

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2011/08/02/new-york-times-heeds-a-cry-from-the-depths-of-pelican-bay-prison/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | August 2, 2011

As [we have written before](#), the three-week-long hunger strike in the Security Housing Unit at Pelican Bay which was joined by inmates at a dozen other California prisons may have wrung few tangible concessions from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. But it achieved something less measurable, but in some senses far more important: For a few weeks, the men of the Pelican Bay SHU ceased to be invisible. They forced the media and the public to bear witness to their torment, and see long-term solitary confinement for what it is: one of the most pressing domestic human rights issues of our time.

The media's responses varied, as did the public's (as any reader of online comment will know). One of the publications that refused to turn its face away from the reality of prison torture was arguably the most important one of all: the *New York Times*. The *Times* not only [covered the strike as news](#), but also addressed it directly on its editorial pages. First came a powerful [op-ed by Colin Dayan](#), author of *The Story of Cruel and Unusual*, which pointed out: Solitary confinement has been transmuted from an occasional tool of discipline into a widespread form of preventive detention. The Supreme Court, over the last two decades, has whittled steadily away at the rights of inmates, surrendering to prison administrators virtually all control over what is done to those held in administrative segregation. In this context, Dayan wrote, Hunger strikes are the only weapons prisoners have left. He suggested: Maybe one way to react to prisoners whose only reaction to bestial treatment is to starve themselves to death might be to do the unthinkable to treat them like human beings.

Today, the *New York Times* [lead editorial](#) is Cruel Isolation. Appearing with the tag line A California prison protest spotlighted widespread use of torturous solitary confinement, it was clearly inspired by the hunger strike. It states that the protest has raised awareness about the national shame of extended solitary confinement at Pelican Bay and at high-security, supermax prisons all around the country. By publishing the editorial, the *Times* ensures that this awareness will be further raised, and brings a desperate cry out of the depths of the Pelican Bay SHU to millions of readers worldwide. The full text of the editorial follows.

For many decades, the civilized world has recognized prolonged isolation of prisoners in cruel conditions to be inhumane, even torture. The Geneva Conventions forbid it. Even at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, where prisoners were sexually humiliated and physically abused systematically and with official sanction, the jailers had to get permission of their commanding general to keep someone in isolation for more than 30 days.

So Americans should be disgusted and outraged that prolonged solitary confinement, sometimes for months or even years, has become a routine form of prison management. It is inflicting unnecessary, indecent and inhumane suffering on tens of thousands of prisoners.

The issue came to the fore [most recently](#) because of a three-week hunger strike by inmates at Pelican Bay State Prison in California near the Oregon border that began on July 1 in the Orwellian Security Housing Unit, where inmates are held in wretched isolation in small windowless cells for more than 22 hours a day, some for many years.

Possessions, reading material, exercise and exposure to natural light and the outside are severely restricted. Meals are served through slots in steel cell doors. There is little in the way of human interaction. Returning to the general prison population is often conditioned on inmates divulging information on other gang members, putting themselves in jeopardy.

How inmates in these circumstances communicated to organize the protest is unclear, but it quickly spread to other California prisons. About 6,600 inmates participated at its peak. California's huge prison system is dysfunctional in so many ways. In May, [the Supreme Court found](#) conditions at the overcrowded prisons so egregious that they violated the Eighth Amendment's ban on cruel and unusual punishment and ordered the state to cut its prison population by more than 30,000 inmates. The case did not address the issue of long-term solitary confinement.

With their health deteriorating, those inmates continuing to fast resumed eating after state prison officials met a few modest demands. Inmates in Pelican Bay's isolation unit will get wool caps for cold weather, wall calendars to mark the passing time and some educational programming. Prison officials said current isolation and gang management policies are under review. But the protest has raised awareness about the national shame of extended solitary confinement at Pelican Bay and at high-security, supermax prisons all around the country.

Once used occasionally as a short-term punishment for violating prison rules, solitary confinements prevalent use as a long-term prison management strategy is a fairly recent development, Colin Dayan, a professor at Vanderbilt University, [said in a recent Op-Ed article in The Times](#). Nationally, more than 20,000 inmates are confined in supermax facilities in horrid conditions.

Prison officials claim the treatment is necessary for combating gang activity and other threats to prison order. It is possible to maintain physical separation of prisoners without ultraharsh levels of deprivation and isolation. Mississippi, which once set the low bar for terrible prison practices, saw a steep reduction of prison violence and ample monetary savings when it dramatically cut back on long-term solitary several years ago.

Holding prisoners in solitary also is very expensive, and several other states have begun to make reductions. In any case, decency requires limits. Resorting to a dehumanizing form of punishment well known to induce suffering and drive people into mental illness is beyond them.



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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For kind remembrance: What happens when you put good people in an evil place? Does humanity win over evil, or does evil triumph? These are some of the questions we posed in this dramatic simulation of prison life conducted in the summer of 1971 at Stanford University. (<http://www.prisonexp.org/>) Indications of an ongoing inhuman brutalizing process: LWP of Juveniles, The Hole, Board members denied 81-year-old woman sat in a wheelchair release from her prison (By LARRY WELBORN, Chowchilla 2009-11-25) (apart from AbuGhraib, Guantanamo and alike).

From Executive Summary (Out of the Shadows: GETTING AHEAD OF PRISONER RADICALIZATION under the leadership of The George Washington Universitys Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI) and The University of Virginias Critical Incident Analysis Group (CIAG), Prisoner Radicalization Task Force is a new approach in understanding but one corner of the many problems: The potential for radicalization of prison inmates in the United States poses a threat of unknown magnitude to the national security of the U.S. Prisons have long been places where extremist ideology and calls to violence could find a willing ear, and conditions are often conducive to radicalization. With the worlds largest prison population (over 2 million ninety-three percent of whom are in state and local prisons and jails) and highest incarceration rate (701 out of every 100,000), America faces what could be an enormous challenge every radicalized prisoner becomes a potential terrorist recruit. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales recently stated that [t]he threat of homegrown terrorist cells radicalized online, in prisons and in other groups of socially isolated souls may be as dangerous as groups like al Qaeda, if not more so. They certainly present new challenges to detection. The London transit bombings of 2005 and the Toronto terrorist plot of 2006, to name just two incidents, illustrate the threat posed by a states own radicalized citizens. By acting upon international lessons learned, the U.S. may operate from a proactive position.

Call your legislators today only they can stop solitary confinement, which is a total waste of tax money and a disgrace to the citizens of the United States.

For sure, California is a place that does punish people harshly, it is beyond what the courts has applied to those individuals. I know this because I live in the state of California.

My interest in prisons were brought to the fore-front because: It is the only place where one can view it from a sociological perspective, a psychological perspective, a anthropological prospective, and a public policy perspective, accumulating with a local government perspective based on political leaders being elected, which is based on the idea of tough on crime. When in reality, crime is down, and has

been for a number of years.

Second, one can also observe within these perspectives, the roll prosecutors play within this arena. For example, prosecutors advance their careers, not by the jury of ones peers, but by the jury of scared little old ladies.those in their seventies, and those that have no concept of other people outside of their own little communities.

If one really wanted to know the effects of solitary confinement they should find the movie, MURDER IN THE FIRST, it is a true story based on the prisoner having no hope, the lawyer having no choice. Yet together they triumphed over Americas most famous and feared prison, Alcatraz.In other words, they brought the prison down.

For example, Henri Young, was a inmate doing time for stealing five-dollars: yes, five dollars for his starving sister.

His fate: was worse than death, he was confined to the dungeons of Alcatraz for attempting to escape, his isolation lasted for three years, along with beatings by the warden. Within these three years, Henri Young became mentally deranged.He murdered the man who told of his planned escape with a spoon.

In other words, a violation of the Eighth Amendment of cruel and unusual punishment against the warden became the defense for Henri Young.

Solitary confinement as a regular punishment lasting for years and years, can be brought to a halt.the halt is centered upon bringing every warden in charge of prisons with a SHU and/or a SuperMax prison to trial for crimes against humanity, based upon the eighth amendment, which would be a federal case based upon civil rights.

well done for the news i am glad to see ny take up such a horrorbal cos to fight for the inmates rights no mater what the end be well done nes of ny keep fighting the good fight shine the light on the darknes of justice may thare be light in the darknes of justice

Fabulous. I love real facts and statistics. If more truth came out is this form our battles would be so much easier.

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