

CONTROL UNITS

An oppressive new order in U.S. prisons

By Nancy Kurshan

A significant event transpired in 1990 — one that may get lost in the general rush of current events if we don't stop and take note.

The U.S. Bureau of Prisons (BOP) announced its decision to open a new maximum security prison in Florence, Colo. This announcement marks an important new stage in penal history, one that is characterized by the proliferation of control unit prisons.

The Nov. 1 *New York Times* refers to the current situation in the prisons as a "new order" with an "iron fist." The most salient feature of this new order is the control unit, and the experimental laboratory and trend setter for this development has been the U.S. Penitentiary (USP) at Marion.

It was at Marion that the control unit was first developed. And it will be in Florence, Colo. that all the lessons of the past decades will be applied. It will be in Florence that the BOP will attempt to perfect their physical and psychological techniques in the service of social control.

MARION

USP Marion opened in 1963, when the infamous Alcatraz was closed down. The brutality of the island prison persisted at Marion but with a refined image, cloaked in experts and new technology. A wide array of government sponsored research on behavior modification and brain washing techniques was applied, including chemical alteration of behavior, sensory deprivation and solitary confinement.

The control unit was officially instituted in July 1972 in response to a peaceful prisoner protest of a guard's beating of a Mexican prisoner. Sixty prisoners were locked away in sensory deprivation cells.

Then on Oct. 22, 1983, two guards were killed in the control unit by two prisoners. Although there was no associated rebellion, prison officials seized the opportunity to violently repress the entire prison and turn it into one huge control unit.

The guards went cell by cell beating people and ravaging their possessions. The entire population at Marion was

collectively, severely and permanently punished in a calculated move by the BOP.

The immediate dispatch of the BOP executive staff members, senior wardens and guards from other institutions suggests that the lockdown was planned well in advance. In fact, a congressional investigation revealed the existence of a 1981 BOP document that detailed plans for the transformation of Marion into one, big control unit.

Since that time seven years ago, Marion has been a high-tech swamp of human rights violations. Amnesty International has stated that Marion violates virtually all the United Nations' standard minimum rules for the treatment of prisoners.

The men at Marion are let out of their 6 x 8 foot cells about one hour each day for showering and recreation. They eat, sleep and defecate in their cells. There are virtually no work programs; nor does the prison allow congregational religious services.

No contact visits are permitted; conversation is conducted through a plexiglass wall and over the telephone. Guards closely monitor all visits. Finger probes of the rectum and chaining men spread eagle to their beds are common procedures.

Twenty states have toured Marion and the control unit model has proliferated as a result: Supermax in Iona, Mich.; Shawangunk and now several others in New York; Pelican Bay in California.

Now the BOP has announced the development of this new prison in Florence, Colo.

FLORENCE

Ground was broken for the \$150 million complex on Saturday, July 14, 1990. Situated in the tiny, isolated town of Florence, the giant 600-acre prison complex will consist of four different level security units: a 250-bed high security penitentiary similar to Leavenworth, and a 550-bed "administrative maximum" prison (larger than the population of Marion, which now holds approximately 360 prisoners).

Designs for the prison have report-

edly been approved but remain unavailable to the public. It has been revealed, however, that Florence will be designed so that one guard can control the movements of numerous prisoners in several cell blocks by way of electronic doors, cameras and audio equipment.

"We'll be able to electronically open a cell door, shut it behind the inmate, and move him through a series of sliding doors," said Russ Martin, project manager for the Florence prison.

Presently at Marion, the prisoners can scream to one another from their cells, and there is minimal contact with guards when food is shoved between cell bars. In Florence, this "contact" will be eliminated.

"These guys will never be out of their cells, much less in the yard or anywhere around here," the Florence city manager claims. State-of-the-art security and new construction materials will ensure near complete isolation.

"Marion learned from Alcatraz, and now we've had 30 years to learn from Marion," Martin said.

ORGANIZING

We too have learned some lessons from Marion. We have come to understand its broader political implications.

The Committee to End the Marion Lockdown see prisons as a mechanism for the social control of people of color, an elaborate system whose intent is to contain people of color both physically and politically.

At Marion over 75 percent of the men are people of color. This is not surprising since imprisonment rates reveal that a Black person is more than eight times more likely to go to prison than a white person.

The BOP would have us believe that only the worst of the "bad apples" are at Marion. However, even former Marion warden Ralph Arons stated in court that, "The purpose of the Marion Control Unit is to control revolutionary attitudes in the prison system and in the society at large."

The BOP's own figures indicate that 80 percent of the men at Marion are

not designated as Control Unit prisoners. Many prisoners at Marion were "jailhouse lawyers," leaders of prison protests, religious dissidents, and others who have refused to "fit in" in the prisons they came from.

In addition to controlling many people of color, prisons help to attack leaders of political movements. Marion holds more political prisoners than any other prison — people like Oscar Lopez, Sekou Odinga, Bill Dunne and Ray Levasseur.

For the past six years we in the CEML have concentrated our energies against the brutality of Marion. We have held press conferences and educational conferences and produced great quantities of literature as well as audio and videotapes. We initiated a successful international petition campaign against the toxic water at Marion, and we demonstrated many times at the prisons, the towns nearby, and at the Chicago Court of Appeals.

We have achieved some small but important successes. In addition to insuring that the BOP bring fresh and safe water to the prisoners, we have been a part of efforts, along with many others, that have forced the BOP to move individual political prisoners out of control units.

A significant victory was won when the Lexington Control Unit for Women was completely shut down as a result of a nationwide campaign.

As of this writing, the BOP has announced that they will end the lockdown at Marion, which has been our primary demand. However, they plan to replace it with an even more destructive institution in Florence, Colo.

The BOP believes that by moving this odious prison out of our back yard, we will give up the fight. We will never do this. And our challenge to you, the reader, is to help us broaden this fight.

Through the efforts of many people we can defeat their plans in Florence, Colo. This will be a real contribution towards the building of a society based on peace and justice.

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