

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/08/01/never-in-the-civilised-world-have-so-many-been-locked-up-for-so-little/>

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | August 1, 2010

Rough Justice in America, the takedown of incarceration nation published last week in *The Economist*, has made the rounds of blogs interested in the U.S. justice system. It needs to be mentioned here, nonetheless, because of the story it uses to exemplify everything that's wrong with the way we handle criminal justice. That story begins with a 65-year-old orchid collector whose home is busted into and searched by six armed police. It ends, as so many stories of its kind do, in solitary confinement.

[George Norris] eventually discovered that he was suspected of smuggling the flowers into America, an offence under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. This came as a shock. He did indeed import flowers and sell them to other orchid-lovers. And it was true that his suppliers in Latin America were sometimes sloppy about their paperwork. In a shipment of many similar-looking plants, it was rare for each permit to match each orchid precisely.

In March 2004, five months after the raid, Mr Norris was indicted, handcuffed and thrown into a cell with a suspected murderer and two suspected drug-dealers. When told why he was there, they thought it hilarious. One asked: What do you do with these things? Smoke 'em?

Prosecutors described Mr Norris as the kingpin of an international smuggling ring. He was dumbfounded: his annual profits were never more than about \$20,000. When prosecutors suggested that he should inform on other smugglers in return for a lighter sentence, he refused, insisting he knew nothing beyond hearsay.

He pleaded innocent. But an undercover federal agent had ordered some orchids from him, a few of which arrived without the correct papers. For this, he was charged with making a false statement to a government official, a federal crime punishable by up to five years in prison. Since he had communicated with his suppliers, he was charged with conspiracy, which also carries a potential five-year term.

As his legal bills exploded, Mr Norris reluctantly changed his plea to guilty, though he still protests his innocence. He was sentenced to 17 months in prison. After some time, he was released while his appeal was heard, but then put back inside. His health suffered: he has Parkinson's disease, which was not helped by the strain of imprisonment. For bringing some prescription sleeping pills into prison, he was put in solitary confinement for 71 days. The prison was so crowded, however, that even in solitary he had two room-mates.

The Economist's full [Briefing](#) and accompanying [commentary](#) are both well worth reading.

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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.

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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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This is real disturbing, its terrible when an elderly man suffering from Parkinsons disease, & making a living at what he knows and loves, is regarded as a terrorist. I feel a ton of emotion in my heart for him.

Then theres the ex Bosnian leader, Ejup Ganic (wanted for war crimes, 1992), who this week went free because the judge said his extradition was politically motivated.

I dont know what we are to do, you try to do right, and you try to be good, yet we keep getting pushed in the wrong direction.

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