

RELIEF OR RIOT -  
PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE

by Edward R. Clark

Part 1

This story is true and documented.

"Burn the prison down!" This threat echoed throughout the Stillwater prison, even among nonviolent prisoners. The obvious area to carry it out in this 100-year-old prison is its industrial buildings having wooden varnished floors, flammable materials, and large propane tanks. Once the fire started, it would quickly spread, while the local community's fire department waited at the gate for their fire trucks to be inspected before authorized to enter the compound.

There was a two-fold reason for the prison's increasingly dangerous unrest:

1) A new sentencing law went into effect, Sentencing Guidelines, but it wasn't retroactive for offenders already imprisoned. The Guidelines used a grid to determine how long the person would be incarcerated based on the seriousness of the crime and his/her criminal record, with a one-third reduction in imprisonment as good time. Whereas, offenders sentenced before the Sentencing Guidelines went into effect were serving up to years longer for the same crime who were at the mercy of a parole board whose decisions were arbitrary. Instead of independent, the parole board was controlled by the state's Department of Corrections.

2) Corrections officials wanted to build another prison, but the only means of justifying the funding ~~form~~ was by maximizing the