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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/03/13/the-hidden-history-of-solitary-confinement-in-new-jerseys-control-units/>

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by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#) | March 13, 2013

Editors Note: As coordinator of the [American Friends Service Committees Prison Watch Project](#), Bonnie Kerness is a leading voice for humanitarian reform of U.S. prisons, jails, and detention centers. Kerness is also a pioneer in raising awareness about the use of prolonged solitary confinement, and in uncompromisingly identifying the practice as a form of torture. Since the 1990s, she has coordinated [AFSCs STOPMAX Campaign](#), which works to eliminate the use of isolation and segregation in U.S. prisons through research, grassroots organizing, public education and policy advocacy.

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Between the 1913 closing of Eastern State Penitentiary's isolation cages and the 1983 lockdown of the federal facility in Marion, Illinois (recently recounted in Nancy Kurshans book *Out of Control*) is a history of struggle against the use of extended solitary confinement in New Jersey, which is little known.

In 1975, after the tumultuous years of the Civil Rights Movement, the Viet Nam War and the prisoners rights movement, Trenton State Prison (now New Jersey State Prison) established an administrative isolation unit for politically dissident prisoners. The warden and his staff decided to use this technique, which was modeled after a unit in Soledad Prison in California. The Management Control Unit housed those prisoners who had not broken institutional rules, but who were, as a result of their political convictions and expressions, seen to be a threat by prison administrators. Thus, the New Jersey MCU pre-dated the advent of the control unit in federal system.

Sundiata Acoli was one of the first people interred in this new unit. Sundiata writes, the warden began rounding up prisoners, 250 all told, of which I was the first. They took me to a cell block, another guard brought my property, stopped in front of a prisoners cell, took him out, put me in his cell, and escorted him and his property to my old cell. They switched prisoners all night like this so the next morning they had rounded up, switched 250 prisoners to create an instant Management Control Unit. In less than a month, they had released 200 of the MCU prisoners back into population and kept the 50 prisoners in the MCU for which the roundup was actually intended.

In his book *Inside Out Fifty Years Behind the Walls of New Jerseys Trenton State Prison*, former guard, Harry Camisa says, The guys singled out for the MCU were viewed as potential troublemakers or political leaders who needed to be segregated to keep them from influencing the rest of the population. This was a new and controversial concept in New Jersey. The unit isolated activists and leaders from the prisons general population, as it attempted to psychologically reshape their convictions by subjecting them to an extraordinary level of physical control and sensory deprivation.

New Jersey was a key state in terms of people being involved in political activities such as the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army. It is also corridor state and often members of other political formations travelled through the state many finding themselves imprisoned at Trenton State Prison. On January 19, 1976, the State of New Jersey alleged that Sundiata Acoli and John L. Clark played key roles in the attempted escape from the Management Control Unit which resulted in two guards being shot, John Clark killed, another prisoner being wounded. Subsequently, Sundiata was transferred out of the MCU to an isolation unit at the federal prison in Marion, Illinois.

Relevant to the continuing use of the MCU was Executive Order 88, signed in 1984 by former Governor Thomas Kean, which mandated that any persons believed to be a member of a terrorist organization or other similar groups committed to violence, murder or mayhem as a means to achieve their purpose could be placed in the Management Control Unit pre-trial. This is exactly what happened to political prisoners Tom Manning and Richard Williams, who were alleged to be members of the United Freedom Front, and Sekou Tychimba, who the state alleged to be a member of the Black Liberation Army.

On February 4, 1986, Ojore Lutalo, a member of the Black Liberation Army, and nine other prisoners were placed in the Management Control Unit. Within 18 months, seven of the prisoners who were placed in the MCU with Ojore were released back into the general population. Ojore reached out to the American Friends Service Committee, asking us what a control unit was, why he was there and how long he would have to remain there. We began to monitor Ojore and 48 others, ultimately establishing the New Jersey-based Control Unit Monitoring Project, which conducted ongoing observation of the unit through visits, letters and telephone calls. Students from many

colleges and universities assisted in this effort. Part of the collective efforts of MCU prisoners and outside advocates resulted in the struggle to contest the cages built in the MCU for recreation. This effort resulted in newspaper coverage from the *New York Times*, in an August 1991 article by Peter Page entitled *Modules or Cages? TSP Enclosures Stir Protest*.

In May of 1992, the AFSC Control Unit Monitoring Project held a Town Meeting and Silent Vigil outside the prison protesting the political use of isolation and conditions of confinement in the control unit. Prisoners in the MCU were/are denied all the collective activities of normal prison life, facing surveillance by guards and cameras which record daily activities, regularly search cells and their persons, and suffer the physical abuse of strip searches by guards in riot-gear which accompany all recreation and visits. Although a generic name classification confinement in the MCU is not defined as punitive, the severe limitations placed on visits and telephone contact with family members, recreation, the denial of work, education, law library access, collective religious practice and the fellowship of other prisoners can hardly be seen any other way. Correspondence and reading material are carefully scrutinized and many political publications, specifically those with Afro-centric content, are excluded. These conditions are indefinite, although they are reviewed every 90 days, and are imposed without judicial supervision or benefit of counsel.

The AFSC contacted multiple media outlets to draw attention to the political use and condition in the MCU. Initially, the reporters were hesitant to believe that people were being detained in the MCU for political purposes or entertaining political thoughts that the administration didn't approve of. They responded to AFSC's initial outreach by saying such things did not happen in the United States. The reporters contacted the Department of Corrections which confirmed that Ojore and others in the MCU broke no prison rules and that their placement wasn't punitive. This resulted in two newspaper articles. On June 11, 1992, *The Record* published an article *NJ Political Prisoners Do Hard in Solitary*, and on June 18th the *New Jersey Tribune* published *Beliefs Made Them Prisoners in Prison Political Radicals Locked in Solitary*.

In 1994, Channel 9 news filmed Ojore Lutalo, Daud Tulam and Clifford Roberts (three MCU prisoners) for a special piece on the 6 o'clock news. Their research led them to contacting the NJ Department of Corrections who informed them that these particular prisoners were not in the control unit for violating any prison rules. The news program, called *Prison Politics*, played widely at the time and is still being used to illustrate the political use of isolation.

The Department of Corrections itself confirms this political use as evidenced in two Notices of Management Control Unit Classification Decisions: the first dated in 1989, informs that, The Committee notes that inmate Lutalo needs to improve his social profile, and insight into his oppositional stance prior to release consideration from the Control Unit. In the late 1990s litigation concerning the Control Unit was filed resulting in a Special Master being appointed to review each person in the Control Unit. With the exception of four people, by 2002, Ojore and others were released back into general population based on the decision of this Special Master.

In 2005, the AFSC stopped hearing from Ojore for an unusual amount of time. Bonnie called the Department of Corrections and was told that Ojore had been placed back in the control unit at the request of Homeland Security. Ojore later reported that he had been disappeared from general population and placed in the prisons mental health unit incommunicado for six days. Ojore's second Classification notice dated 2008 notes that, The MCURC notes your concern regarding your feelings of persecution and discrimination based on your political affiliation. The Committee continues to show concern with your admitted affiliation with the Black Liberation Army, and the Anarchist Black Cross foundation. Your radical views and ability to influence others pose a threat to the orderly operation of this institution.

In 2008, New Jersey attorney Bruce Afran filed a brief challenging Ojore's MCU detention not on the basis of any charged offenses but because of his political beliefs and affiliations. After 22 years of political isolation in the MCU, Ojore was released from prison by way of court order on August 26, 2009.

The definition of no touch torture is a set of practices used to inflict pain or suffering without resorting to direct physical violence: sleep deprivation, sensory disorientation, solitary confinement, humiliation, extreme cold or heat, extreme light or dark. Intentional placement situations. A systematic attack on all human stimuli. A November 2010 New Jersey Network program called *Due Process Solitary: Who and Why* featured myself and Ojore, and other advocates and lawyers talking about the history of activism to close the MCU.

The history of the opposition to the New Jersey Management Control Unit includes advocates from the 1994-1998 National Campaign to Stop Control Unit Prisons, of which the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown was a founding member. It also includes the publication of a [*Survivors Manual written by and for people living in isolation*](#) inspired by Ojore.

The political use of isolation in ensuing years has morphed into entire isolation prisons being built for the mentally ill. The political use of this form of torture continues with the development of Security Threat Group Management Units (for purported gang members), and Communications Management Units (for Muslims in the federal system). Imam Jamil Al-Amin has been held in such conditions for years. For those of us monitoring US prisons over decades, the targeting of radicalization feels eerily familiar. The Department of Corrections is more than an institution, it is a state of mind. That state of mind has led to the use of no touch and other devices of torture both here and overseas.

We owe thanks to all of those inside and out who have spoken out: Eddie Griffin, Jr, who had the courage to write *Breaking Mens Minds* while he was held in the Marion Control Unit; the Marion Brothers who were part of the ongoing resistance to the control unit repression; and to the hundreds of prisoners who had the mettle to contribute their testimony and art to AFSC's 2012 [*Torture in US Prisons*](#), and to Jean Ross and the many lawyers who have been there for all of us, inside and out.

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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After 9-11 the fear that is driving such draconian policies described by Kerness is laid out below.

<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/220957.pdf>

In 2006 The Homeland Security Policy Institute and Critical Incident Analysis Prisoner Radicalization Task Force published *Out of the Shadows: Getting Ahead of the Prisoner*.

The researchers concede that there is insufficient information about prisoner radicalization to qualify the threat of Islam in prison. Nevertheless, the Homeland Report concludes that, because Islam feeds on resentment and anger all too prevalent in prisons, Islam therefore poses a threat of unknown magnitude to the national security of the U.S.

In short, these analysts believe that the Black Muslim prisoner movement is being hijacked by Saudi Arabia. When released, these black offenders will support terrorist goals, murdering their own countrymen in a kind of payback for perceived injustices done to them by white America.

Complicating this threat is wholly contradictory fact that radical inmates, wishing to avoid attention, act as model prisoners, leading prison officials to focus on violent prisoners while overlooking radicalization

In harmony with previous scholarship, the study found that maximum security prisons are more likely to produce radicalized prisoners than lesser custody institutions.

Maximum security has fewer rehabilitation programs; higher levels of overcrowding; more serious gang problems; and more politically charged living spaces. These factors constitute a Petri dish in which terrorism may grow and prosper.

In short H.S. fears the anger their abusive policies have generated.

The higher the security level the more intense the anger.

I hope we as a society can find a way to reduce the pressure before it all blows up.

In keeping with my previous character studies on this site I think it is necessary to give some back ground on these inmates.

Thomas Manning has written, I became somewhat politicized in prison, taking part in food and work strikes, being around people willing to teach and organize at great personal risk. I spent my last 14 months in Walpoles 10 Block, where I first read Che

I stand accused of being a part of the Sam Melville/Jonathan Jackson unit in the 1970s and the United Freedom Front in the 1980s. I am proud of the association and all that it implies

The United Freedom Front

Thomas Manning and Raymond Levasseur, formed the Sam Melville/Jonathan Jackson group in 1974.

By 1982, the group had a maximum of eight members:

Thomas Manning (born 1946) and his wife Carol Ann Manning (1956)

Jaan Laaman (1948) in Estonia and his wife Barbara Curzi-Laaman (1948)

Richard C Williams (1948)

Raymond Levasseur (1946) and his wife Patricia Gros (1955)

Christopher King (1951)

The group was active over much of the north-east, from 1975-1984.

In all, the group was accused of nineteen bombings and attempted bombings; plus ten bank robberies which netted some \$900,000 in cash to fund operations. A total of ten bombings and one attempted bombing occurred between December 1982 and September 1984. Banks robbed included targets in Maine, Connecticut, Vermont, New York, and Virginia. From 1976 to 1979, the Sam Melville/Jonathan Jackson group undertook some eight bomb attacks. From 1982, the group took the name United Freedom Front, and intensified their campaign.

Their ideology can be described as generic New Left.

The UFF Campaign

They undertook the following attacks:

1975 attempted murder of a Portland, Maine police officer after a bank robbery

April 1976 bomb at Suffolk County Courthouse, MA.

December 1981 murder of New Jersey state trooper.

February 1982 attempted murder of two Massachusetts state police in North Attleboro.

Bombing attacks occurred on courthouses eg Middlesex County in Lowell, MA; on corporate offices Union Carbide in Needham MA and Tarrytown, NY;

-Mobil Oil in Wakefield and Waltham, MA., and Eastchester, NY.

-South African Airways procurement Office in Elmont, LI.

-two IBM corporation buildings in Harrison, NY

-Honeywell Corporation and Motorola in Queens, NY

and military facilities. eg Army Reserve Centers in Uniondale, LI and the Bronx; Naval Reserve Center in Queens, NY.

Investigation intensified in late 1981 with the murder of the Jersey trooper, and the increased awareness of domestic terrorism after the Nyack Brinks robbery. An interstate/ federal task force was established in 1983. Thomas and Carol Manning were seized in Norfolk, VA in April 1985 along with explosives and automatic weapons.

The activists were dubbed the Ohio Seven during their trials.

The UFF was not the first militant white clandestine group composed primarily by white working-class revolutionaries. Remember the Weathermen?

The Weather Underground Organization (WUO), commonly known as the Weather Underground, was an American radical left organization founded on the Ann Arbor campus of the University of Michigan. Originally called Weatherman, the group became known colloquially as the Weathermen. Weatherman first organized in 1969 as a faction of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) composed for the most part of the national office leadership of SDS and their supporters. Their goal was to create a clandestine revolutionary party for the overthrow of the US government.

In 1969, in a show of support for prisoners, the radical Weathermen organization bombed a California Department of Corrections office in San Francisco. The most extreme in the Left went much further.

Eric Cummins wrote:

Revolutionary convicts, the ideological products of secret political study groups, were by 1970 more and more often resorting to secret, retaliatory gang-style slayings aimed at changing the way power was distributed in the prison. By late 1970 the tone of San Quentins imported literature became noticeably more inflammatory and more practical rather than theoretical, including detailed diagrams and instructions on bomb and weapons manufacture.

Unfortunately, this change, well noted by prison staff, furnished the state with just the evidence of conspiracy it had so long desired and fueled moves toward a prison crackdown and a conservative repudiation of prison reform directed from both Sacramento and Washington.

In its campaign to recapture of San Quentin from its radical convicts, the prison stepped up suppression of mail and books. This was especially true in the Adjustment Center (the hole.)

A fascinating account. Deserves to be widely read.

Thanks for this snippet of movement history and herstory. Thanks Bonnie!

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