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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [James Ridgeway](#) | July 28, 2011

Editors Note: The latest issue of Mother Jones magazine includes James Ridgeway's long article on Burl Cain, warden of the nation's largest prison, and possibly its most notorious. The former slave plantation is known for the fact that 90 percent of its more than 5,000 prisoners will die behind bars, and also for holding two members of the Angola 3 in solitary confinement for nearly 40 years. More recently, it has also become known for the miracle wrought by its controversial warden, who is said to have transformed the prison with the help of Christianity.

It took the threat of an ACLU lawsuit for James Ridgeway to gain access to Angola. The resulting article offers an alternative narrative on the miracle at Angola. The opening section of the article follows; the full article can be read on [MotherJones.com](#).



It was a chilly December morning when I got to the gates of [Angola prison](#), and I was nervous as I waited to be admitted. To begin with, nothing looked the way it ought to have looked. The entrance, with its little yellow gatehouse and red brick sign, could have marked the gates of one of the smaller national parks. There was a [museum with a gift shop](#), where I perused miniature handcuffs, jars of inmate-made jelly, and mugs that read Angola: A Gated Community before moving on to the exhibits, which include Gruesome Gertie, the only electric chair in which a prisoner was executed twice. (It [didn't take the first time](#), possibly because the executioners were visibly drunk.)

Besides being cold and disoriented, I had the well-founded sense of being someplace where I wasn't wanted. Angola welcomes a thousand or more visitors a month, including religious groups, schoolchildren, and tourists taking a side trip from their vacations in plantation country. Under ordinary circumstances, it's possible to drive up to the gate and [tour the prison](#) in a state vehicle, accompanied by a staff guide. But for me, it had taken close to two years and the threat of an ACLU lawsuit to [get permission to visit the place](#).

I was studying an exhibit of sawed-off shotguns when I heard someone call my name. It was Cathy Fontenot, the assistant warden in charge of PR. Smartly dressed in a tailored shirt and jeans, a suede jacket, and boots with four-inch heels, she introduced me to a smiling corrections officer (my bodyguard) and to Pam Laborde, the genial head spokeswoman for the Louisiana department of corrections who had come up from Baton Rouge to help escort me on my hard-won tour of Angola.

Everyone was there except the person I had come to see: Warden Burl Cain, a man with a near-mythical reputation for turning Angola, once known as [the bloodiest prison in the South](#), into a model facility. Among born-again Christians, Cain is revered for delivering hundreds of incarcerated sinners to the Lord, running the nation's largest maximum-security prison, as [one evangelical publication put it](#), with an iron fist and an even stronger love for Jesus. To Cain's [more secular admirers](#), Angola demonstrates an attractive option for controlling the nation's booming prison population at a time when the notion of rehabilitation has effectively been abandoned.

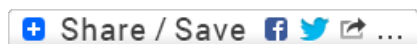
Cain was like a king, a sole ruler, Rideau writes in his recent memoir, [In the Place of Justice](#). He enjoyed being a dictator, and regarded himself as a benevolent one. When a group of middle school students visited Angola a few years ago, [Cain told them](#) that the inmates were there because they didn't listen to their parents. They didn't listen to law enforcement. So when they get here, I become their daddy,

and they will either listen to me or make their time here very hard.

Another former prisoner, John Thompson who spent 14 years on death row at Angola before being exonerated by previously concealed evidence told me that Cain runs Angola with a Bible in one hand and a sword in the other. And when the chips are down, Thompson said, he drops the Bible.

Who is the man who wields so much untempered power over so many human beings? I wanted to find out firsthand but when I requested permission to visit the prison and interview Cain, back in 2009, Fontenot turned me down flat. Cain, she said, was not happy with what I had written about the Angola Three, a trio of inmates who have been [in solitary longer than any other prisoners in America](#). Two years and much legal wrangling later, I was here at Fontenot's invitation, ready to see the Cain miracle for myself

[Read the rest on MotherJones.com.](#)



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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I WORKED AT ANGOLA MANY YEARS AGO, THERE WAS LOTS OF BLOOD SHED. I HAVE BEEN BACK 15-20 TIMES IN HE LAST 5 YEARS. ITS NOT WHAT IT USE TO BE, WARDEN CAIN HAS DONE A GREAT JOB. HE DOES RULE WITH A IRON FIST AND USES SOLITARY WHEN HE HAS TO. HE IS A GOOD MAN AND A GOOD CHRISTAIN .
LT. ROBERT DAVIDSON

That Burl Cain tries to pretend he is rehabilitating the inmates he cares nothing about those black inmates there is nothing godly about him he works for the devil, he should be locked up in solitary with his porky the pig looking self.

Good to know that this reporter has finally gained entry to this prison. The public needs to know what's going on in these places so that the powers that be can be held accountable.

I know this has nothing to do with your site but my husband and I are trying to find an inmate and we are told he is at Angola, but no matter what site we check we can't seem to locate him. His name is Doyle Billiot. If you could recommend a web site it would be greatly appreciated

In Louisiana you need to use a telephone inmate locator system: <http://doc.louisiana.gov/view.php?cat=10&id=64>

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