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■ BRAINWASHING IN AMERICA?

The Women of Lexington Prison

WILLIAM A. REUBEN AND
CARLOS NORMAN

On October 29, 1986, the United States Bureau of Prisons formally opened a special facility for "high security" women prisoners in Lexington, Kentucky. Built to house sixteen inmates and the result of more than a decade's planning, the Female High Security Unit (H.S.U.) is a kind of prison within a prison, occupying the basement of the Federal Correctional Institute. The unit's first two inmates were Alejandrina Torres, a 49-year-old Puerto Rican nationalist, and Susan Rosenberg, 31, a self-proclaimed revolutionary.

The Lexington unit is America's second high-security prison. The other is the Federal prison at Marion, Illinois, which has the dubious distinction of being the first penitentiary in the United States to be investigated by Amnesty International. On June 4 the human rights group announced its finding that conditions at Marion amounted to "cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment," in violation of the minimum standards for the treatment of prisoners promulgated by the United Nations.

The Marion prison was built to house inmates who had presented disciplinary problems. The mission of the H.S.U. at Lexington is hazy, but it is not to reform or rehabilitate its inmates, who are assigned there by the director of the Bureau of Prisons.

The two women at H.S.U. are confined to subterranean cells twenty-three hours a day. They are permitted one hour of exercise in a yard measuring fifty feet square; upon their return they are strip-searched. That daily outing is the only time they see sunlight, except when they leave the facility for medical or dental treatment. On those occasions they are handcuffed and manacled by chains around their waists. In their cells they are kept under constant surveillance by guards or television cameras. Whenever they leave the cells, even to take a shower, they must be accompanied by guards.

William A. Reuben, a former national public relations director of the American Civil Liberties Union, is the author of The Atom Spy Hoax, The Honorable Mr. Nixon and other books. Carlos Norman is the pseudonym of an attorney and journalist living in New York City.

Torres and Rosenberg charge that they are the subjects of a pilot study of behavior-modification methods, which are being tested on them and will be applied to future inhabitants of the H.S.U. They say that they are exposed to various forms of sensory deprivation designed to alter their personalities. The lights in their cells glare down on them continuously, and they are forbidden to cover them in any way. Nor are they allowed to place photographs or pictures on the walls. They may wear only prison-issue shoes, undergarments, drab shirts and culottes. Virtually the only contact they are allowed with the outside world consists of a fifteen-minute telephone call to their lawyers each week and a visit with members of their families, separated by a glass partition, once a month. Guards are instructed not to converse with them. They are denied access to the prison library as well as the entertainment and recreational facilities. They may read only magazines, books and newspapers that are approved by prison officials, and are permitted only five books at any one time. For companionship they have a color television set in their cells. "Only in America," says Rosenberg, "can you abuse people, take away their human dignity, and then give them a TV and that makes it O.K."

Rosenberg's lawyer, Mary O'Melveny, who was allowed to visit her client on December 14 and 15 of last year, recorded these impressions of conditions at the H.S.U.:

Imagine a world without color, any color. Only bright, high-glossy white, everywhere one looks. Even uniforms—ludicrous clothes selected for their "feminine" look—are bleached out. Nothing is permitted to brighten up, or even add contrast to, these bleak, colorless surroundings.

Next, imagine a world without daylight, without fresh air. Only artificial fluorescent lights—on all of the time. Artificial air—too hot or too cold but never real. The prison pallor one reads of takes on new meaning; both women looked gray. . . .

The overwhelming sense of loneliness of this place is all-pervading, the isolation is overwhelming. It is much like stepping off the regular world into some sort of frozen limbo state where an occasional real person floats by, but always by accident and always before one can get ready for enlarged human contact.

The Lexington prison is a world away from Manhattan's Upper West Side, where Susan Rosenberg was raised. (We interviewed her recently at the Metropolitan Correctional Center in New York City, where she was being held temporarily for questioning by defense lawyers in an unrelated case. We were not allowed to talk to Torres.) Rosenberg, dark-haired with soft features, is the only child of well-off, middle-class parents. Her father is a dentist, and her mother worked in theater and film production. She was educated at the Walden School, a progressive private school, Barnard College and the City University of New York. Radicalized by the black power and antiwar movements, she became involved with clandestine revolutionary groups in the late 1970s. She was indicted on conspiracy charges for her alleged participation in the 1979 prison escape of black activist Joanne Chesimard, and in the 1981 Brink's armored-car robbery by former members of the Weather Underground in which two policemen and a Brink's security guard were killed.

Those charges were later dropped for lack of evidence. In 1984 she was arrested for possession of arms and explosives and, two years ago, convicted on those charges and sentenced to fifty-eight years in prison by Federal Judge Frederick Lacey, who recommended that she be denied parole.

Alejandrina Torres is also from New York City, but she was raised in a working-class neighborhood and educated in public schools. Her family moved to the United States from Puerto Rico when she was a child. After graduating from high school, she moved to Chicago, where she married the Rev. José Torres, a minister of the United Church of Christ. She worked as an executive secretary at the University of Illinois's Chicago campus. She became active in the Puerto Rican independence movement and, according to the government, was a member of Fuerza Armadas de Liberación Nacional (F.A.L.N.), an underground group that has claimed responsibility for a number of bombings in the United States. In 1983 she was arrested on charges of possessing weapons and explosives. In addition, she was charged with seditious conspiracy—"conspiring to use force to oppose the lawful authority of the U.S. over Puerto Rico." She was convicted on those charges in 1985 and sentenced to thirty-five years in prison.

Although neither woman was convicted of committing acts of violence, each received an unusually harsh sentence. Rosenberg's term is sixteen times longer than the average sentence meted out to weapons-possession offenders, and twice the 1985 average for first-degree murderers in the Federal courts. Both steadfastly maintain that they never engaged in violence; neither had a previous criminal record.

Why, then, did they end up in a maximum-security facility? It could not have been for disciplinary reasons, because neither woman had been in any trouble during the time she spent at other Federal prisons. And, in any case, the H.S.U. was not set up for violent or unruly prisoners. According to a Bureau of Prisons directive dated September 2, 1986:

The 16-bed High Security Unit for females [was] developed to meet the needs for very secure prison space for females

where placement in less secure facilities is not appropriate. Candidates for placement in this unit are those females whose confinement raises a serious threat of external assault for the purpose of aiding the offender's escape. . . . Assignments to the unit will be made without regards to such factors as . . . disciplinary reasons, but are a matter of classifications.

On March 25, Norman Carlson, the director of the Bureau of Prisons, gave the same explanation for the women's incarceration at Lexington, in response to an inquiry by Representative Robert Kastenmeier, chair of the House Subcommittee on Courts, Civil Liberties and the Administration of Justice.

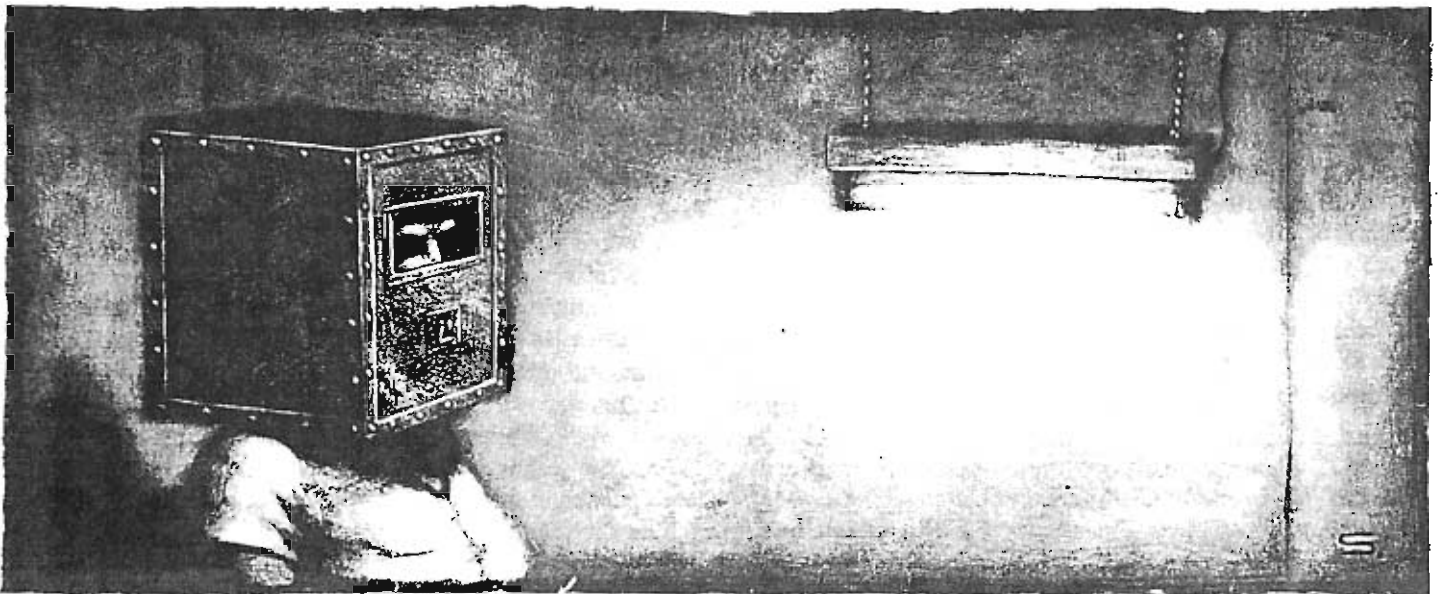
The reasons were spelled out more explicitly in the August 19, 1986, Rationale for Redesignation, which authorized Rosenberg's transfer to Lexington:

Rosenberg has been associated with FALN, Black Liberation Army, and other terrorist groups. She also was thought to have been involved in an [sic] 1981 Brinks Armed Car Robbery and has previously been linked to the Joanne Chesimard escape in 1979.

Appended, almost as an afterthought, is a statement that the United States Attorney's office had confirmed that the charges in connection with the Brink's case "had been dropped." Not mentioned is the fact that at Rosenberg's one and only trial the government produced no evidence tying her to the F.A.L.N., the Black Liberation Army or any other terrorist group.

Clearly, Rosenberg and Torres were sent to Lexington not because of any particular act or behavior but because unnamed persons might attempt, at some unspecified time in the future, to help them escape. The idea that an individual can be punished by being subjected to special confinement for the hypothetical actions of unidentified others rather than her own conduct is a radical departure from the norms and established practices of the U.S. legal system.

Rosenberg contends that conditions at the H.S.U. are "designed to destroy those who are in it, psychologically and physically," and "to disintegrate people's personalities." The constant surveillance, the basement cells, the absence of fresh air and human companionship, the ever-



blazing lights—all those things have a single purpose: “They are trying to drive us completely out of our minds.”

When Rosenberg sought an explanation of why she had been transferred from the Federal prison in Arizona where she had been serving her time, officials at Lexington told her that the decision was, in her words, “based on an internal criterion that is secret.” As she recalled it, “They said, It’s not disciplinary, it’s not punitive, it’s got nothing to do with that,” and they also said, “The only way you can get out is if you change your associations and affiliations.” We asked her how she could prove to the authorities’ satisfaction that she had purged herself of such ties. She said, “I think one would have to go to them voluntarily and say, I don’t want to live under these conditions any longer, and, therefore, I’m sorry. I will never communicate with these other people, and, moreover, I will never desire to communicate with these other people.”

When we asked Lexington prison officials about the conditions described by Rosenberg and her attorney, they refused to comment. Our request to visit the facility was denied. According to Dave Dove, the facility’s public information officer, our presence would pose a threat to security. The Bureau of Prisons’ only comment was that “conditions of confinement within the High Security Unit at Lexington are closely reviewed and consistent with its mission.”

Little is publicly known about that mission. The planning and construction of the Lexington H.S.U. was done secretly. And today, despite inquiries by Representative Kastenmeier and other members of Congress, secrecy continues to shroud its operations.

Are the conditions described by Rosenberg a form of cruel and unusual punishment? Is she correct in charging that she and Torres are part of an experiment in behavior modification? Alexa Freeman, a staff counsel with the American Civil Liberties Union’s National Prison Project, which has reviewed the correspondence between the attorneys for Rosenberg and Torres and Representative Kastenmeier and the Bureau of Prisons, told us: “It would appear that there are serious questions as to whether these women’s First Amendment rights are being violated because of the blanket restrictions controlling visitation and communication and access to reading materials; whether their Fourth Amendment rights are being violated because of the frequent strip searches and the constant surveillance, which would seem to be an intolerable invasion of their privacy; and whether these inmates’ very assignment to Lexington in and of itself constitutes cruel and unusual punishment.” But Rosenberg’s charges of psychological coercion should not be dismissed out of hand.

The idea of brainwashing is not foreign to American prison policy. In 1962, at a seminar for wardens and criminal psychologists chaired by James Bennett, then director of the Bureau of Prisons, Professor Edgar Schein of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology presented a paper titled “Man Against Man: Brainwashing.” Schein had conducted five years of research, funded by the Central Intelligence Agency, on the brainwashing techniques used by the North Koreans and the Chinese on American prisoners

of war during the Korean conflict. The most important of those techniques, Schein said, was placing the subjects in conditions of extreme isolation: “It is necessary to weaken, undermine or remove the supports to the old patterns of behavior and the old attitudes . . . if change is to take place.” Elaborating on this idea, Schein wrote:

Because most of these supports are the face-to-face confirmation of present behavior and attitudes which are provided by those with whom close emotional ties exist, it is often necessary to break those emotional ties. This can be done . . . by removing the individual physically and preventing any communication with those whom he cares about. . . . If, at the same time, the total environment inflexibly provides rewards and punishments only in terms of the new behavior and attitudes to be obtained, and provides new human contacts around which to build up relationships, it is highly likely that the desired new behavior and attitudes will be learned. They will be learned as a basic solution to the problem of how to survive in the inflexible environment. . . . I would like to have you think of brainwashing not in terms of politics, ethics and morals, but in terms of the deliberate changing of behavior and attitudes by a group of men who have relatively complete control over the environment in which the captive population lives.

Schein’s paper was enthusiastically endorsed by Bennett, who told the assembled wardens, “We here in Washington are anxious to have you undertake some of these things . . . on your own.” It was subsequently published in the scholarly periodical *Corrective Psychiatry and Journal of Social Therapy*.

In a recent letter to us, Schein wrote that he had had no contact “of any sort” with the Bureau of Prisons after presenting his paper, or with anyone “in authority relating to the treatment of prisoners.” He said that his point in the paper was that behavior-modification techniques “have always been used by people who have power over other people. . . . What the Chinese did was to refine these techniques, and what I did was to describe as clearly as I could what these refinements are.”

In her book *Kind and Usual Punishment*, Jessica Mitford argues that in 1968 the prison psychiatrist at Marion Federal Penitentiary, Dr. Martin Groder, “applie[d] the proposals outlined in Dr. Schein’s paper to ‘agitators,’ suspected militants . . . and other troublemakers.” According to Mitford, Groder continued his work at the Behavioral Research Center, a Federal institution near Butner, North Carolina.

Thus far, despite the questions asked by Kastenmeier, Representative Ted Weiss and other legislators, and more recently by Amnesty International, which has launched its own inquiry into the conditions at Lexington H.S.U., the Bureau of Prisons’ grim wall of silence remains in place. Recently, two more inmates, Debra Brown and Silvia Baraldini, were assigned to the facility. Brown appears to have no connection with any political group, but Baraldini was imprisoned for conspiracy and racketeering in the Brink’s case. Before more join them, Congress and the press should demand to know what is going on at the Lexington H.S.U. and what its “mission” really is. □