a major political focus for certain members of the U.S. government. The American support for the hunger strikes was led by Senator Edward M. Kennedy. On May 5, 1981, he addressed the Senate, saying "[t]he death of Bobby Sands is a symptom of a deeper crisis — a crisis that will go on and on and on in Northern Ireland, until the Government of Great Britain, the Government of Ireland, and all who truly seek an end to violence care enough to speak and work for peace" ("Speeches and Telegrams," 2). On May 6, Kennedy and several other politicians, including Sen Daniel Patrick Moynihan,

House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr., and Gov. Hugh L. Carey, wrote a telegram to Margaret Thatcher to convey their dissent to the British policies: "[W]e question a posture of inflexibility," they wrote, "that must lead inevitably to more senseless violence and more needless deaths in Northern Ireland" ("Speeches and Telegrams," 2).

Thatcher responded to this telegram on May 14, stating that the British government was, in fact, being flexible: "We have offered a series of improvements in conditions to all prisoners — most of which the protesters have rejected" ("Speeches and Telegrams," 5). Clearly, however, the British government had not been flexible enough to avert the death of Bobby Sands. Nine more strikers died before Thatcher's government took any considerable action. But in the end, these strikes did accomplish their stated goals and also much more. They received international attention, enough to be brought up on the floor of the U.S. Senate. The longer the British government ignored the strikes and remained non-compliant, the stronger they became, as more and more young Irish protestors gave their lives.

The aftermath of these hunger strikes provided the U.S. government with a greater understanding of what policies were effective in such situations. The British government eventually admitted that its policy of "criminalization" of the Irish Nationals was wrong and betrayed democratic principles (Smith, 1). It also became understood that these policies often encouraged higher recruitment in the IRA (1). These hunger strikes were so effective because of their exposure: the world watched as these men used their last right of protest to support their cause. In this situation, American politicians were willing to address political

concerns to save the lives of protestors and others who might be killed in response to their martyrdom.

But Guantanamo Bay, the U.S. military prison facility in Cuba, has brought the issue directly into American political policy, and the U.S. government's current approach to dealing with hunger strikers in Guantanamo clearly reflects an understanding of the outcome of the Irish strikes of 1981. Unlike the British response, the U.S. government's policy in Guantanamo has been one of secrecy and of force-feeding prisoners to avoid the media coverage that created the martyrdom of Bobby Sands.

The Guantanamo Bay facility has recently functioned as a dumping ground for suspected terrorists, and prisoners have often not been given the right to trial. Hunger strikes have only begun at Guantanamo in the last several years. The prisoners have protested of the nature of their imprisonment: they want to be given basic human rights, such as the right to a fair trial, and other measures upheld by international law. The prisoners hope to achieve their goals through the spreading of awareness of their condition. Last year, what was likely the largest hunger strike to ever take place at an American-run prison began, led by 76 prisoners, and at its height in September, "more than a quarter of the prison's nearly 500 inmates were refusing to eat." (Mitchell, 9). Military spokesman Cmdr. Robert Durand called the hunger strike "an attempt by the prisoners to gain media attention and to pressure the United States to release about 460 men held as enemy combatants" (as cited in Bacon, 1). Journalist Luke Mitchell also pointed out that initially military and administration officials tied to the Pentagon were "dismissive of the strikes, which they called 'voluntary fasts'" (9).

But to avoid both martyrdom and substantial media attention to the hunger strike, the U.S. government changed tactics and in 2002 took up the practice of force feeding, an approach it has continued to use as the hunger strikes have grown (Mitchell, 9).. The force feeding has been called wrong for several reasons. First, defense lawyers for the imprisoned claim the physical harm in the procedures used, saying that "the doctors sometimes used excessively thick tubes that caused internal bleeding and that they deliberately overfed the prisoners, causing them to vomit and to defecate in their clothing and on their chairs" (Mitchell, 9). Secondly, the practice has been challenged as unethical. The Medical Association drafted a ban on force-feeding in 1975 at a conference in Tokyo, later approved by the American Medical Association (Mitchell, 9). By force feeding the strikers, the U.S. government has taken away the right to refuse treatment, an internationally supported right. Bernadette Gregory, a general practitioner from England, wrote that "[d]octors who participate in these practices need to examine their own consciences" (2). She has also realized that it is not necessarily the decision of each of the individual doctors at Guantanamo but that the ethical burden lies in the hands of the U.S. government.

The use of force-feeding at Guantanamo has been justified by prison authorities on the basis of preventing suicide (Gregory, 1). But this assumption has been roundly rejected, as "[t]he aim of suicide is death. Hunger Strikers do not want to die; they want to live. They want to live with a better quality of life" (Gregory, 1). The bottom line over force feeding comes back to the ethical debate and the "recognition that prisoners have the same right as any other

patient to refuse medical treatment" (2). Even though the British government was inflexible to the demands of the Irish hunger strikers, it did, at least, grant the prisoners the right to die, the last and ultimate right of any human.

Further, the prisoners, like any protester, are empowered by their ability to protest. The act of refusing to eat retains a strong power; as X. Russell contends, "[h]unger strikers believe that the voice of hunger has a power disproportionate to its source. Hunger can strengthen the weak, inspire the timid, bully the powerful. The voice of hunger can free the oppressed and right injustice This last right is taken away through force feeding " (73). To combat this inherent power, the U.S. government has acted to avoid the martyrdom that the world witnessed in the 1981 Irish hunger strikes . . .

When it is mentioned in American media, Guantanamo Bay is often portrayed as filled with horrible terrorists, when most of the people imprisoned there are not, in fact, confirmed guilty through a fair trial. James Yusuf Yee is a West Point graduate who became a Muslim chaplain and served in Guantanamo Bay for 10 months before being released when his charges were dropped. He said, "[t]he prisoners are human. They are Muslim men, husbands, fathers, brothers. They have families, wives, sisters, brothers, and children. In the press they are portrayed as people who are in some way related to September 11. I found it hard to believe that all are connected, that they are terrorists. Some 200 have been released" (as cited in Tanne, 1).

While the U.S. has purposely taken a different approach than the British, this policy of criminalization by the U.S. is even worse than when used by the British toward the IRA before 1981. Many of the prisoners clearly are innocent, as

hundreds have been released and their charges dropped. The prisoners, therefore, are inaccurately portrayed as terrorists across the board by the media.

The overall policy has been one of secrecy, as the U.S. government draws attention away from unjust policies and away from the reality facing the prisoners. Gitanjali Gutierrez, a lawyer representing Guantanamo detainees, said that in 2005 there might have been as many as 250 prisoners participating in the hunger strikes, with 21 hospitalized (as cited in Tanne, 2). Gutierrez reported that 20 of these prisoners were being force fed and that “[t]he Department of Defense refuses to release the names of the men hospitalized and won’t tell their attorneys” (as cited in Tanne, 2).

The secrecy of the government is compounded by misleading information about Guantanamo. Events at the prison often have been simplified and manipulated in their portrayal, through the use of vague language. In 2002, the American press became aware of a heightened suicide rate among Guantanamo detainees at the same time that the military publically claimed that “suicide attempts had radically declined.” But according to *Nation* writer Clive Smith, “it took a foreign journalist to expose the truth: The very word ‘suicide’ had been replaced by the authorities with the term Manipulative Self-Injurious Behavior (SIB)—and there were still plenty of SIBs” (1). In this situation, the U.S. government tried to avoid the attention that Bobby Sands developed as a result of his media attention and the British government’s firm opposition to his demands. The U.S., instead, stifled media coverage and refused to acknowledge the protest of the strikers

The position of the military is clear: Not to allow these prisoners to make the ultimate, tragic political statement that Bobby Sands made in Northern Ireland several decades earlier (Smith, 2). Prisoners are being hospitalized, strapped into chairs, and tubes are being forced down their noses and throats. The information officially released about these prisoners and their condition is vague and restricted. "I am slowly dying in this solitary prison cell," said Omar Deghayes, a British refugee and Guantánamo Bay prisoner; "I have no rights, no hope. So why not take my destiny into my own hands, and die for a principle?" (as cited in Smith, 1). But the U.S. government reasons that its actions in ignoring the protest's central cause and force feeding prisoners are justified by preventing any recognition and power to strikers such as Deghayes in the media. So far, this policy has worked for the most part, as many people in America do not know of these protestors, their conditions, or their cause. The U.S. government cannot continue this policy, for manipulating the media in turn manipulates the rights of these prisoners and, ultimately, compromises our conscience as citizens of this nation.

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