

USP-MARION, Part III

National Public Radio, 12-16-87  
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Last year, we aired a special report on the United States Penitentiary at Marion, in Southern Illinois. It is a prison, we reported, which officially replaces Alcatraz as a punitive prison, to which state and federal wardens can transfer designated prisoners. Marion was locked down in 1983. A lockdown is usually a temporary response to violence, and our report questioned the length of the Marion lockdown. Now it is a year later and little has changed. The Federal Bureau of Prisons has declared the lockdown permanent and established a permanent control policy at Marion. Most of Marion's 360 inmates spend nearly 23 hours a day locked in single man cells.

Recently a penal reform group criticized Marion, saying it is not simply a high security control program, but a behavior modification experiment, using sensory deprivation, isolation, and disorienting techniques which combine to destroy the human personality. Also this year, Amnesty International condemned Marion for violating United Nations Minimum Standards for the Humane Treatment of Prisoners.

NPR's Jacki Lyden, who reported our story last year, recently returned to Marion. Here's her story of how things are now.

Only one prison in the country has as its policy a mission of total control over nearly every action by every prisoner under lock and key, and that is the United States Penitentiary at Marion. What control means, isn't only spending up to 23 hours a day by yourself in a 6 x 9 foot cell, or the large guard-to-prisoner ratio, or even the leg irons and handcuffs used every time a prisoner is moved around at Marion. Control is also items in the cell arranged to the warden's specifications, no pictures on the walls, a rigid schedule for when to shower, when to eat, and when to speak. Prisoners get only two ten-minute phone calls a month, two groups of prisoners are prohibited from communicating with each other on the yard. Such control is expensive and consumes enormous staff resources. But to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, Marion is well worth it, because, the Bureau says, these prisoners require the severest punishment the federal government can deliver. Although the accuracy of that portrayal has been questioned, Marion's control program has been upheld in court.

Since the control restrictions began, many inmates have been transferred out of Marion, but the concern of prison watchdog groups, the prisoner's themselves, and their families, is for those who remain in Marion year after year. John Campbell, who is 43, has been in Marion for 9 years now. He's a bank robber, sent to Marion after an escape attempt. He accepts incarceration, he says, but thinks he's enmeshed in something else: a program designed to break him down.

JC: They've took my emotions and they've trampled them down so far that the only way that I ever feel emotion any more is watching a TV movie where some young girl, little girl is dying of cancer or something. And that's terrible when that's the only way that I can feel emotion or maybe cry, is to have to revert to a 12" TV set. Whereas, the next day I could probably watch a man on the tier get stabbed to death and not feel any emotion at all. And I don't like being like that, and I don't want to continue feeling that way. And I would like to have more control over my emotions, where they would be restored

to the degree they were before I come to Marion, Illinois.

JL: Campbell doesn't believe he'll ever get out of Marion, and he doesn't know what the consequences are of losing his normal emotional response.

JC: I think their wills are broken, and these people broke em. And that's not to justify ...the punishment, as far as I'm a bank robber, I go to prison. I believe in that, because society has to have that. And I don't have a problem with that. But I do have a problem with putting me in this situation and then breaking all my parts, mostly my internal parts. And there's no one around to put them back together again. And I don't think I have the ability to put them back together again, or the knowhow.

JL: You get angry Johnny?

JC: A lot. But I've been able to smolder my anger. It's kind of like throwing weeds on a blazing fire and it just smokes now, instead of blazes. But I'm afraid of what's going to happen when there's no more weeds to throw on it, and maybe the blaze will go under control, or out of control, or maybe, and I hope this don't happen either, that I'll throw so many weeds on the damn fire that I'll smother myself out.

JL: Would you ever ask to see a psychiatrist here?

JC: Oh, no. No, these people, the psychiatrists here...I think they govern this control program that's going on here. They totally frighten me. In fact, they frighten me more than the warden frightens me. And when he walks the tier I turn my back to him, where he won't even...I hope he don't even know I'm in the cell, he frightens me that much.

JL: John Campbell feels he's unable to help himself, coming apart in a system he suspects wants him to do just that. But to Marion's warden, Gary Henman, Campbell is a failure, unmotivated to help himself. Warden Henman says Marion's control mission is successful and is working.

GH: We don't think we're all that wrong. We just think that there's just some who maybe learn slower, or just have not tracked, or just want to, just want to test. We're not going to change, you know, to my knowledge, and I have no plans on the basic changes. And... they're the ones who are gonna have to change. If they're frustrated, in some ways I'm happy that they are, because through frustration... sometimes you get off your duff and try to do a little something about it to help improve yourself. But I don't want them to be depressed, because they know where the front door is; they know how to get there. And I don't want them to get mentally sick or emotionally ill, because, you know, that's not the purpose of this program.

JL: Whether or not that's the intention, the John Howard Association says psychological breakdown is Marion's effect. The John Howard Association is an Illinois prison reform organization which recently issued its second report on Marion. Spokesperson Jeanette Musengo says the report's authors stopped just short of calling Marion's techniques "brainwashing", but they did call Marion a quote firmly established, fully functioning behavior modification unit unquote, and said it is time to evaluate Marion's control program in psychological terms, as well as for its security purposes.

JM: They are really just determined to break the defiant spirit, and then implant very compliant behavior. As long as people don't make waves, as long as they move to left when they are to move to the left, and move to the right when they are to move to the right, they are satisfactory prisoners at Marion.

JL: The problem with that, according to Musengo, is that it doesn't serve any legitimate penological purpose to give orders designed merely to test compliance. She says no one knows how long prisoners can continue to react passively to orders and rules which seem arbitrary, even provocative. No United States prison has ever been as tightly controlled as Marion, for this long. Musengo is convinced the near total control can be severely damaging.

JM: The ways in which a person continues to be a whole person is in making decisions,...in having some means of expressing their individuality. There is just no means to do that at Marion. So that people do become depersonalized, depressed, very withdrawn,...or they go to the other extreme, and lash out almost continuously. Whatever their life experience has been that has brought them to Marion, they have really developed a well of rage. And they're just..., it's like somebody is jabbing them all the time, and keeping them boiling. I think that Mr. Gometz is probably a prime example of that.

JL: Randy Gometz is a special case. He's been in isolation at Marion for the last seven years, perhaps the longest of any prisoner in the federal system. Gometz who is 33, has been in prison since he was 18. He's now serving a life sentence for his role in the slaying of a guard, four years ago. As the years go by, it's become easier he says, in his isolation, to justify things he would have once abhorred. Now he faces charges of deadly assault with a paper mache zip gun he made. Our interview was conducted over a monitored prison telephone. Gometz is saying he feels he's never allowed to be on an even keel at Marion, and feels powerless. But he can fight that feeling when he's violent. That's when he feels he's in control, regardless of the consequences.

RG: Absolutely, even if it's like standing on a drill bit where I'm spinning myself further in the hole, you know what I mean? Even though that's going to be the consequences of a violent act. I'm really just throwing myself away, or any prospects of a future away. Even that is, in itself is a choice that I'm in control of, even though that all these bad repercussions may come down from it. I'm still in control of the precise act that I'm trying to address. Do you know what I'm talking about?

JL: Um hum, exactly.

RG: If nothing else, I can control...I can control things on an individual level, on an immediate level, even if the repercussions later down the line are going to be awesomely terrible, you know?

JL: Um hum, for those 10 or 15 minutes, or however many minutes or hour that it is.

RG: I'm driving. Yeah.

JL: Randy Gometz's case draws a lot of attention. People who favor the Marion

control program hold Randy Gometz out as an example of who it's for. People who protest Marion, hold him out as an example of what it's done. Perhaps not unrelated to his high profile in the federal system, is the fact that recently his attorney's office was broken into. The only thing taken was the Gometz file. Gometz often describes Marion as a merry-go-round of aggression and retribution, but Warden Henman denies that the administration is a part of that cycle.

GH: The program is not set up to be some conspiracy to hide out or to lock up and throw away the key any group of inmates that for some reason or other they don't think we like them, or that we're trying to hurt 'em or harm 'em. All we're trying to do is to allow all the other institutions in the Bureau of Prisons to be safe and secure.

JL: Well let me ask you this quickly from another standpoint. If there's the impression that there's nothing they can do to work their way out if here, and let's just take it for the sake of argument that that is their impression...

GH: Um, hum.

JL: Does that concern you as a warden?

GH: Certainly it does. I think its..., to have any inmate to feel that way, if he really feels that way, to me he's given up. OK? The purpose of this program.... the only thing we're asking inmates to give up ...is the conduct, behavior, ...maybe in some-ways the attitudes, and the projections or relationships or impact they have or have had on other inmates and staff.

JL: But if I've done it and nothing happens?

GH: Tell me when.

JL: Many prisoners say they have long since proved their ability to conform to the rules. Breaking the rules means doing more time at Marion. 24 months of incident free behavior, or clear conduct, is supposed to earn a transfer out of Marion, but prisoners say it often doesn't work that way. Michael Geoghegan was convicted of assaulting a guard in 1982. In the last 5 years Michael Geoghegan has been written up for only one minor rules infraction.

MG: You know I don't feel that anything I do to accomplish anything that they say that is supposed to be the program has any meaning whatsoever. Because it doesn't matter what you do, they're going to go on what you did.

JL: What bothers Geoghegan is that often an established practice at Marion, suddenly becomes illegal, and that just as prisoners are getting used to one set of rules, the rules are changed. That, says Geoghegan, is the name of the game.

MG: So they come up with a new rule all the time. And you don't even know what the hell they are half the time. Guys got polaroids in the mail the other night, and all of a sudden they got them sent back. They said, well, you can't have polaroids. What do mean you can't have polaroids? When did that start? You know? And all of a sudden...I got wrote the other day for letting somebody read my magazines. They said well, that's against the rules,

you're not supposed to let anybody read your magazines. I said, what do you mean? I thought the purpose of being here is to show that you can get along with other inmates. I said, I thought that was part of the program, you know, to show a willingness and an ability to get along with other inmates. So, I'm getting along, I'm being a nice guy and letting this guy read my magazines, but you're telling me I've got to tell this guy no, you know, and be an asshole. So they took the magazines, and they mailed them back to the people who sent them to me. They confiscated them and mailed them back to the people who sent them to me, which, in turn they will mail them back to me, which I'll get, again.

JL: Geoghegan was lucky. The guard tore up that particular incident report, and never filed it. But if he had, Michael Geoghegan could theoretically have seen all of his two and a half years of his clear conduct time erased and his time at Marion start over. Among its recommendations, the John Howard Association suggests Marion reduce from two years to one year the time prisoners are expected to remain incident free. More recommendations came from Amnesty International this past summer, which for the first time investigated an American prison. Amnesty condemned the Marion control policy, saying Marion violated the United Nations Minimum Standards for the Humane Treatment of Prisoners at every level. Responding to such criticism, the Federal Bureau of Prisons has commissioned its own report which is expected to conclude that Marion does not cause harmful psychological effects. Warden Henman, when asked if he could suggest changes at Marion, had none.

GH: Mum's the word. I just don't, you know, I don't really have a ...specific...you know, anything that's really,... you know, if we had this... I guess if I had one wish, I would wish that the inmates ...could understand a little bit more ... personally, and accept a little bit more... their responsibility in the mission of Marion, and why Marion exists. Marion would not exist if it wasn't for them. The program would not be unique, if it wasn't because of them. We wouldn't have a level 6 institution that would have to be different and be restricted because of the..the behavior and the conduct that these people have presented to us. And I don't think that my wish will ever be fulfilled in that area. I think its very difficult for the inmates to understand, maybe or at least accept their responsibility. Its all on us to try to explain and to relate and justify why we have Marions.

JL: A federal district court validated Marion's control policy this year, when it decided against the prisoners in a class action suit challenging the lockdown, but the court did say the prison operates at minimum standards, barely above conditions that would quote shock the conscience of a reasonable man.

Inmate Barry Mills has spent most of his life in prison, 8 years at Marion. He thinks the chief mistake of the Marion control program is that it ignores the human need for self-determination, even in prison.

BM: There's probably going to be prisons, you know, we can accept that fact. Therefore, there's a job that police have to do in here, they have a role to play, you know. But they have to allow, they can't...exert their wills to the point where they don't allow the prisoners to retain a certain amount of dignity. You dig, I mean whether the administration wants it or not, I mean, they're going to take it. They're going to take some kind of role in their

life. It's going to happen, it's human nature, you know. It's part of being a human being, I believe. I mean if you don't..., if you could care less, then there's no sense in you being alive. The only way I can see a prison working, is for the prisoners play some kind of role in it. I would think that a guard's job is to keep you out of society, separate society from you, you know. And I believe his job ends there, basically.

JL: But at Marion, a guard's job doesn't always stop at enforcing security. On a recent Saturday morning at Marion, the admitting officer was embarrassed when he was ordered to stop Shirley Sizemore from bringing in her photographs. For four and a half years, Mrs. Sizemore and her husband Robert have been coming to visit their son Michael, at Marion. Mrs. Sizemore always brings pictures and photo albums which she presses to the plexiglass that separates Marion visitors from inmates. The officer looked and told us he could find no written policy against bringing in pictures, to support the order he was given. Mrs. Sizemore feels the administration singles her family out because she testified in the class action suit concerning the Marion visiting room restrictions.

SS: I have brought pictures, ever since he's been here. Almost every visit, I've brought some pictures. And there's been no problem. So I walk in this morning with pictures, and I'm told I can't bring them in. And it's just been constant things like that. The first time we came up here after I had come to the hearing, Mike had to use the bathroom. They made him wait one hour...to use the bathroom. I would get him a soda, they'd make him wait almost an hour before they'd bring the soda back. Now, this time the guards in here have been more courteous to us. But you know, it's just constant things like this, that I know they are angry and I feel that they're singling us out for harassment. And we've come, consistently. They've tried so hard to discourage that. It's just not going to happen. If anything, it makes us more determined to come and to support him and back him up.

JL: Why would they discourage family visits?

SS: I've wondered that a lot of times myself. Its like they want the men locked away, and they want everybody to forget them. You know, sometimes I feel like they like the fact that they can refer to these men as animals, and that they're such hardened convicts. They're not, I mean they're all convicts, or they wouldn't be in here, but they're human beings, just like we are, that got in trouble. And I don't know why they don't want the families to support them, but they don't.

JL: On the way out, we passed the officer at the gate. He'd concluded he was not going to find a written policy against pictures. He said he planned to write a note questioning the order to Michael Sizemore's case manager. And then he said, softly, "You know, I wish I could win the lottery so I could get out of here."

I'm Jacki Lyden, reporting.