

HOLEY WARS

TO THEM IT'S SEGREGATION, ISOLATION, OR DISCIPLINARY —
TO US IT'S *THE HOLE*.

THESE ARE THE PEOPLE
WHO FIGHT AGAINST IT.

Dungeon Marion: Experimental Repression

by
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The U.S. Penitentiary at Marion, Illinois, is a locked down prison. Official propaganda has other names for it such as *concentration model* and *high-security operation*. But in reality, since the infamous lockdown was imposed on October 27, 1983, the whole prison has been a control unit on the pattern of the notorious H unit.

U.S. Bureau of Prisons (BOP) administrators claim the 1983 lockdown was the necessary response to an unplanned emergency situation—the killing of two guards and a prisoner in separate incidents. They also claim that all the brutality implemented in the lockdown, and upon which Marion-style oppression is still based, is the necessary response to violence in other prisons. However, the facts and circumstances say otherwise.

The History

The federal maximum-restriction mania that culminated in the lockdown got rolling with a 1963 conference of prison administrators and sociologists in Puerto Rico. There, Dr. Edward Schein presented a program of repressive behavior modification techniques designed to force attitude changes on prisoners. James Bennett, who was then director

of the BOP, endorsed these ideas and encouraged prison officials to use their unique power to conduct experiments in psychological manipulation. Ten years later, the "control unit" was opened in USP Marion's H Block to carry out this experimentation more intensely.

In H Block, the research and development of breaking and controlling prisoners took precedence over and eventually replaced any effort at positive attitude changes. However, one unit was not a big enough laboratory. In 1979, USP Marion not only became the BOP's only level-six penitentiary—the highest security classification—a decision also was made to convert it from a prison with one control unit to a "close, tightly-controlled, unitized" institution for all prisoners.

Use of rhetoric such as "new," "higher security", "long-term segregation," "highly controlled setting," etc., in the policy decrees demonstrated that officialdom intended to lock Marion down at least as early as 1979. The words also indicate the BOP was not thinking only about the "concentration models" and "humane incapacitation" in its public pronouncements. They show, too, that the alleged reasons for the lockdown were just excuses—excuses that were deliberately created.



The BOP recognized the need for public relations to put some covers on this dirty deed, which might draw enough criticism to cause trouble. Hence, it didn't just lock Marion directly down. Instead, it set about creating conditions in which not only a lockdown but a permanent lockdown would be applauded instead of criticized. It wanted to divert attention from its own bad intent and set prisoners up to look like vicious fiends who deserved whatever they got.

The Advent of Harold Miller

Warden Harold Miller was sent to Marion in 1979. As a result, within months of his arrival, a more authoritarian regime was instituted and conditions deteriorated.

- Harder administrative attitudes were transmitted to staff, who put them into practice.
- Industry jobs began to be worse.
- Pay decreased.
- Harassment increased.
- Infractions became more common and punishments harsher.
- Activities were cut back.

In short, the population was put under substantially greater pressure for no reason.

The Reaction

As can be imagined, the administrative provocation, instigation, and repression stimulated protest and conflict. The tension and stress expressed itself in expected ways, some principled and others not: they included demands presented to staff and "buck" altercations with staff and between prisoners. However, since the statistics are all the BOP's, it is impossible to know the true extent of the reaction.

Whatever criticisms may be due to the ignorance and lack of consciousness expressed by the prisoner assaults, it is important to understand that they are not evidence of general prisoner depravity. They are the product of administratively-created conditions and not justification for more repression.

The largest expressions of prisoner resistance were work strikes, the first of which took place in January 1980. By March and April of that year, participation was virtually total. Staff accused prisoners of using threats and coercion to obtain solidarity and launched a media campaign to that effect, knowing it was false. More repression followed.

In September 1980, a third work strike was called, and all but one prisoner joined. Outside people had to be brought in to carry out essential

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tasks, and real information about prisoner grievances began to get out. In an attempt to stem the flow of information and enhance prisoners' isolation, Miller used unfounded allegations as a pretext to ban some lawyers and paralegals from the prison.

While the work strike continued, the BOP took further steps toward total lockdown. By January 1981, the industrial program was terminated and all the equipment was sent elsewhere. The same was done with the vocational training program, and the academic program was shut down in almost all but name. Other jobs were all but eliminated, too, and recreation was cut back to about every other day—a block at a time, and a tier at a time. This semi-lockdown was called an "evolving stringent environment" and said to be necessary for safety and security. In fact, statistics provided to Congress by then BOP Director Normal Carlson contradicted that claim.

The Results

The adversarial atmosphere of this stringent environment, coupled with the idleness—particularly intellectual idleness—and relative poverty in the absence of work, could only breed strife. Restriction to the cells or to the tiers in front of the cells—with one TV for 35 prisoners and only a few games and meager self-education materials—meant there were few constructive pursuits available to prisoners.

People were jammed together with others from different cultures, racial and ethnic groups, levels of consciousness, educational levels, regions, and sentences. There was little opportunity to demonstrate competence or value or even to constructively connect with the de facto community. Friction was unavoidable, especially under the incessant and relentless pressure of the repressive apparatus and the stress thus induced. Behavior officialdom could hawk as atrocious was one of the few available outlets.

The BOP cites, as demonstrative of prisoner nastiness, a number of escape attempts, group disturbances, assaults on staff and prisoners by prisoners, and eight prisoner deaths between February 1980 and June 1983. Officialdom apparently uses the statistics for this period to create the impression that prisoners were wild to the point of uncontrollability when the prison was open. Ignored is the fact that, however deplorable some

incidents may have been, such circumstances were nowhere near unique to Marion. Many of the incidents (those that were not figments of BOP record-keeping) cannot be considered deplorable at all: self-protection and resistance to one's victimization in unavoidable situations

Prisoners, naked or clad only in drawers, were pushed, shoved, hit, kicked, jerked around by handcuffs and jabbed with riot batons. Many also were beaten and literally dragged to the hole.

All the while they were insulted and threatened in every imaginable way.

is admirable. Ignored, too, was the administrative responsibility for the conditions to which the alleged misbehavior was a reaction.

The "Last Mile" Toward Lockdown

The months between June 1983 and the October lockdown are arbitrarily described as "leading to" the lockdown, as if there were suddenly some drastic escalation in trouble. The BOP used a lot of sensational descriptions of alleged violence and other problems to create a crisis atmosphere. Actually, the charges from this period involved only some 234 perpetrators, or about 7 percent of the prisoners then at Marion. And many of those were not in the general population (another indication that lockdown is more likely to aggravate the causes of problems).

The incidents the BOP generally claims precipitated the lockdown were the October 22, 1983 killings of two guards in separate incidents in the control unit. The killings were done by two prisoners who repeatedly had been harassed and abused by these guards in the already oppressive unit. Repeated and numerous complaints

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and warnings of impending trouble by prisoners and staff, in addition to the danger evident to correctional professionals, were ignored.

Administrators claimed the killings were some bizarre murder game. But a federal magistrate handling the lockdown litigation later acknowledged the prisoners could have killed all three guards present at each incident, and the prisoners did surrender. These facts are hardly consistent with the administration's fantasy. Moreover, the killings occurred in the control unit, an operationally-separate part of Marion so far removed from the rest of the operation as to be virtually another prison.

Additionally, the lockdown was not imposed until five days later. Even the discovery of the prisoner's body, which is sometimes added to the guard killings as another precipitator of the riot, was not the "emergency" the administrators hawked it to be because the joint was open after it was found.

Apparently it took the hierarchy a few days to decide the guard killings were just the excuse necessary to avoid more "phasing in" of the ultimate design for a control unit prison. Perhaps it also took some time to arrange the logistics to usher in the guard riot.

The Guard Riot, a.k.a. "Lockdown"

The guard riot was a classic demonstration of terrorism. Mass goons were imported from other prisons, dressed in identity-obscuring riot gear, and then allowed to run roughshod throughout the prison. Whole units were moved on the pretext of searching. Prisoners, naked or clad only in drawers, were pushed,

shoved, hit, kicked, jerked around by handcuffs and jabbed with riot batons. Many also were beaten and literally dragged to the hole.

All the while they were insulted and threatened in every imaginable way:

- Some were left handcuffed for days.
- Chow was sack lunches, often contaminated by swine.
- Conditions were filthy and prisoners were subjected to intense cold.
- All personal property was confiscated and "red-necked" and most of it was never returned.

In subsequent weeks, the reign of terror fell off sharply and subsided more gradually thereafter—but it has never ended.*

Marion Today

USP Marion remains, almost seven years later, a locked-down prison. The imported goon squads have long since left—the relatively few beatings, chainings to concrete slabs, rectal probes, and other physical abuse necessary to enforce Marion-style repression can be handled locally. A vastly inflated local staff and facility costing roughly \$16 million per year is sufficient to maintain the threat and demonstrate the powerlessness of prisoners.

Now the attack is primarily psychological, at least in the active sense, although the physical repression behind it is still very real. Prisoners in what is misleadingly called the "mainline" of USP Marion exist with the following conditions:

- They spend an average of 22 hours per day locked in cells measuring approximately 6 by 9 feet.
- They are permitted out on the long, narrow range running in front of the two tiers of cells on each side of the block (in groups of nine or fewer) for 90 minutes, five days per week. The sides of each block are physically separate and prisoners can only talk to the prisoners on their own side of the block.

- Each week, they are given a three-hour yard period on one day and a three-hour gym period on another, to which they are taken, with hands cuffed behind their backs, by gangs of club-wielding guards.
- There is work for only a few prisoners and, with the exception of some orderly jobs, all jobs are in the pre-transfer unit that it may take years for a prisoner to reach.
- Education is limited to one correspondence course (two for A students) and some rudimentary self-study basic education programs shown on the prison's closed circuit TV channel.
- The library is a cardboard box, filled with ragged paperbacks, outside the bars at the end of the tier.
- Recreational activities are limited to handball, basketball, running calisthenics, cards, chess, and dominoes, depending on where the recreation is held.
- Personal property is severely limited.

Harassment

Harassment is continual. Endless and shifting petty rules and requirements are so numerous no one can even know—let alone observe—all of them to ensure he avoids "doing his own number" in isolation.

The Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals found Marion conditions were "sordid and horrible," "ghastly" and "depressing in the extreme."

Invasive intrusions carry silly demands into the very corners of Marion subsistence, and ensure that prisoners cannot escape the rigors of maximum-restriction mania by creating a cocoon of study or anything else within their cells.

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Other harassments such as mail interference, cell changes, arbitrary moves, frequent lies, poor food, etc., etc., etc. abound, and the deliberate absence of any official policy on how to avoid being characterized as needing "attitude adjustment" also is calculated to add to the uncertainty and insecurity that is an essential element of Marion.

Nothing is for sure.

Disciplinary and Administrative Processes

The disciplinary process is a charade that has more to do with kangaroo courts than justice. Staff members are considered infallible in matters of discipline and an imperial Disciplinary Hearing Officer (DHO) decrees guilt and punishment, supposedly based on procedures. However, the procedures are so loose they make the due process they supposedly protect meaningful only if the DHO wants it to be. Additionally, infractions, however minor, are used to justify requiring a prisoner to start over on his indeterminate sentence to Marion.

Administrative appeals, be they of disciplinary matters or other things, are rarely granted and are even more bankrupt.

The courts are no help, either. The local federal district court does everything it can to delay, obstruct and deny prisoner litigation relating to the prison (and even not relating to it!) The Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals found Marion conditions were "sordid and horrible," "ghastly" and "depressing in the extreme" but ruled they were constitutional nevertheless.

There are no mandatory, written procedures for transfer to or from Marion. Prisoners may be sent there for, according to one court, "any reason or no reason at all." The Bureau of Prisons (BOP) incessantly tells the media and legions of tourists Marion is

only for "the worst of the worst"—vicious predators convicted of acts of violence in other prisons. However, the truth is anyone is subject to Marion. People are sent there straight from the courts, for political reasons, on vague plots that are too weak to stand even a fake infraction, or for "administrative reasons." There are no hearings.

Administrative mythology says that prisoners can "work their way out" of Marion, but it doesn't say how. Transfer out allegedly is based on staff's "professional judgment" but no one knows what that means—and observation says it varies widely.

Marion As a Role Model

The BOP claims Marion is necessary to control violence in other prisons and allow them to be operated more openly. However—despite its total control over how and what statistics are gathered—

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it has not been able to show any convincing evidence that Marion is effective at doing this. Indeed, available evidence instead indicates Marion has acted like a ball and chain to drag other federal and state prisons toward its own repressive extreme.

Regular prisons are becoming more restrictive and repressive—constructive programs are being eliminated, and both mini and maxi control-unit Marion clones are proliferating at an alarming rate.

There is a substantial body of psychological literature that states the elements of Marion subsistence are destructive and result in a variety of

problems and disabilities. Even former Marion Warden Jerry Willford admitted the Marion non-program resulted in mental impairment of prisoners. Only the most affected are shockingly visible—those who "go off" explosively, kill themselves, gibber their lives away, struggle with imaginary demons in single cells, etc.

Some people can better handle the psychological assault than others, the negative consequences ooze less dramatically through cracks in their emotional armor. Even as they seem to maintain equilibrium, their disabilities range from minor to major. The load of tension, insult, debilitation and frustration could at any time reach the critical point and will suddenly be detonated by some otherwise insignificant event. Communities somewhere will pay the cost of the damage done to victims of Marion-style oppression.

Knowledge of the maximum restriction regimen at Marion seems to be synonymous with criticism.

- Numerous people, including a variety of political, social, and religious activists, have pointed out that Marion violates a number of the United Nations Minimum Standard Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.
- In congressional hearings, the overwhelming majority of testimony about Marion was critical.
- Psychological, correctional, legal and academic "experts" have concluded Marion is damaging and dangerous for society as well as for prisoners and should not continue on lockdown.
- Thousands of citizens have criticized various aspects of the Marion operation.
- USP Marion has the distinction of being the only U.S. prison to be condemned by Amnesty International.

An Experimental Laboratory

So why, in the face of all these failures and condemnations, would the BOP insist on the effectiveness of Marion and its policies of repression? The answer can be found in the BOP's ulterior motives for the lockdown.

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Marion is not merely a segregation unit—there are plenty of those in other prisons and prisoncrats have never found it hard to keep people in them for years.

Nor is it only a means of behavior modification. Modification implies replacing objectionable behavior with something better; Marion promotes no positive element.

Nor is it only a concentration model because there are many who don't fit Marion's stated criteria at Marion, and many who do fit them elsewhere.

Marion is an instrument of social manipulation and control—it is an *experimental laboratory*.

Aside from the obvious incidental benefits to prisoncrats of yet another lockdown spot—something they will increasingly need as social conditions deteriorate—the Marion laboratory can yield information.

- It can tell the apparatus of repression how to handle the variety of attitudes necessary for resistance both within and outside prisons.
- It can help it prepare ways to control populations that might respond to deteriorating conditions with resistance.
- It can tell its agents how people develop and maintain the strength to oppose their victimization, and also how to undermine it.

In the future, these lessons will find increasing application in the outside community, not only because the ruling class will be forced to replace social contract with social control, but also because repressive attitudes tend to move laterally in bureaucracies.

Dungeons such as Marion serve no one but the prison bureaucracy. Despite some incidental, short-term administrative benefits to prisoncrats, these dungeons have failed to deter crime or violence either inside or out. They also make society hypocritical by

its violation of the same human rights it condemns other countries for violating. By creating debilitated, stressed-out, bitter victims with no social or job skills—the vast majority of whom eventually return to the community—they work counter to the supposed goal of corrections. They encourage repressive attitudes in government agencies and give them information that can be used against “we, the people.” And these expensive weapons multiply at a rate to shame rabbits, wasting vast social wealth.

The apparatus screams that it needs these instruments of oppression.

In pursuit of power and profit—and greater social control—the legislature panders to the very crime hysteria it and the media created with sensationalism over substance.

The courts willingly permit the “sordid and horrible” and “ghastly” if that's what the apparatus needs to defend ruling class position and privilege.

Hence it is up to the people to apply pressure that will halt and reverse the growth of this metastasizing cancer—not only to defend prisoners but to defend themselves as well. Final solutions always start with the use of “concentration models” and other oppression against small and vilified minorities ... but they never end there.

**For a description of another guard riot, see “Rampage at Camp Hill” and “Who Rampaged” in the Spring 1990 issue of CONVICTIONS.*

NAACP to Fund Ex-Con Scholarship

The NAACP announced the establishment of an unusual scholarship at Oregon State University—one that gives preference to former prisoners.

Any non-traditional, older-than-average student of at least sophomore standing is eligible for the \$500 scholarship, but students who have previously been enrolled in educational or vocational training programs within the Oregon State Department of Corrections will receive first priority. Students with families and students who have been clients of the Department of Social Services will also be given preference.

Oregon chapters of the NAACP established the scholarship to honor Benjamin L. Hooks, former Executive Director of the NAACP, for his efforts to enhance educational programs within prisons.

Scholarship donations may be sent to:

NAACP
Benjamin Hooks Scholarship Fund
P.O. Box 3004-113
Corvallis, OR 97339

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