

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Albert Woodfox was freed from custody on his 69th birthday, February 19, after more than four decades in solitary confinement in Louisiana prisons.

Mr. Woodfox, Herman Wallace, and Robert King, known as the Angola 3, spent decades in isolation after being wrongly convicted of prison murders in retaliation for their political activism inside the Louisiana State Penitentiary, called Angola. Mr. Wallace was released in 2013 and died days later of liver cancer; Mr. King was released in 2001.

Mr. Woodfox pleaded no contest to lesser charges of manslaughter and aggravated burglary in the 1972 killing of an Angola prison guard and was sentenced to time served. Although I was looking forward to proving my innocence at a new trial, he said in a statement released by his attorneys, concerns about my health and my age have caused me to resolve this case now and obtain my release with this no-contest plea to lesser charges.

Attorney George Kendall represented Mr. Woodfox in federal court, and told reporters his firm will continue to pursue a civil lawsuit filed in 2000 that challenges the practice of indefinite solitary confinement. Albert survived the extreme and cruel punishment of 40 plus years in solitary confinement because of his extraordinary strength and character, Mr. Kendall said in a statement. These inhumane practices must stop. Mr. Woodfox said he plans to now direct all his efforts to ending the barbarous use of solitary confinement.

Mr. Woodfox reportedly spent the longest time in solitary of any prisoner in United States history, alone in a six-by-nine-foot cell, allowed out for one hour a day. You pace, you know. Walk up and down the cell And you fight the urge to take off all your clothes, cause you feel like everything is weighing you down, he said. You go through this psychological self-analysis and then you talking to yourself, and telling yourself that you strong enough Just trying to push these walls back and the ceiling back with the force of mind.

About 75,000 people in the United States are held in solitary confinement today, spending 23 or more hours a day in small cells, allowed out only for showers, brief exercise, or medical visits, without telephone calls or visits from family members. The use of long-term isolation escalated after tough on crime policies led states to build super-maximum-security prisons in the 1980s and 1990s. Studies show that people held in long-term solitary confinement suffer from anxiety, paranoia, perceptual disturbances, and deep depression. Nationwide, suicides among people held in isolation, who make up 3 to 8 percent of the nations prison population, account for about 50 percent of prison suicides.

Some states and the [federal government](#) recently enacted reforms to restrict solitary confinement for juveniles and people with mental illness and to reduce the maximum time that can be spent in solitary. The story of the Angola 3 has shined a light on one of the most inhumane practices in our criminal justice system, Rep. Ced Richmond (D-LA) said in a statement this weekend. What happened to Mr. Woodfox was cruel and I dont think it will ever be easy to understand, but that process will only be eased if we do all we can to ensure that no one else has to endure the same.

I learned how strong the human spirit can be, that the change has to come from within. I learned that although human beings do horrible things sometimes, they still have worth, Mr. Woodfox told NOLA.com. And that there should be a certain amount of dignity given to every human being even though they're in prison, he said. And thats not the way it is now.

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