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# The Sacramento Bee

## Susanville Strife

### Prison Scenery Belies Ugliness

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Bee Staff Writer

SUSANVILLE — Like so many California prisons, its setting is spectacular. Rimmed by mountains, miles from urban air, with sky the intense blue of altitude and clarity.

On this windy day in early spring, the air is especially crisp, cold, whipping off the white-topped mountains that surround it like nature's own guard towers.

"It's beautiful in the fall," says the small, dark-haired man as he escorts us through the interminably clanking gates of prison.

Time was, not so many years ago, when there were more prisoners, fewer security measures, no real need here for the big new steel-and-glass guard towers that now surround it. When it opened, 15 years back, this was a place for "good" prisoners — minimum security types whose predominant offenses were against property, not person. Lightweight guys who for the most part didn't talk back to the guards.

None stayed much longer than a few weeks, a few months at most. It was called a "conservation center" then, and prisoners were simply processed for assignment to various state forestry camps where they would do their time fighting fires and clearing brush.

Prisoners didn't complain about anything much except the food. They generally didn't try to kill each other very often, and their rapport with employees was largely moot since the time they spent together, keeper and kept, was brief.

Criminal justice experts were learning then that a guy who can function in a camp setting can just as easily be placed, with supervision, in his own community — and for a lot less money. The number of minimum security inmates dropped, camps

The California Correctional Center in Susanville — a medium-security state prison racked in the past week by inmate racial clashes — has had more than its share of problems.

It made headlines last year when officers and administrators were criticized and disciplined by state prison officials for unnecessarily firing on occupied inmate dormitories to halt a peaceful prisoner work stoppage. In the months to follow, other incidents — including one prisoner killing — forced periodic lockdowns at the prison.

In addition, the new superintendent, Senon Palacios, has been under investigation by the Senate Rules Committee for alleged administrative incompetence. But other sources have told The Bee that Palacios, who is Mexican-American, is the victim of a racist campaign to harass minority employees.

Bee staff writer Sigrid Bathen interviewed dozens of present and former Susanville employees, inmates, state officials and others concerned with problems at that institution.

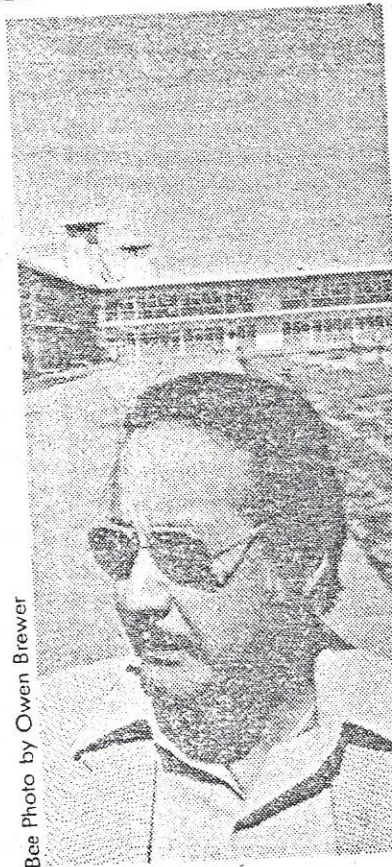
were closed. In 1972, state prison director Ray Procnier announced that Susanville would have to be closed less than a decade after it opened.

Sometime not long after it was built — toward the end of the '60s and the beginning of the '70s — all that changed. And fast.

A furor followed with the community of Susanville and the employees of the prison rising as one and mounted an intense "Save Our Center" campaign.

They held rallies and talked to reporters. They pressured legislators, and legislators pressured Procnier. At the same time, the prison population statewide again began to rise; in 1973, Procnier announced that Susanville would remain open as a vocational skills center for minimum and medium security prisoners.

Today, at a time when the state prison system is rapidly reaching over-capacity, Susanville has about two-thirds its dormitory capacity of some 1,200 inmates. It's called a "correctional center" now, and it has four big new guard towers to replace the old observation towers around its perimeter. It also has killings, stab-bings, dope-dealing, race wars and all the assorted horrors of a bigtime



Bee Photo by Owen Brewer

SENON PALACIOZ  
...new superintendent



"You just can't make cells out of dormitories," was the way one official put it.

Prison administrators will openly

## 'You just can't make cells out of dormitories'

say that a new prison or jail is obsolete almost as soon as it is built, and nowhere in the California prison system has that been more true than at Susanville. Some will tell you privately that Susanville is 'one institution that never should have been built at all — that it came to be built where it was because of political pressure to bolster the economy of a community decimated by the decline of the lumber industry. And, they say, another one like it never will be built — at least not in California.

Too isolated, they say, too far from the urban centers where most prisoners lived before they were sent to prison. Too far for families to visit. Too far removed from work furlough and community programs to help a guy in prison make it once he is released.

And much, much too far, they emphasize, from urban centers where people from ethnic minority cultures usually live. If there is one thing on which state prison officials agree when you ask them about Susanville, it is the near-impossible task of recruiting minority staff to work in an institution where the inmate population is nearly two-thirds minority — and growing. The preponderant minority group of inmates is black.

Federal standards guiding state prison administration repeatedly emphasize the importance of sufficient minority staff in prisons, which traditionally house minorities and poor people out of all proportion to their numbers in the general population.

Since prison employees in California are often shifted from place to place, many of those at Susanville come from urban backgrounds. But the inescapable fact is that most of them are white — more than 85 percent of the 340-plus employees. Only nine are black.

"It's a white institution in a white community," said one state prison official familiar with controversy at Susanville. "By its very location, it's isolated, and people who work in that institution don't have much contact with minority groups. There is no community for minorities, no minority culture.

"A significant majority of the employees would not go for racist conduct and wouldn't condone those kinds of acts. But, with exceptions, their sophistication level is not very high.

"Susanville is the kind of town that still has a furor over the showing of a pornographic movie."

Comments like that by officials in Sacramento incense many Susanville employees, who thoroughly dislike being described as rednecks.

"I disagree with that altogether," says Lee Fouch, a correctional sergeant who has been active in employee groups at Susanville. "Nothing could be further from the truth... We've kind of been labelled unfairly as rednecks and so on, when 96 to 98 percent of us have promoted from metropolitan areas... We've come from metropolitan areas. We've dealt with minority groups.

"It's easy for them (department officials) to talk about us... I would like to correct some of the imbalance. All we're interested in is a fair shake."

Fouch and others insist they are not opposed to departmental affirmative action programs for minorities and women, and they officially condemn racist behavior reported by minority employees and documented in department files.

There is a persistent theme in conversations with some white officers at Susanville. They speak, not to the goals of affirmative action but to the methods, which they see as discriminatory against whites. The Bakke case of the state prison system — a so-called reverse discrimination lawsuit upheld in a San Francisco superior court and on appeal by the state — originated at Susanville.

"We're not talking about affirmative action," Fouch says of objections to minority hiring. "We're talking about unfair hiring practices. We feel civil service rules have been violated in all aspects of hiring... We are not opposed to affirmative action..."

"Because of our location, we have considerable difficulty recruiting and retaining blacks, although there is a fairly large Chicano community... Black staff are reluctant to bring their families here."

On a Saturday in February 1977 guards at Susanville opened fire on occupied inmate dormitories, ostensibly to halt a peaceful prisoner work stoppage.

The issues of the work stoppage — dormitory cleanliness rules and what the inmates saw as overzealous enforcement of same — were largely forgotten in the ensuing melee. After it was over, 10 inmates had been wounded, three by gunfire.

"We were damn lucky," state prison director Jerry Enomoto said after that incident, "an inmate wasn't killed."

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In March 1977, the Department of Corrections sent an unprecedented 13-member team of its top administrators to investigate that incident. Their conclusion — that officers had fired unnecessarily and without provocation — was a harsh one for the staff at Susanville to stomach. The two administrators in charge at the time — associate superintendents Charles Townsend and Clem Rice — were permanently demoted, a nearly unheard-of act in departmental history. Other lesser figures were disciplined in various ways. Many appealed, and the bulk won their cases before the state Personnel Board.

Many prisoners chose to be transferred rather than stay at Susanville after that incident. Many had their parole dates delayed as a result — technically because they chose not to return to work at the institution, to be transferred instead.

Many of them were minorities; some were interviewed by The Bee last year, and some of those said they would not stay at Susanville because of behavior by Susanville officers who they regarded as racist.

In a larger sense, department officials suspect the racial prejudices of some line staff may contribute to inmate racism. And, beyond the racial tension itself, state prison officials and Susanville employees say staff dissension contributes to inmate unrest and could well exacerbate the recent rash of race-related incidents at the prison.

Place, if you will, a small dark-haired man with the trace of a Spanish accent into that environment. Add to your perception the knowledge that his previous assignment in the Department of Corrections was as its human relations-equal employment director — the man directly in charge of the affirmative action programs so distrusted by many line staff at Susanville.

Place that man in charge of the institution. Make him the superintendent.

Senon Palacios came to Susanville as an acting superintendent in October 1976. Like many wardens and superintendents in the state, he has yet to be confirmed by the Senate Rules Committee, which abruptly postponed a March hearing on the confirmation of four wardens in order to investigate more fully the qualifications of one — Senon Palacios.

When he does appear before the Rules Committee for confirmation, Palacios is expected to be questioned on allegations that he is not a competent administrator, that he has been gone too much from the institution, that his expense account is overlarge, that he has misused state vehicles.

Sources close to the Rules Committee investigation say the committee will probably not concern itself with allegations of racism at the California Correctional Center and the effect of that alleged racism on Palacios' ten-



Although details of the Rules Committee investigation have not been made public, sources close to the controversy say it centers on: (1) Palacios' high absentee rate; (2) his absence during several major prison crises in Susanville; and (3) his use of his private vehicle when a state car is permanently assigned to him at the institution.

In his own defense, Palacios says he was on a long-scheduled vacation during the February incident and that he was en route to another vacation nearly a year later, in December 1977, when a major inmate racial confrontation occurred during which one man was killed.

The next month, in January 1978, he said the institution had calmed and he decided to have another go at his vacation. Toward the end, while he was touring a Mexican prison utilizing new methods of dealing with violent offenders, another racial clash occurred at Susanville.

He was also in Sacramento on departmental business during a recent racial confrontation last Sunday, but returned immediately.

Because of his former position as head of the department's human relations office, according to corrections spokesman Phil Guthrie, Palacios is required to attend various state meetings on human rights issues, as well as meetings related to his position as superintendent. "The distance from the institution often requires that he take more than one day," Guthrie said.

Susanville's remote location also accounts for Palacios' reported near-50-per cent absence rate from the institution, officials say, and for \$7,000 in expense claims reportedly attributed to him over a 16-month period.

The Susanville superintendent also says his use of his private vehicle for long trips — while a state car is assigned to him (and, he says, used by others) at the institution — is perfectly proper. He is supported in that view by department officials.

"There is nothing illegal about him either using a state car or using his private car," says Enomoto assistant Walt Lew. "He has that option as does any other state worker."

"I did the audit of his absences and correlated it with his expense account, the official absence slips from the institution, as well as the attendance records . . . All the trips and absences that he took were legitimate."

Sources who have been questioned in the Department of Corrections by Rules Committee investigators say

*'It's a white institution in a white community'*

the committee also seems to be concerned about how Palacios relates to his employees, and whether he favors inmate rights over employee concerns.

Cancellation of the March hearing, in fact, came days after the California Correctional Officers Association reversed its earlier position of support and urged the committee not to confirm Palacios. Complaints about Palacios also went to Sen. Ray Johnson, R-Chico, from Susanville constituents.

Palacios was in Sacramento to meet with Johnson last week when violence broke out at Susanville. The meeting was cancelled because Palacios had to return to the prison.

During the department investigations last year, blatantly racist documents signed by a "group of solid professionals" decried the department, its affirmative action program, Palacios and Enomoto.

Fouch said the documents were "not sanctioned" by the so-called Ad Hoc Committee — a group of Susanville officers organized to represent some line staff during the controversial investigation and chaired by Fouch. "We are definitely against anything of that nature," Fouch said. Although many sources spoke of the committee as current, Fouch said it was disbanded several months ago when the need for it — apparently stemming from dissatisfaction with the department's investigation last year — disappeared.

Palacios' description of the committee's aims differs somewhat from Fouch's. "My perception is that this is a group of people who were originally opposed to my coming up here even before I arrived," he says. "They were of that conviction already but had not found a cause around which to organize as a group."

Palacios and other present and former minority employees believe a small group of prison employees have met regularly over the past few years to design ways to subvert the affirmative action programs. Considerable research by The Bee, including interviews with numerous present and former Susanville employees and department officials, indicates that this group probably numbers no more than six or eight persons, with about a dozen strong sympathizers. They are united in their dislike of affirmative action programs, Bee sources say, in their belief that inmates have too many rights and freedoms, and in

their specific disdain for Senon Palacios.

At the fringes of the group, minority employees and others say, are those who verbally and in a few cases physically threatened minorities and women, as well as whites who resist some of the group's methods.

Palacios says he has received various notes and letters ridiculing both him and his Mexican ancestry.

In other cases, the threats have been even more alarming. "I know of instances in which they have made telephone threats to people's homes," Palacios said. "One individual said they threatened to burn his home, and another individual said they threatened to harm his wife and she was pregnant at the time." In both cases, he said, the officers were whites who refused to go along with the heavy-handed methods of some of their Susanville brethren.

One well-documented incident with a Get-Palacios theme reportedly occurred before he arrived and involved a former administrator who was allegedly part of efforts to discredit the incoming superintendent. Word of the alleged threat came to The Bee via a confidential tip from an employee and was confirmed by two department employees who were present when the incident occurred.

"The threat was about a month before Palacios came up," said one source. "It was said to me in front of another employee (who) was present when the threat was made . . . It (involved) feelings about affirmative action . . ."

"It was at a person's home, and I was simply told that Palacios was going to come up here as superintendent and that the cards were supposed to be stacked against him, and if I lifted a finger to help him or in any way facilitated helping him be a good superintendent, that if it took five years or 10 years they would ruin my career."

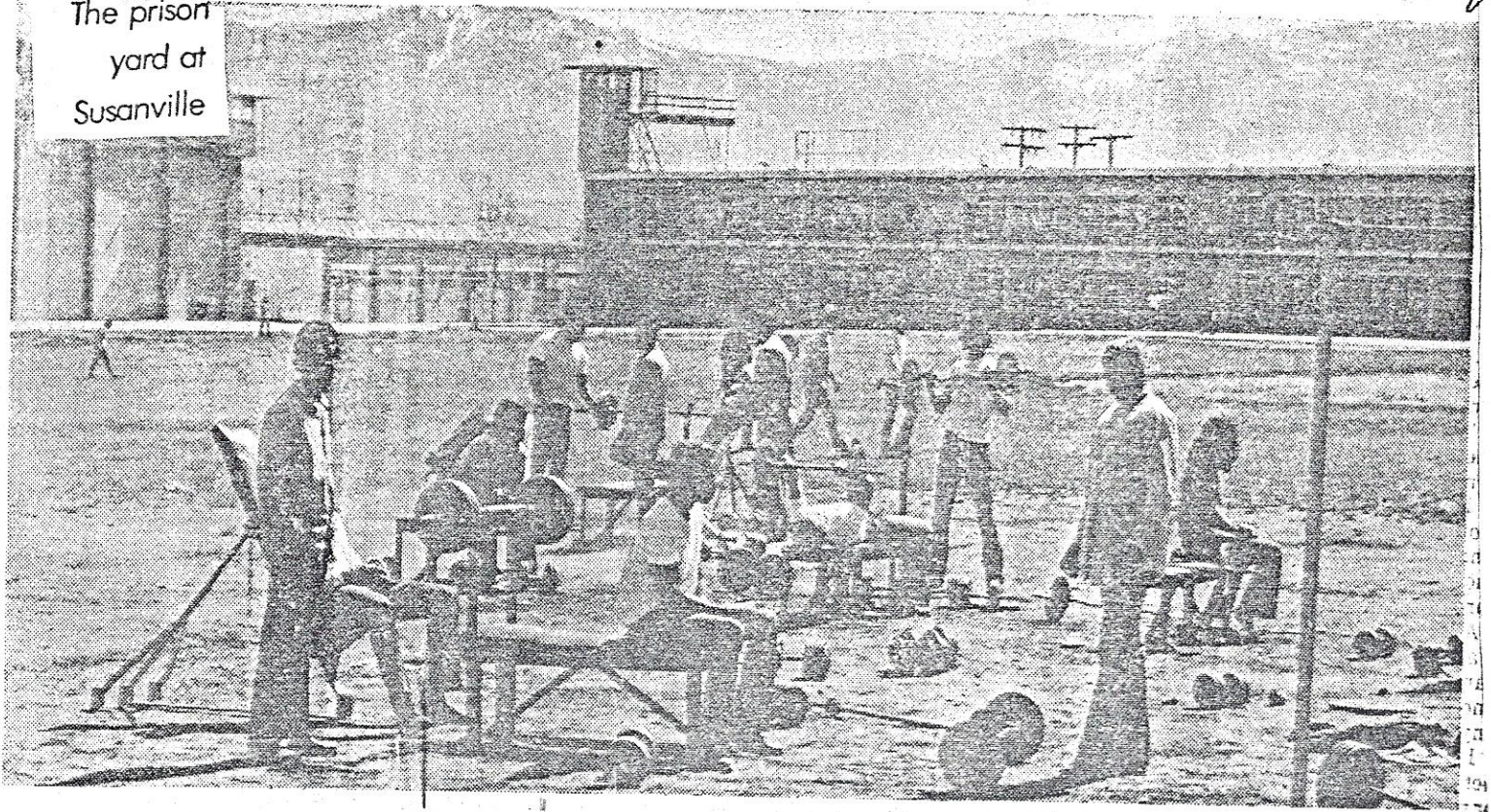
Tawne Somerville is a 51-year-old licensed vocational nurse who went to work at Susanville in 1976 as a medical-technical assistant in the prison hospital. Because of irregularities in the appointment process — not apparently in her qualifications or competence for the job — she was later placed in a clerical position.

Mrs. Somerville is black. She is married to a white Susanville farmer she met while working for the prison. She is currently on medical leave after suffering a variety of physical and emotional disorders which she believes stem from pressures on the job.

"When I first came up, I got a letter and phone calls telling me to resign or be sorry. 'we don't need any niggers here.'"



The prison yard at Susanville



"There were nights when I was there by myself (in the prison hospital) and nobody would work with me. There was no reason given, but it was obvious that they did not want to work with me because I was black."

There were periodic phone calls and threats of various sorts, she said, with fairly long periods of quiet in between. She transferred to secretarial positions; things were not always pleasant, she recalls, but not intolerable.

She continued to take exams to requalify as a medical assistant.

Then, last March 29, she got another letter:

"Nigger," it read, "you are not going back in the hospital as long as we're here. We warned you before, remember. You better resign or be sorry."

"I came unglued," she says, suffered severe emotional tension and pressure, went on medical leave. "Several doctors told me a year and a half ago to get out of there," she says.

Department of Corrections officials support her story and have referred the threats to the FBI for criminal and civil rights investigations which are currently under way.

Tawne Somerville may become the department's cause celebre in demonstrating the 1971 Procnier Dictum that racists will not be tolerated as employees in the state prisons. Officials say they intend to pursue her tormentor(s) with every legal avenue open to them. The latest letter has been dusted for fingerprints by the FBI, and nobody is saying what they found.

Rick Espinosa was a correctional lieutenant and training officer at Susanville for 14 months, leaving in 1976 to become a parole agent in Sac-

ramento. Like many minority Susanville employees interviewed by The Bee, he does not have fond memories of the place.

"A lot of things were done to my kids and my wife," Espinosa recalls bitterly. "The kids would come home with busted noses and torn clothing. I really questioned what the hell I was doing up there.

Espinosa was particularly visible because he was active in the institution's human relations committee and held meetings in his house. During one meeting, he said an anonymous caller phoned the house to say Susanville's affirmative action program could easily be destroyed with one well-placed bomb.

Espinosa suspects that violent opposition to affirmative action programs is the focus of a small group of malcontents who "use affirmative action as a crutch to promote their own interests."

"It's sad and it's bad for the institution," he said. "It's a civil war up there. Nobody trusts anybody, and the inmates are having a field day."

Mike Vaughn, a white officer currently on medical leave because of high blood pressure and emotional tension believed to be job-related, in April filed a grievance against a prison supervisor who allegedly accused Vaughn of "being responsible for the promotion of a minority staff member."

In the April 6 grievance, on file at the institution, Vaughn said the supervisor "outwardly harassed and intimidated me in a very aggressive and malicious manner. His actions provoked or influenced two other employees to act the same toward me."

Shortly thereafter, Vaughn said, he was hospitalized with "sky high" blood pressure, 220 over 110. Vaughn is 35 years old.

In his grievance, Vaughn said the supervisor has "hurt the morale of line staff and has broken the cohesiveness that we have tried to maintain with each other through the animosity (he) expresses regarding minority employees and myself."

Tawne Somerville, Rick Espinosa and Mike Vaughn are only three of numerous former and present Susanville employees — mostly minorities, but some whites — who have complained of harassment by this elusive small group of individuals committed to subverting the affirmative action program.

The Department of Corrections is investigating several of those incidents, including intensive investigation into alleged threats against a white officer that his house would be burned if he did not support anti-affir-

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mative action efforts at the institution.



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In a confidential interview with The Bee, that officer told how he became disenchanted with the methods being used or threatened by that small faction — about a meeting in the swastika-draped home of a prison employee where “weapons were passed around” and “the topic of conversation was what we were going to do about all the minorities coming to Susanville.”

That and other confidential sources told of the existence of something called the “MF Club,” whose aim — like the group at the Neo-Nazi’s house — was to subvert affirmative action programs by harassing minority and female employees, and apparently white males who disapproved of the MF mode as well.

Although Lee Fouch calls the MF Club “a complete fabrication” designed to “stir up some waves,” other sources — including administrators at Susanville and departmental officials in Sacramento — said it exists today, though perhaps less visibly.

“I’ve never seen an institution like this one where you have a handful of people who are able to influence so many others,” said a white officer who has worked in prisons other than Susanville.

Particularly vulnerable, those sources say, are probationary or new employees, which many women and minorities are. Repeatedly, those

sources say, some active members of the anti-affirmative action clique in the institution are supervisors who have considerable control over individuals on the job.

“I’m told they hold ‘choir practice’ (a term derived from Joseph Wambaugh’s book, “The Choirboys”) at some of the local bars,” Palacioz said of the clique. “They’d get together and hold strategy meetings on who would be done in, who would be promoted, who they would push to get promoted, who they would see that good things didn’t happen to . . . They must have been successful, because they were supervisory level people.

“Most of that stuff came to an end after I arrived, at least in terms of their openness about it.”

One source at the institution said, “They (include) supervisors who do probationary reports on employees and who definitely have a say in promotional and shift assignments. They can influence so many people’s lives and whether they are comfortable on the job.”

“I would be foolish in my perception of that place to deny it is not worse than others,” says corrections director Enomoto. “Racism permeates the institution.

“There are a lot of people up there who don’t buy into that. But they may be passive and apathetic. They may not work diligently to curtail racism and make minorities and women feel welcome.” An obstacle to halting racist behavior and weeding out the offenders — which they would dearly love to do — is the frequent anonymity of it and the unwillingness of victims or witnesses to come forward, although that seems to be changing.

“I know what I’m tempted to do,” Enomoto says, “but legally I can’t. So we deal with it whenever it crops up.”

Some present and former Susanville employees believe otherwise. They say the department is not taking the strong stand it should against those believed responsible for most of the trouble.

“I feel there is a group of people there who, if they could get away with it, I’d find myself in a back alley,” says Carlos Sanchez, the department’s personnel director and a member of the investigating team last year. “That certainly does not speak to all the employees, but to a sufficient number to cause concern.”

Dorothy Stevens-Roby, a black woman who is a former correctional officer and now the department’s human relations director, flatly calls Susanville “one of the most racist institutions in the state” — a place where “people are out front with their racial slurs.

“Three-quarters of the problems Mr. Palacioz has are because he is a minority.”

Sometime this summer, a small dark-haired man with the trace of a Spanish accent may go before the Senate Rules Committee to answer questions about his administration of the California Correctional Center in Susanville.

If he is asked, he may tell the committee about how he has substantially increased the amount of staff training. He may tell the senators how he has tried to bring the staff together, how he does not favor inmates over staff, how things are better now than they were in October 1976 when he arrived.

If he is asked, he may talk about the threats to bomb his house or the fact that he and his wife have been invited out twice in the past 19 months or the fact that his Mexico-born wife has trouble cashing checks at the bank.

He will probably be asked about his absences, about his car, about his expense account, maybe about dope dealing at the institution and gang activity, perhaps about inmate racial tension.

He may not be asked about employee racial tension or about the MF’s or about little kids and pregnant women being threatened.

“A guy like Senon, by the usual standards by which confirmation is judged — his credentials, his experience — would have no problem being confirmed,” says Guthrie.

“Part of the mistake was putting Senon up there,” says one department official. “He’s not strong enough to handle it.” And there is a long pause because this is an official who is a strong supporter of affirmative action programs.

“I doubt any minority should be put in charge up there.”