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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [James Ridgeway](#) | January 7, 2010

The [Associated Press](#) today put out a laudatory piece on Warden Burl Cain's program of Christian education at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. The article, which was picked up by the *New York Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and dozens of other publications, is sure to advance Cain's reputation as a great prison reformer.

The AP piece depicts Angola as a one-time den of violence and despair that has been transformed by Cain into a safe and orderly community where everyone has a job and where students crowd into classrooms to study toward a college degree. The prison's bloody past, Cain tells the AP, was all because of a lack of hope; a situation the warden has treated with the dual remedy of education and redemption, in part through a degree program in Christian Ministry.



There's another side to this story, of course, and it's a whole lot grimmer than the AP piece would suggest. More than 90 percent of the 5,200 men Angola will die there, thanks to the state's harsh sentencing policies. Much of the work on the 18,000-acre [former slave plantation](#) consists of backbreaking labor in the cotton, corn, and soybean fields, presided over by armed guards on horseback. Some inmates do not work at all because they are kept in isolation in their cells, in the prison's notorious Camp J disciplinary unit or in long-term solitary confinement. (Among Angola's most widely known prisoners are former Black Panthers Herman Wallace and Albert Woodfox, members of the [Angola 3](#), who have been in solitary for more than 37 years.)

An inmate's fate at Angola depends upon how he measures up to the warden's standards, which are rooted firmly in his personal religious dogma. Cain believes that there is only one path toward rehabilitation, and it runs through [Christian redemption](#). (According to Herman Wallace, Cain has at least once offered to release him from solitary if he renounced his political beliefs and [accepted Jesus Christ as his savior](#).)

The warden says it takes good food, good medicine, good prayin and good playin to have a good prison, an assistant warden told [Truthout](#) in 2008, Angola has all these. To make sure there is ample opportunity for good prayin, Cain has raised funds to construct 18 Christian chapels on the prison's grounds. (One of several recent corruption charges against Cain involved [shaking down a contractor](#) for a donation to the prison chapel fund.)

Likewise, inmates at Angola can gain access to higher education only by embracing Cain's brand of Christianity. According to the [prisons own web site](#), while Angola offers literacy and GED classes and technical training in things like auto mechanics, horticulture, and welding, the only college degree program it offers is in Christian Ministry from the New Orleans Baptist Seminary. Only a few hundred prisoners are admitted to his program.

The [American Civil Liberties Union](#) has filed lawsuits challenging some of Angola's policies as constitutional violations of the prisoners' freedom of religion; in one statement, the ACLU remarked: Cain's job is to be Warden of Angola, not the Chaplain of Angola. But even some Christians would find Burl Cain's vision of both human and divine justice unsavory.

A glowing 2008 article in the [Baptist Press](#) praised Cain for govern[ing] the massive prison on the Mississippi River delta with an iron fist and an even stronger love for Jesus. The iron fist includes Cain's determination to keep certain dangerous prisoners in permanent lockdown, a condition that many have denounced as [torture](#). Cain also presides over the state's executions. The *Baptist Press* article noted

Cain special dedication to delivering souls from the death chamber into the hands of Christ. When he supervised his first execution as warden, Cain said, I didnt share Jesus with the condemned man, and as he received the lethal injection, I felt him go to hell as I held his hand. As Cain tells it, I decided that night I would never again put someone to death without telling him about his soul and about Jesus.

In fact, Cain will get an opportunity to put his mission into practice a few hours from now, when the state of Louisiana carries out [its first execution](#) in eight years, in the death chamber at Angola prison.

This post was written in collaboration with Jean Casella. Full disclosure: We have [written several articles](#) about the Angola 3 for Mother Jones. Last year I also requested permission to interview Burl Cain, as well as Herman Wallace and Albert Woodfox, and to visit Angola; all requests were denied by the Louisiana Department of Corrections.

James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, Blood in the Face.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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Are you kidding me! Inmates have to work at Angola?? Man, thats brutal! This is America; in America we dont have to work if we dont want to. These poor souls make a decision that ruins the life of another human being and look what they get for that! They have to pay societys prescribed consequence. NO FAIR! Prison is not a nice place to live. Confinement, bars, restrictions against predatory behavior; thats really uncomfortable stuff. Why cant we just put them up at the Hilton Inn, if in our barbarism we feel we must incarcerate them at all. And before I read your article, I wasnt sure where to lay the blame for these offenders, now, I get it; all of this is the wardens fault. When all other programs and interventions have failed, how dare a single man, a warden, risk giving hope through the wrong avenue! Through a path that would soften inmate hearts into doing something never before achievable, such as: taking full responsibility for their own selves: accepting full accountability for their crimes: repenting of the damage they inflicted upon innocent people: making a commitment to change into a man of noble character: developing self-discipline: being proud to give a hard days work: beginning a relationship of answerability with a higher power.

What we need in this world is a warden with no belief system. Breathing hope into Angola Prison while following the boundaries clearly outlined by the criminal justice department and the legal systems recommended punishment for law-breakers simply awful! Being compassionate at an execution he did not initiate, cannot stop, but must attend as per his job description; well that sounds nice, but it must be wrong if Warden Cain does it with any kind of divinity in mind. The opposite would be better, huh?

Now that you have clearly laid out for us this messed-up attempt by Warden Cain to raise the bar and to do something of lasting benefit for offenders who would otherwise have no hope, what is your plan to assist those cheated fellows forced to live against their will in this place called Angola Prison?

Ajansi I guess I should have written what seemed like outrageous stories at the time. I left believing most of what they said were possible examples of incidents that they had either witnessed or experienced themselves.

I hope this clarifies my position.

I would like you to view this video below from the 4:40 min marker on and listen to the makers of Easy Rider which was filmed the same year 1969. The images and commentary are useful in understanding what I wrote about.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_mzdhzDIiDQ

The characters in the film are also visiting from California. These people in the cafe are actual citizens of the area near Angola speaking freely. It was a dangerous place for anyone different then the locals believe me. And prison guards in LA were much more abusive even then CA. But many police officers in Los Angeles where I came from were recruited down south so I didnt fully escape these people either.

after they learned that we were from California they tried to scare us by telling us outrageous stories of their life experiences in southern prisons

Cains is really doing a fantastic job.

How I know about these places.

November 1968:

The ride from the police station to the Parrish Jail was an entertaining half hour. The guards put shackles on us and took us out to a Paddy Wagon. The transportation reminded me of a dog catchers vehicle only larger. The cabin up front had a sliding door to view the prisoners through its narrow slot. The rear of the vehicle was a windowless five foot high box with a sheet metal bench on each side. Due to the vehicles low roof line we all had to enter into it crouched over to avoid hitting our heads on its low ceiling. We each sat down on one of the two benches and the guards had us pass a heavy chain through the loops in our shackles in a daisy chain. Then they locked the two ends of the chain to rings attached to the floorboard and secured the exit door.

Our eyes adjusted slowly to the low light level inside the cab revealing half a dozen white men on board. The other inmates immediately asked us where we were from. And after they learned that we were from California they tried to scare us by telling us outrageous stories of their life experiences in southern prisons.

They told us how the guards hated young Yankee Hippies coming down south corrupting its colored people with thoughts of equality. They told us of their individual experiences on chain gangs, and how abusive the guards were. They claimed the guards loved to dish out punishment especially to northerners to teach them a lesson.

One particular guy stuck out above all the rest that day. He was a heavy set man around thirty years old with a jolly air about him. He was clearly enjoying the lime light as he wove his outlandish tales in a heavy Cajun accent. Soon we realized that although his stories may have held some truths that he was enjoying them far too much to be entirely true. He delighted at laughing at our open mouthed horrified expressions and as a finale he began a rendition of the song The House of the Rising Sun. The Cajun sung a couple of the refrains with so much emotion that they sent shivers down my spine.

When we finally arrived at the Parrish Jail the chain anchor to the floorboard was removed and we were made to step down off the back of the Paddy Wagon. There was total silence as we each stepped down into the blinding mid-days sunlight. Resigned to our fate each of us wore expressions of defeat tinted only with a touch of apprehension. After the fantastic stories of the other passengers Mike and I did not know what was in store for us in this new environment. As we gathered near the vehicle we were all closely watched over by two shotgun toting guards wearing mirrored sunglasses seemingly right out of the movie Cool Hand Luke.

We were each stripped searched and given some bedding and a towel but no tooth brush or any other such personal items. These essential personal items would need to be purchased or sent from home. I noted that this jail was also racially segregated as Mike and I were placed in different cells of the same unit..

Upon my release in mid to late March 1969, I spent my first night in the free world trying to leave a small country town near Houston. The ride I had hitched from Baton Rouge had let me out when he turned south towards Corpus Christi in a sleepy little village which apparently closed up all of its establishments by 9PM.

I was broke and hungry when, not long after I was dropped off and before a single vehicle had passed me by, the local sheriff spotted me in the darkness along side the road. He pulled his cruiser over about twenty feet in front of me. Suddenly the vehicles interior light came on which eerily illuminated the sheriffs face like a jack-o lantern. The sheriffs stern expression under his white ten gallon hat made my heart race with apprehension as the vehicle slowly inched its way over to my position on the side of the road. In the otherwise still of the night the only audible sounds were the idle of the vehicles engine, its approaching tires crunching pebbles on the road, and the intermittent squawking of the dispatchers voice over the radio. When the vehicle finally pulled along side of me the officer rolled down the passenger side window and asked in an authoritative heavy southern drawl What you doing out here so late boy? To which I answered Im on my way out to California and Im waiting for a ride.

You dont say, California huh? You got some ID boy?

No I dont have a drivers license yet.

Whats your name then boy? Where you say youre coming from boy? I gave the officer my name and my fathers address in Baton Rouge in the belief a southern address would be more acceptable to him. Although my hair was short and my cloths dressy the sheriff replied Ill tell you what boy Ill be back in awhile if your still here Im going to take you downtown and you can be our guest for awhile. We know how to treat you California hippie types. Understand me boy? Although Im thinking what am I going to do now? I smile politely and say Thank you officer Ill be on my way then. As the cruiser pulls away I continue thinking If I dont get out of here soon Ill end up cutting cane. Please, Please let me get a ride!

I knew that the Texas work farms, along the lower reaches of the Brazos River were infamous for sending men there for even the smallest of infractions such as vagrancy. Legend has it that the mules on the farms were treated better than the convicts, because the state had paid money for the mules. The farms mill and headquarters were both located in a small town called Sugar Land southwest of Houston. And the song Midnight Special lamented the plight of these poor souls on the radio of the day.

A lone cars lights suddenly appeared in the distance down the dark country road. As the car approached me I put on the most desperate face that I could possibly muster pleading telepathically with the occupant of the car to stop. But the car passed me by with a whoosh. I turned and watched as the car continued down the road then suddenly it stopped some hundred yards down the road. As it began to back up I ran up to meet the car and when I opened the passenger door the driver, a soldier in uniform, asked me Where are you headed? To which I replied Anywhere but here but eventually Im going to California.

Well Im going to Austin.

Great, sounds good to me. I didnt know whether Austin was out of my way or not when I hopped in the car but I was just glad to leave town. Down the road a bit I noticed the sheriffs car heading back towards where he had earlier questioned me. Whew! I thought without speaking a word Youll have to find someone else to cut the cane tonight.

Still on the dual subjects of southern prison farms and the blues, check this link out on

Parchman (not Parchment) Farm in Mississippi.

http://www.nps.gov/history/delta/blues/sites/delta_sites.htm

Or these two articles written 40 years apart on the

Tucker & Cummins State Prison Farms in Arkansas.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,844402,00.html>

<http://www.buffalo.edu/ubreporter/archives/vol39/vol39n18/articles/JacksonExhibit.html>

In reflection on these places I like this quote from a book review of:

Orange Is the New Black My Year in a Womens Prison by Piper Kerman.

Our system of corrections is about arms-length revenge and retribution. Then its overseers wonder why people leave prison more broken than when they went in.

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/la-ca-piper-kerman-20100425.0,5173956.story>

Here is a related excerpt from the following article.

This was a regional culture. Another such place was Parchment Farms in Mississippi amongst others in the south.

From Chain Gangs to Chain Stores

Sugar Lands storied prison farm gives way to suburban sprawl.

By Patsy Sims

Thursday, June 12th, 2008 in the Texas Observer

The warden throughout my grandfathers years at Central was R.J. Flanagan, a tall, solidly built man who enjoyed extraordinary popularity in both the prison system and the community at large. When Huntsville higher-ups wanted to court the governor, they invited him to Central, where Flanagan's wife, Emma, and her houseboy would prepare a feast, and convicts would sometimes entertain. Over the course of Flanagan's 30 years as warden, 10 governors made the visit, as did scores of state legislators, some of them returning for multiple helpings of prison hospitality even after leaving office.

On the evening Gov. Pat Neff came to dinner, legendary blues singer Huddie Ledbetter was escorted to the Flanagan's back porch. Leadbelly was serving 30 years for murder and assault, but had apparently impressed Captain Flanagan, who allowed him to sing for the other convicts on Sundays. The potential benefits of impressing Neff did not escape the cunning Leadbelly, and he ended the evenings performance with a song composed for the occasion, pleading with the governor to set him free so he could return to his woman friend Mary. Before the night ended, Neff had promised to pardon Leadbelly, which he did on his final day in office.

The song was Midnight Special.

<http://30daysout.wordpress.com/2009/01/13/the-midnight-special/>

The Central State Prisons property extended on both sides of U.S. 90A as far as the eye could see, the only interruptions on the low, level terrain being the prisons New Unit for white convicts to the north of the highway, a hulking red brick building known as Two Camp to the south where black convicts were confined, and the Imperial Sugar Co. refinery two miles away in Sugar Land proper. Until the late 1940s, the land was farmed by men and mules, and it was said by some that the mules were treated better than the convicts, because the state had paid money for the mules.

In the late 1960s the New Unit was integrated and Two Camp closed.

The farm is still open for business although smaller and surrounded by suburbs.

Yes, Ranchhouse food and service is legendary. Even the regular visitors food (that you buy, or that is served at club banquets) is good.

Even though Cain allows cameras inside Angola, you never see footage of, or hear reporting about, the Ranchhouse, which is a deluxe facility for ranking staff and visitors to eat. I have heard that the place is made of fieldstone, has a living room, and a dining room with a very long table around which select people are entertained, with white glove formal service by prisoners. Since cooking is a well-practiced art in Louisiana anyway, the prison houses many excellent cooks to be sure. An acquaintance was surprised to find himself entertained there as part of camera crew making a well-known documentary about Angola. He claims the food there was the best he has ever eaten and he is a New Orleans native. Everything he could have wanted was formally offered by black prisoners carrying trays, and with white tea towels draped over their arms. He later tried to get permission to go back in to do a documentary of his own about the Ranchhouse, but his requests were ignored. They were not allowed to photograph the inside or outside of the place.

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