

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | October 12, 2010

After reading our post on [Caon City, Colorado](#), a reader called our attention to a piece on the Huffington Post by Anne-Marie Cusac called [Torture Is American](#). As an investigative reporter for *The Progressive*, Cusac wrote about devices of [torture in U.S. prisons](#), including [Tasers](#), [restraint chairs](#), and [stun belts](#), as well as [solitary confinement](#); she has also authored a book on the subject, called [Cruel and Unusual: The Culture of Punishment in America](#).

In *Torture Is American*, Cusac begins by referencing the [suicide of Allyssa Peterson](#), a young American soldier charged with questioning prisoners in Iraq, who shot herself in the head back in 2003 after being ordered to use interrogation techniques that she clearly considered torture. I suspect that what confronted this patriotic, Arabic-speaking, intelligent, sensitive, and empathetic woman in the last days of her life, Cusac writes, was evidence of a culture in conflict. She appears to have gone to Iraq as a true believer in the good of her country. She discovered there the American culture of punishment. Cusac continues:

Torture is American. It was American when Peterson died. It was American long before that. How do I know? I am a reporter who for years covered allegations of prison abuse and ill treatment in domestic U.S. prisons. Nearly every technique used at Abu Ghraib had a close, recent parallel in a U.S. facility. Just to mention a few parallels, inmates in domestic U.S. prisons have been threatened with electrocution, intimidated with dogs, restrained nude, and restrained for weeks. Some U.S. inmates have alleged that they were forced to soil themselves, an allegation that also arose in Iraq.

So I didn't feel surprise when the Abu Ghraib story broke. I felt a sickened familiarity. What bothered me more than Abu Ghraib was the outrage my fellow Americans expressed. Why were they so upset about torture in Iraq when similar punishments had been used in the United States in recent years? Peterson's death says a bit about why. She didn't know about such techniques until she saw the interrogation techniques used on prisoners with her own eyes. Prisons are closed, private places. Most of us don't know, and would rather know little, about what life inside is like.

And prisoners, even those who have been severely mistreated, can be less-than-sympathetic subjects. My subject matter has inspired baffled stares at high school reunions, jokes from schoolteachers about putting their students in stun belts, and yelling sessions in elevators. The response tends to be strong, and I feel a hitch in my stomach when a new acquaintance, upon hearing I am a reporter and writer, asks me my area of specialty.

Contrary to such responses, Cusac concludes, Our lives outside are linked to those inside, whether we admit this to ourselves or not. You can read the [full article here](#).



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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the usa we call home is not a land of justice by far it is just as sick as the men in war we fight those who we call terrorists we are as well to be blamed alone if we to break are treaties and torches are used every day and call it justice i see not the pride from the flag but the sadness of what it was once meant to be and is no longer meant to be there be light in the darkness of justice

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