

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2011/01/22/supermax-psych-behavior-modification-at-marion-federal-prison/>

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | January 22, 2011

Eddie Griffin, a former Civil Rights Movement activist and Black Panther, spent 12 years in federal prison for bank robbery, beginning in the early 1970s. After he was injured doing prison labor at Terre Haute Federal Prison, and refused to return to work under unsafe conditions, he was labelled incorrigible and transferred to the U.S. Penitentiary in Marion, Illinois.

Built to replace Alcatraz in 1963, Marion is widely acknowledged to be the first modern supermax, and was once the highest security and most notorious prison in the federal system. That distinction today belongs to ADX Florence in Colorado, but Marion is now home to one of the ultra-isolated federal Communications Management Units opened during the Bush Administration.

[Breaking Mens Minds: Behavior Control and Human Experimentation at the Federal Prison in Marion](#) is a remarkable article authored by Griffin and published in the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* in 1993 (vol. 4, no. 2). (H/T to Alan for alerting us to the piece.) In it, he discusses the realities of the behavior modification program instituted at Marion in the 1960s. Griffin begins by describing the control of every moment and every movement in the lives of prisoners.

In prisoners words, it is part of the program part of the systematic process of reinforcing the unconditional fact of a prisoners existence: that he has no control over the regulation and orientation of his own being. In behavioral psychology, this condition is called learned helplessness a derivative of Skinnerian operant conditioning (commonly called learning techniques). In essence, a prisoner is taught to be helpless, dependent on his overseer. He is taught to accept without question the overseers power to control him. This rebels against human consciousness, so some prisoners seek means of resistance. Others try to circumnavigate the omnipotent force via escape.

But the omnipotent is also omnipresent. Nothing escapes Marion's elaborate network of eyes. Between television monitors, prisoner spies, collaborators, and prison officials, every crevice of the prison is overlaid by a constant watch. Front-line officers specially trained in the cold, calculated art of observation, watch prisoners movements with a particular meticulousness, scrutinizing little details in behavior patterns, then recording them in the Log Book. This aid provides the staff with a means to manipulate certain individuals behavior. It is feasible to calculate a prisoners level of sensitivity from the information, so his vulnerability can be tested with a degree of precision. Some behavior modification experts call these tests stress assessment. Prisoners call it harassment. In some cases, selected prisoners are singled out for one or several of these differential treatment tactics. A prisoner could have his mail turned back or accidentally mutilated. He could become the object of regular searches, or even his visitors could be strip searched. These and more tactics are consistent with those propagated by one Dr. Edgar H. Schein.

Griffin goes on to tell the story of what he calls the history of this behavior modification laboratory, which its inventors and practitioners did not hesitate to call brainwashing.

At a Washington, DC conference in 1962 organized for the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) by the National Institutes of Mental Health, Schein presented his ideas on brainwashing. Addressing the topic of Man against Man: Brainwashing, he stated:

In order to produce marked changes of behavior and/or attitude, it is necessary to weaken, undermine or remove the supports to the old patterns of behavior and the old attitudes. Because most of these supports are the face to-face confirmation of present behavior and attitudes, which are provided by those with whom close emotional ties exist, it is often necessary to break those emotional ties. This can be done either by removing the individual physically and preventing any communication with those whom he cares about, or by proving to him that those whom he respects are not worthy of it and, indeed, should be actively mistrusted.

Dr. Schein then provided the group with a list of specific examples:

[F]ollowing Schein's address, then-director of the BOP, James V. Bennett, encouraged the administrators and wardens throughout the federal prison system to put Schein's techniques into practice. We can manipulate our environment and culture. We can perhaps undertake some of the techniques Dr. Schein discussed. There's a lot of research to do. Do it as individuals. Do it as groups and let us know the results.

That was in 1962. Since then the results have been compiled and evaluated many times over, and all but one of Schein's suggested

techniques have been left intact at Marion along with the addition of several new features.

There's much more to this long article, which deserves to be [read in full](#).



James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the 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*. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

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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Spent 1981 to 1983 at Marion Illinois supermax. I was sentenced right from court on a 35 year bank robbery sentence to that place. It is used by the government to break one's spirit and mind. I was a survivor and after serving 20 years I was released 14 years ago went on to help other guys getting out of prison managing sober houses etc. today I am retired and wish all those still struggling to stay strong and never give up as the best revenge is success.

It is all true this meeting did happen I seen this in books wardens from all over the bop were invited to it the white house was open to this as well those who willingly do this sort of thing to others they are the real sentrys of justice the dark part is if my mind recalls right I think the CIA and FBI were in on this meeting as well yes are government held this meeting even with records and so much proof the sickest part is are top court has done nothing for those suffering from that meetings ends they know of it and still do nothing I need not tell that are top court is more powerful than any other branch of government in end they can step on anything they just have to say it brakes a right yes yet they do nothing this nations turning into the plane of justice faster than Casey telling you the nut case dr who gave this speech was insanely sick in the head to do so no one should have to go to know that what was one of the people is now or soon to be of the tribunal may there be light in the darkness of justice

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The War Widows  
Mary Murphy, former VA/Prison Chaplain/Marshal Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals

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Please help us provide Dr. (Pastor) Stan Moody's profound gift of gifts McCHURCHED 300 MILLION SERVED @ STILL HUNGRY

I have been quoting this often. Also in reference to the recent news on the Atlanta Prison Strike people should read about this older prison strike at Marion. What is that quote about knowing history or your doomed to relive it?

And I would like to share two of Eddie's stories on his blog. He is an interesting man. I am not aligned with all his thoughts but I respect his right to voice them.

[http://realcostofprisons.org/materials/Resisting\\_Living\\_Death\\_Gomez.pdf](http://realcostofprisons.org/materials/Resisting_Living_Death_Gomez.pdf)

Resisting Living Death

<http://eglibraryreferences.blogspot.com/2009/05/most-dangerous-thing-about-torture-its.html>

The Most Dangerous Thing about Torture, Its Acceptance  
By Eddie Griffin

Tuesday, May 19, 2009

<http://eglibraryreferences.blogspot.com/2008/04/confession-of-underground-think-tank.html>

Tuesday, April 22, 2008

Confession of an Underground Think Tank Strategist  
By Eddie Griffin

Tuesday, April 22, 2008

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