

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | June 19, 2010

Raymond Luc Levasseur wrote the following essay back in 1996, when he was a prisoner at the federal supermax prison in Florence, Colorado, known as ADX (for Administrative Maximum). A Vietnam veteran and antiwar activist, Levasseur became a member of the revolutionary group United Freedom Front. In 1986, he and several others were convicted of taking part in a series of bombings targeting military facilities, military contractors, and corporations doing business with apartheid South Africa. Levasseur was sentenced to 45 years, and initially placed in the Control Unit at USP Marion. After refusing to work for Federal Prison Industries (UNICOR), which was contracting with the Department of Defense, he was sent in 1994 to the ultra-high-security, high-tech ADX for five years, then transferred to Atlanta Federal Prison.

In all, Levasseur spent 15 years of his 18 years in prison in solitary confinement. Released on parole in 2004, he returned to his native state of Maine, where he had grown up the son of poor French Canadian textile workers. He was [active in the effort](#) to pass a [bill limiting the use of solitary confinement](#) in state prisons, which the Maine Legislature [effectively tabled](#) earlier this year.

More of Ray Luc Levasseur's writings appear [here](#), and a profile of him in the *Portland Phoenix* can be found [here](#). The piece excerpted below, called *Trouble Coming Every Day*, appeared in the [North Coast Xpress](#). You can [read the full essay](#) in our [Voices from Solitary archive](#). (H/T to Alan for calling this piece to our attention.)

Society reflects itself in the microcosm of prison. From a class-based, economically-driven, racially-motivated construct devolves life as a series of Chinese boxes—a set of boxes decreasing in size so that each box fits inside the next larger one. I am in the smallest box.

I am in Administrative Maximum (ADX) prison, the Federal government's latest boondoggle to contain prisoners' rebellion and dissent. I am in a boxcar cell. Picture a cage where top, bottom, sides, and back are concrete walls. The front is sliced by steel bars. Several feet beyond the bars is another wall. In this wall is a solid steel door. The term boxcar is derived from this configuration: a small, enclosed box that doesn't move.

I am confined to the boxcar cell 157 hours of each 168-hour week. Eleven hours each week I'm allowed into the barren area adjacent to this cell. Each morning begins with the noisy rumble of the steel door opening. A guard steps to the bars and slides food through a small slot. Feeding time. The guard steps back and the door slaps shut with a vengeance.

The purpose of a boxcar cell is to gouge the prisoners' senses by suppressing human sound, putting blinders about our eyes, and forbidding touch. Essential human needs are viewed with suspicion. Within the larger context of a control unit prison, the boxcar cell is designed to inflict physical and emotional isolation that wears down a prisoner's will to resist. When this regimen undermines a prisoner's health or distorts his/her personality, it's considered the cost of doing business.

It seems endless. Each morning I look at the same gray door and hear the same rumbles followed by long silences. It is endless. Subjected to humiliations designed to buckle our knees, we are bent over, arms clamped behind our backs, pawed, prodded, cell-searched, strip-searched, commanded, marched distances of 50 feet, silenced, and hooked to a chain running through 1,500,000 prisoners. All this is enforced by a porcine abomination called the Goon Squad whose idea of combat is to jump on handcuffed and caged prisoners while applying boots, truncheons, and blasts of chemical agents to faces that are pushed into unforgiving concrete.

I'm deeply cornered in their prison. My sight is diminished, but I maintain my vision. I see their hand in the use of four-point restraints to spread-eagle prisoners, something inherently abusive regardless of the excuse. I see forced feedings, cell extractions, hassles, harassments, verbal barrages, mindfuck games, disciplinary reports, medical neglect, and the omnipresent threat of violence. Airborne bags of shit and gobs of spit become the response of the caged.

The minds of some prisoners are collapsing in on them. I don't know what internal strife lies within them, but it isn't mitigated here. One prisoner subjected to four-point restraints (chains, actually) as shock therapy, had been chewing on his own flesh. Why is a prisoner who mutilates himself kept in ADX? Is he supposed to improve his outlook on life while stripped, chained and tormented by a squad of guards and prison functionaries?

Some prisoners rarely come out of their cells. Others never come out. I don't know why. Meanwhile, psychologists with heads full of psycho-babble roam the tiers supposedly sniffing out pockets of mental instability.

I was in Tennessee's Brushy Mountain penitentiary in 1970-71 when it was locked down. The media (finally!) did a shocking exposé demonstrating that up to one third of Brushy's prisoners were mentally ill and didn't belong there. Left unanswered was whether they arrived in that condition or whether Brushy drove them over the edge. It never will be answered because Brushy prisoners rebelled in a conflagration that claimed lives on both sides of the bars. Brushy Mountain is no more.

Authorities designed ADX the way corporations design schemes to poison the environment while avoiding responsibility for doing so. They cut into sight and sound with ubiquitous walls and boxes. We exercise in something resembling the deep end of a cement-lined pool. Every seam and crack is sealed so that not a solitary weed will penetrate this desolation. Smell and taste are reduced to staleness and sameness. Every guard functions as a spy, watching and listening with prying, voyeuristic eyes, cameras, and microphones. (Intelligence gathering by the staff is critical. 1) When they're done with us, we become someone else's problem.

Television deserves special mention. Unlike other prisons, every ADX cell is equipped with a small black & white TV, compliments of the Bureau of Prisons (BoP) pacification program. Hollywood and Madison Avenue images are churned out through a barrage of talk shows, soaps, cartoons, and B movies to give us some vicarious social interaction. Feeling rebellious, lonely, angry, miserable, alienated, unskilled and uneducated? Turn on the face of Amerika. The administration replaces a broken TV quicker than fixing a toilet.

There are no jobs for those in boxcar cells. Like millions of others, we are punished with unemployment. Education is restricted to inadequate videos on the TVs. One such program featured *The Criminal Mind*. I was expecting some analysis of U.S. corporate criminals and politicians. Instead, we got a sketch of drug abusers stealing and cavorting in a landscape of dilapidated houses and abandoned factories. A school we had already been through.

Religious services are relegated to TV. Recently the prison chaplain presented his video analysis of the U.S.'s decline caused by homosexuality, AIDS, and women's rights. Lifting this blight would make America great again (like in the good old days of land theft and chattel slavery). The chaplain said nothing about the scourge of poverty, racism, unemployment, or killer cops and their connection to the prison industry. The chaplain said nothing about the ADX visiting room where floor-to-ceiling partitions rub family values into our wounds. Christianity rules. There is no Imam for Muslim prisoners.

Every morning, I go through my own ablutions. Every morning there is a layer of chalky dust settled about the cell. It comes through the single air vent. It never stops. Each morning I busy myself with a wet rag mopping up all that is not in my lungs.

The government says we don't have much common cause with humanity because we are the worst of the worst—an incessant BoP incantation which has become an effective soundbite. The government successfully monopolizes and manipulates information pertaining to crime and punishment. But was the government to be believed about Vietnam or the S&L rip-off? Was Nixon to be believed on Watergate? Was Reagan to be believed about the mass murder in Central America? Was Clinton to be believed concerning the human ashes in Waco? If they were, maybe you'll buy a Brooklyn Bridge named ADX. The government has a major credibility problem, yet tax dollars continue to bleed into the sordid business of the world's largest prison system.

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 [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 30, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 19, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 6, 2022

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it is true all he sees the USA we run every day life like those in prison do think about it gangs have the leader we call them presidents then come your shot callers or your managers then your members who do the dirty work or the normal worker even government is the same

way they have a code of laws we have a code of laws they fight we fight in the end we are much like a prison all one need to to see how this hole planet run is look at the way a prison runs or a pack of dogs but what is difrent then them and dogs is dogs would not do this to thare owen or anyone we as a nashion are wishing to be brave free just and rightus we stand for humane treetment fare justice no torcher and the right to be your self that is what we say we stand for but in all trueth we are in are courts more just as for holding a trial that is but ones thats over we tern from what we say we stand for and do things not even those we call tarerist do to thare owen yes they may for shot times but i know no other nashion that is proud of it so much as we are we call are self grate nashion under god but i see not the us they speek of we are indeed better then others as for rights we have but others then that we are a lie we do torcher we do brake are treatys we do kill are owen we do suport gangs like demcrats or rublicans we do fight we do things that we hide you want to see the real usa look in your supermax prisons see the inmates that is what your nashion is doing and as this shory shows it can be you in thare places of usa or not ones i lookted at this nashion and loved it held the flag and honnered it now i see what and why the flag realy is old and raged it not from war its from the refleshion of the realy usa i know i will give all i have to end solitary and if the govemement has a bone with that they want to pick i will anyday let them come for i know who the real tarerestis are the nashion i am now ashamed to be call a part of

yup.. if you want to know what our country really does.. go to the supermax prisons. who is really the criminal? the jailers or the inmates. certainly what they are doing is massively unconstitutional. yet they dont get punished for it.

Like Jackson I do not support this mans agenda. Although he makes some valid observations about the system I understand why his lecture was canceled at U Mass. in this day and age.

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