

November 8, 1971

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To: Members of the Black Caucus

Shirley Chisolm
Ralph Metcalfe
William Clay
Augustus Hawkins
Charles Diggs
John Congers

Walter Fountroy
Robert Nix
Charles Rangel
Parren J. Mitchell
Louis Stokes
George Collins

In recent weeks a critical situation has been developing within the walls of the Tennessee State Prison. Black prisoners have attempted to utilize traditional prison channels in order to get their grievances redressed. Their efforts have been largely unsuccessful. This failure with traditional methods led the prisoners to publish an open letter to the public putting forth their demands. A copy of this letter is enclosed.

Upon reading this open letter you will find that I am one of the individuals whom the prisoners requested serve on a committee to investigate their grievances and seek redress. In other letters received through private channels from prisoners, I have been asked to contact you and other members of the caucus to put forth a request. The Black inmates of the Tennessee State Prison request that the members of the Black Caucus arrange a tour and discussion session with inmates when they come to Nashville on December 10th and 11th for the Black Caucus - Tennessee Voters Association dinner.

This request was made by the inmates with the understanding that while elected from particular congressional districts, you and your colleagues represent the interest of Black people across the country, regardless of geographical boundaries.

Enclosed is the open letter from the inmates to the public. I would appreciate some communications on this matter as soon as possible. I may

be reached at the following locations:

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Nashville, Tenn., 37203

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Remember Attica
Yours in the struggle,

James Dawson
James Dawson

Reform Asked By Prisoners

By DWIGHT LEWIS

A group of inmates at the Tennessee state prison here who call themselves "the prison activist group for reform" has released a list of grievances that include dismissal of "unqualified" guards, better health care and an orderly grievance procedure.

In an open letter mailed to Gov. Winfield Dunn, Corrections Commissioner Mark Luttrell, several state legislators and newsmen, the activist group said:

"We want an end to the hiring of unqualified guards who aren't capable or mentally equipped to successfully carry out the functions of their jobs without causing incidents. Also, we want those now working who lack the proper qualifications to be dismissed."

WHILE NEITHER the number of inmates in the group, nor their names, could be learned, the letter said "the motive of our writing you stems somewhat from the fact that our attempts to have these grievances acted upon by the officials of this institution have failed to a degree that they leave us no other alternative but to institute actions that can only be detrimental to the institution as a whole, from the point of view that society and all taxpayers as a whole will take." Luttrell said he received a copy of the letter last Sunday.

"I got my copy Sunday evening and have studied their complaints," he said. "I have written a letter to the people whom the inmates sent the letter to and have asked

them to join me in a visit at the prison."

"SOME OF the grievances they listed we are already working on and we have had some of them in process for some time. Others we will have to take a hard look at before deciding what to do," Luttrell said.

Other statements and grievances in part listed by the group include:

"Hospital and health care facilities — The unavailability

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State Penitentiary

Inmates Demand Reform

(Continued From Page One)

of a licensed doctor on duty on a fulltime basis. The deliberate delay of prison officials to transfer emergency cases to hospitals in downtown Nashville. We want an end to prejudices rendered to blacks as opposed to whites when it comes to proper treatment for ailments. Presently there is a kidney epidemic flourishing within this institution and there has been no effort on the part of the officials to curtail it and find its exact source.

"Prison economy—Violation of minimum wage law. We want an end to discrimination to job appointments and job classification, in that the result of our labor is the production of quality products sold to free-world agencies. We feel that we are justified in our request to receive wages ranging from a fair minimum wage and up. We

want an end to the limitation of how much money we can draw from our personal accounts. This tends to psychologically dehumanize a man.

"Dining room—We want an end to the overall unsanitary conditions that exist in the overall preparation of food and the area this is done in. None of the personnel working in the dining room have health cards.

Commissary — We want better products that everyone

can use for their personal needs. Prices on items are exceedingly high, we feel that they can and should be lowered. We have compared certain prices here with prices on the outside and in here are higher.

All prices in the commissary are rounded off to avoid dealing with pennies, basically to hide the fact of overcharging. This creates the illusion that we aren't being taxed but when the rounding off is done it's to the next

highest tenth or round figure.

Other grievances called for an end to mail censorship; an orderly way to address our problems to the officials hired to deal with them; an end to the "kangaroo disciplinary court and permission to hold political meetings and a suitable place to do so.

Also better housing facilities for the elderly men; an end to the discrimination in the selection of entertainment allowed within this institution; better recreational facilities

to accommodate us during the winter months as well as the summer, and an end to the encouragement of homosexuality by prison officials.

LUTTRELL SAID some of the grievances that are on the list such as getting a new gym will have to come before the state legislature.

"We are converting the auditorium into a gym until we can get a permanent gym built. The auditorium will have a basketball court in it but we still will be able to

put the chairs back in place when we are scheduled to have entertainment that calls for the inmates to be sitting in chairs," he said.

Luttrell said as for the housing of the elderly men, an architect has been selected to construct a new building. He added that effective this week, the inmates have received a \$20 monthly increase in their money account.

"ONE OF the reasons for the complaints about the

money situation is that we are putting in a new pay schedule and some of the black inmates felt that they would be put in a lower bracket than the whites. The truth is that we have increased the pay of 400 men and 200 of those are black.

Luttrell added that he has issued an order that all stewards immediately get a health card and that prison officials plan to take an extensive look at the kitchen and medical facilities.

Here are edited versions of letters written by the brothers in the prison requesting the Black Caucus to come and view the conditions of the Tennessee State Prison.

10/23/71

"... It was known to ... that the Caucus would be holding a fund raising affair for Avon Williams, but if it can be arranged try and set up a meeting with them [Caucus] before or after their [Caucus] gathering. By contacting Wms., by phone or appointment, in advance and together with he [Wms]... could arrange some type of scheldule for the meetings. If they [Caucus] are as concerned with the plight of blacks as they claim to be, something... sure can be worked out with very little effort on their [Caucus] part. The best way to assure some type of response, positiv response, would be to contact Wms. as early as possible prior to the gathering. That way he'll [Wms] have time to rearrang his [Wms] scheldule to fit..... or vice versa, all.... want is a chance to rap. Right? Not eat!..."

11/4/71

"... Have.....made any contact w th Atty. Wms. yet? If not, keep trying!!
is ... can see by the literature sent with this leter, escalating
fforts here. We got eighteen letters off to those people whom the literature men-
tioned."

It has come to the attention of this organization that our purpose, and aim here at this slave labor camp is being mis-interpreted as well as mis-understood by a large segment of the general population. Due to the slandering of some, and the lack of understanding among others, we've been called everything from a Memphis Cliche, to a group of would be revolutionaries bent on creating a racial situation here of gigantic proportion in order to draw the public's notice to this particular institution. We wish to dispell these lies and distortions once and for all; we are not a Memphis Cliche in that there are men in our organization from all regions of the state, and as for being a cliche, yes! We are a cliche in that a Black Reformist Cliche, who seeks the participation of every Black man here. Our aim is to bring about a much needed degree of reform within this institution, not for the betterment of a handful of people because this is an impossibility, but for their own. To these people a revolution is based on land, a revolution is the changing of the social order, the complete destruction of one form of government and all of its lackies, for that of another. The question asked is, is this possible and can it happen from behind the walls of this house of oppression and degradation? To listen to the slander of the psuedo-prison nimps and hustlers, who if given the chance would attempt to, not sell but give away their very souls in exchange for a mere smile of acknowledgement from any white racist official of this institution, one would be led to believe that nothing in the form of change can occur behind these walls. But our answer to the question is YES. Because of this our organization calls for complete "UNITY" among the BLACK MEN incarcerated within this institution, we call for and end to the PETTY fights and arguments that develop over nothing other than the tensions and anger instilled in us by the very forces that wish to see us at each other's throats like MAD DOG'S instead of directing our energies and anxieties towards them, who are in fact our real enemies. They assume the responsibility of keeping us imprisoned here at this slave-labor camp, they are the cause for us existing under inhumane conditions fit for on man, they are the ones who violate our rights as men and human beings. No man or group or men or institution has the right to subject us to these conditions, and as men it is our duty to REBEL against them, we call for an end of the horse-play between convicts and guards, we call for an end to the raping of our young brothers coming here from the streets because this is exactly what the guards and officials of this institution encourage. The time has arrived for black men to began channeling some constructive thoughts into the fertile minds of our younger brothers because they will and have to play an important role in the total liberation of our people. The raping and systematic ripping off of these brothers is going to become a thing of the past one way or another. We must come together and direct our energies toward bettering our conditions, the HOSPITAL facilities are extremely inadequate, and the personnel is even worse. In a community of this size there should be a LICENCED doctor on duty at all times, none of us are promised perfect health, so these conditions effect everyone. THE dining room is pitiful, extremely unsanitary, its required by the health card, but no one who works there has one. Because of this negligence we are all being subjected to every form of disease that exist. One of the stewards is sick that he constantly SPITS on the floor of the food preparation area. The food isn't prepared properly in that all the nutrients are cooked out of it, due to the lack of trained personnel. They have a qualified man here teaching the food class, but over the cooking department there is a little unhealthy man who can't even spell the word. There are inmates working outside these walls painting the building which is unlawful, because this institution has an arrangement with a private company in Nashville. But by using slave labor they can pocket the money. In addition to this a system has been devised as a means of cutting the amount of personal wages that we were previously making, along with cutting the amount of personal money we are allowed to draw. Brothers its time to wake up to reality and fully recognize what is actually happening, and why it is urgent that we bring about a overt change in our existence. When a man is taken out of society and placed within an institution operated by the state on state and federal funds, its the obligation of the institution to insure that the man is housed, fed and clothed properly, it is also the obligation of the state to see to it that you are furnished with anything to keep up your health and personal hygiene, we are receiving none of these things but the "cap" for that is that we are payed a salary to compensate for this, or is suppose to. The question is what amount of money compensates for these things such as, toothpaste, soap, toothbrush, razor, razor blades, hair grease or oil, deodorant, etc? The food is improper and unhealthy so most of us are forced to live out of the commissary, which is the intention of the administration, because the prices on everything there are higher than they should be. It only takes a little logic to see that when you purchase all the articles you actually need in order to keep yourself up to par, and when we see we are intentionally forced to get a half way decent but un-nourishing meal out of the commissary or actually working for NOTHING AT ALL because the racist administration here really has the money we receive, back before we receive it. Yet we work like Dog's to help the states budget, and none of this money is being channeled back into this institution to better the conditions of the very people who make its existence possible. So we say it is time that we unite to oppose these practices, all that is needed is.....

"UNITY, for in it lies our strength, we have the power to either force these people to better our conditions or completely without fear, withdraw our MAN-POWER.

THE DECISION IS YOURS, YOU ARE OUR UNITY

LET THIS NEWSLETTER SERVE AS A WARNING TO THE RACIST OFFICIALS WHO RUN THIS PRISON THAT OUR ORGANIZATION IS ESTABLISHED HERE TO STAY REGARDLESS OF ANY REPRESSIVE MEASURES TAKEN TO SUPPRESS OUR EFFORTS.

WHAT IS BLACK UNITY?

THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE KEY CHANGE IN OUR THINKING IS SHOWN BY THE FACT, THAT IT'S TONIC CHORD COULD RING TRUE FOR A MIND ESSENTIALLY PREOCCUPIED WITH LOGIC. TO IT'S ULTIMATE BEING AND REALITY, AS THE IDEALISTIC MINIMUM NECESSARY FOR ANY ADEQUATE THEORY OF SYMBOLISM, . IF THESE BE SUCH A REALITY AS THE IDEALISTS ASSUME, THEN ACCESS TO IT, AS TO ANY OTHER INTELLECTUAL GOAL, MUST BE THROUGH SOME ADEQUATE SYMBOLISM. BUT I CAN NOT SEE THAT ANY ACCESS TO THE SOURCE OR PRINCIPLE OF MAN'S BEING IS PRESUPPOSED IN THE LOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF SYMBOLISM ITSELF. IN OUR QUESTIONS LIE OUR PRINCIPLES OF ANALYSIS, AND OUR ANSWERS MAY EXPRESS WHETHER THOSE PRINCIPLES ARE ABLE TO YIELD.

PAGFR/ T.S.P.

"IT'S NATION TIME "

WE ARE EXPECTING IN THE VERY NEAR FUTURE A COMMITTEE OF MEN WHO ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THE INHUMAN WAY IN WHICH WE EXIST WITHIN THIS INSTITUTION. IF THEY ARE ALLOWED TO ENTER THE WALLS THEY WILL BE SEEKING INFORMATION THAT WILL BE BENEFICIAL IN HELPING US OBTAIN THE CHANGES THAT ARE SO BADLY NEEDED AT THIS PRISON FACILITY. IN VIEW OF THIS, AND IN AN EFFORT TO BE OF HELP IN BRINGING ABOUT THESE CHANGES WE REQUEST THAT EVERY BLACK MAN HERE STEP-UP AND SPEAK TO THESE GENTLEMEN ABOUT THE MANY GRIEVANCES THAT WE HAVE. BY DOING SO WE CAN GAIN THE OUTSIDE HELP THAT WE NEED TO EXPOSE THE PREFUDICIAL PRACTICES OF THIS PENAL SYSTEM. DON'T HESITATE TO STAND-UP AND SPEAK-OUT.

THE FOLLOWING IS THE LETTER THAT WAS SENT TO THE MEN MENTIONED ABOVE.

THE NAMES AT THE END ARE THOSE WHO WILL GET A COPY.

PRISON ACTIVIST GROUP FOR REFORM
OPEN LETTER TO THE PUBLIC

CONTENT:

IN THAT EACH OF YOU ARE PUBLIC SERVANT OR IN SOME WAY SERVE THIS COMMUNITY AS A WHOLE WE THE INMATES INCARCERATED BEHIND THE WALLS OF THE PRISON FACILITY IN NASHVILLE HAVE FELT THE NECESSITY TO ADDRESS OUR GRIEVANCES TO YOU IN ANTICIPATION THAT WE'LL BE ABLE TO OBTAIN THE MUCH NEEDED CHANGES WHICH THIS INSTITUTION DESPERATELY NEEDS. THE MOTIVE OF OUR WRITING YOU STEMS SOMEWHAT FROM THE FACT THAT OUR ATTEMPTS TO HAVE THESE GRIEVANCES ACTED UPON BY THE OFFICIALS OF THIS INSTITUTION HAVE FAILED TO A DEGREE THAT THEY LEAVE US NO OTHER ALTERNATIVE BUT TO INSTITUTE ACTIONS THAT CAN ONLY BE DETRIMENTAL TO THE INSTITUTION AS A WHOLE, FROM THE POINT OF VIEW THAT SOCIETY AND ALL TAX PAYERS AS A WHOLE WILL TAKE. BECAUSE OF THIS AND THE CURRENT INVESTIGATION OF THE CORRECTIONAL SYSTEM OF THIS STATE WE URGE YOU TO FORM A COMMITTEE TO COME BEHIND THE WALLS AND TALK WITH THE INMATE POPULATION TO FIND OUT EXACTLY WHAT THE PROBLEMS AND TREATMENT WE ARE SUBJECTED TO ARE.

THE FOLLOWING ARE A LIST OF GRIEVANCES THAT WE FEEL SHOULD BE ACTED UPON IMMEDIATELY:

1. HOSPITAL AND HEALTH CARE FACILITIES

- A. THE UNAVAILABILITY OF A LICENSED DOCTOR ON DUTY ON A FULL-TIME BASIS, 24 HOURS.
- B. THE DELIBERATE DELAY OF PRISON OFFICIALS TO TRANSFER EMERGENCY CASES TO HOSPITALS IN DOWNTOWN NASHVILLE.
- C. WE WANT AN END TO PREJUDICES RENDERED TO BLACKS AS OPPOSED TO WHITES WHEN IT COMES TO PROPER TREATMENT FOR AILMENTS.

PRESENTLY THERE IS A KIDNEY EPIDEMIC FLOURISHING WITHIN THIS INSTITUTION AND THERE HAS BEEN NO EFFORT ON THE PART OF THE OFFICIALS TO CURTAIL IT AND FIND ITS EXACT SOURCE.

2. PRISON ECONOMY-VIOLATION OF MINIMUM WAGE LAW

- A. WE WANT AN END TO DISCRIMINATION TO JOB APPOINTMENTS AND JOB CLASSIFICATION.
- B. IN THAT THE RESULT OF OUR LABOR IS THE PRODUCTION OF QUALITY PRODUCTS SOLD TO FREE-WORLD AGENCIES, WE FEEL THAT WE ARE JUSTIFIED IN OUR REQUEST TO RECEIVE WAGES RANGING FROM A FAIR MINIMUM WAGE AND UP. OUT OF THESE WAGES WE WILL PAY THE STATE THE PRICE FOR OUR ROOM AND BOARD. THIS INSTITUTING AND INSTILLING A SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY ON THE INMATES PART. PREPARING US FOR RELEASE INTO SOCIETY AS FUNCTIONAL PARTS OF IT.
- C. WE WANT AN END TO THE LIMITATION OF HOW MUCH MONEY WE CAN DRAW FROM OUR PERSONAL ACCOUNTS. THIS TENDS TO PSYCHOLOGICALLY DE-HUMANIZE A MAN-TELLING HIM IN FACT THAT HE CAN'T MANAGE HIS OWN MONEY.

3. DINING ROOM

- A. WE WANT AN END TO THE OVERALL UNSANITARY CONDITIONS THAT EXIST IN THE OVERALL PREPARATION OF FOOD AND THE AREA THIS IS DONE IN..IN THAT IT IS A HEALTH HAZARD THAT NEEDS DESPERATELY TO BE INSPECTED BY THE HEALTH DEPARTMENT.
- B. NONE OF THE PERSONNEL WORKING IN THE DINING ROOM HAVE HEALTH CARDS, WHICH ENCOURAGES DISEASE. ALL PERSONS HANDLING FOOD SHOULD HAVE HEALTH CARDS.

4. COMMISSARY

- A. WE WANT BETTER PRODUCTS THAT EVERYONE CAN USE FOR THEIR PERSONAL NEEDS.
- B. PRICES ON ITEMS ARE EXCEEDINGLY HIGH, WE FEEL THAT THEY CAN AND SHOULD BE LOWERED. WE HAVE COMPARED CERTAIN PRICES HERE WITH PRICES ON THE OUTSIDE, AND IN MOST INSTANCES THE PRICES HERE ARE HIGHER. WE WERE TOLD THAT WE ARE 'T BEING RIPPED ON THE ITEMS WE BUY BUT IN REALITY WE ARE, IT'S ADDED UP IN THE TOTAL PRICE. ALL PRICES IN THE COMMISSARY ARE ROUNDED OFF TO AVOID DEALING WITH PENNIES, BASICALLY TO HIDE THE FACT OF OVER CHARGING. THIS CREATES THE ILLUSION THAT WE AREN'T BEING TAXED BUT WHEN THE ROUNDING OFF IS DONE ITS TO THE NEXT HIGHEST TENTHS OR ROUND FIGURE. TECHNICALLY SPEAKING THIS IS CALLED EXPLOITATION AT IT'S LOWEST LEVEL, BECAUSE WE, THE INMATES ARE IN A SEEMINGLY HELPLESS POSITION.

5. WE WANT AN END TO MAIL CENSORSHIP.
6. WE WANT AN ORDERLY GREIVANCE PROCEDURE ESTABLISHED SO WE WILL HAVE AN ORDERLY WAY TO ADDRESS OUR PROBLEMS TO THE OFFICIALS HIRED TO DEAL WITH THEM.
7. WE WANT AN END TO THE "KANGAROO DISCIPLINARY COURT".
8. WE WANT PERMISSION TO HOLD POLITICAL MEETINGS AND SUITABLE PLACE TO DO SO.
9. WE WANT A BETTER HOUSING FACILITY FOR THE ELDERLY MEN INCARCERATED HERE AND THEIR PRESENT PLACE OF CONFINEMENT, NOT ONLY CONDEMNED BUT TORN DOWN.
10. WE WANT AN END TO THE DISCRIMINATION IN THE SELECTION OF ENTERTAINMENT ALLOWED WITHIN THIS INSTITUTION, THIS CAN BE DONE BY SELECTING GROUPS WHO CATER TO THE MUSICAL TASTE OF BLACKS AS WELL AS WHITES.
11. WE WANT BETTER RECREATIONAL FACILITIES TO ACCOMMODATE US DURING THE WINTER MONTHS AS WELL AS THE SUMMER. THIS CAN BE DONE BY PURCHASING FOOTBALL EQUIPMENT AND MAINLY BUILDING A GYMNASIUM.
12. WE WANT AN END TO THE HIRING OF UNQUALIFIED GUARDS WHO AREN'T CAPABLE OR MENTALLY EQUIPPED TO SUCCESSFULLY CARRY OUT THE FUNCTIONS OF THEIR JOBS WITHOUT CAUSING INCIDENTS. ALSO WE WANT THOSE NOW WORKING WHO LACK THE PROPER QUALIFICATIONS TO BE DISMISSED. SUCH AS THE FOLLOWING MEN TO NAME JUST A FEW:

| | |
|--|--------------------------|
| 1. ASST. DEPUTY WARDEN- JOE MILLS | 7. PRIVATE A.G. LACKEY |
| 2. DIRECTOR OF TREATMENT-ROBT. CHILDRESS | 8. " KENNETH CARRUTHERS |
| 3. SGT. WILLIAM CHAMBERS | 9. " L.Q. RUSSELL |
| 4. SGT. BILLIE J. KIRBY | 10. PRIVATE J.M. CHAPMAN |
| 5. CPL. HOLLOWAY | 11. CPL. GRISHAM |
| 6. CPL. TATE | 12. SGT. DAWES |
13. WE WANT AN END TO THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF HOMOSEXUALITY BY PRISON OFFICIALS. WE FEEL THAT THE FIRST STEP NECESSARY TO ALLEVIATE THIS PROBLEM IS FOR THE OFFICIALS OF THIS INSTITUTION TO ASSUME THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PROVIDING EACH INMATE WITH THE ARTICLES THAT HE NEEDS SUCH AS, SOAP, TOOTHBRUSH, TOOTHPASTE, DEODORANT, RAZORS, RAZOR BLADES, ETC., UNTIL THEY ARE RELEASED INTO POPULATION AND ASSIGNED TO A JOB.

FOR TOO LONG PRISONS HAVE ASSUMED THE RESPONSIBILITY OF DEGRADING A MAN AND STRIPPING HIM OF HIS DIGNITY AND SELF-RESPECT. WITH NO REGARDS TO THE LASTING EFFECT THIS WILL HAVE UPON US WHEN WE RE-ENTER SOCIETY. IN VIEW OF THE PRESENT RHETORIC CONCERNING PRISON REFORM AND THE NEED FOR IT WE ADDRESS OURSELVES TO YOU, BECAUSE OF THE FACT THAT EACH OF YOU ARE SENSIBLE THINKING PERSONS CONCERNED ABOUT THIS STATE AND COUNTRY. WE FEEL THAT YOU ARE AWARE THAT IN ORDER TO GET A HEAD START ON REHABILITATION IT MUST BEGIN BEHIND THE WALLS OF THIS COUNTRY'S PRISONS. WE HOPE AND REQUEST THAT AS A RESULT OF RECEIVING THIS LETTER EACH OF YOU WILL MAKE AN EFFORT TO UNIFY INTO ONE BODY AND COME BEHIND THESE WALLS TO SEE THAT THESE GREIVANCES ARE DEALT WITH AND MET. UPON ARRIVING WE URGE YOU TO SEEK INFORMATION CONCERNING THE SITUATION HERE FROM PEOPLE OF YOUR OWN CHOOSING IN ORDER TO AVOID RECEIVING DISTORTED VIEW-POINTS FROM PERSONS CONFINED HERE WHO AREN'T MEN ENOUGH TO TELL THE TRUTH ABOUT THE CONDITIONS AND TREATMENT WE RECEIVE.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH,

PRISON ACTIVIST GROUP FOR REFORM
TENNESSEE STATE PENITENTIARY

cc: SENATOR J.O. PATTERSON
 REPRESENTATIVE HAROLD FORD
 " IRA MURPHY
 " ALVIN C. KING
 " WILLIAM R. ANDERSON
 " BOB HAWKS
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 MR. KENNETH LESTER - WVOL RADIO
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