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## FROM ALCATRAZ TO MARION

In June, 1962, the United States Bureau of Prisons closed the most repressive prison America had ever known. Located on an island near San Francisco, surrounded by the Pacific Ocean, Alcatraz was truly "The Rock."

But even before the doors to Alcatraz were closed, the Bureau was making plans to build a still more repressive maximum security prison. Opened in 1963, three hundred miles south of Chicago in rural Illinois, the U.S. Penitentiary located at Marion became the new Alcatraz.

The Bureau put fifteen years of planning into the creation of Marion. Just before Alcatraz was closed down, James V. Bennett, then director of the Bureau, called together the wardens from the federal prison system to discuss new methods of dealing with prisoners. A series of seminars was conducted to establish more "progressive" trends of penology; for prisoner discontent was pervading the prison system, and resistance toward prison officials and prison "programs" was becoming widespread. Black, Third World and poor white prisoners were starting to understand that they were the victims of an economic crisis taking place in this country and that their imprisonments were, in many cases, an inevitable outgrowth of their class backgrounds. Interrelating their class backgrounds and their imprisonments, progressive prisoners acquired a consciousness to resist the arbitrary and unchecked power of their keepers.

At one of these Washington, D.C. seminars, psychologists supplied prison officials with an alternative to physically brutalizing "problem" members of their captive communities. They outlined brainwashing methods allegedly employed by North Koreans and Chinese Communists during the Korean War, and encouraged the use of such techniques on prisoners in the federal prison system.

Between 1962 and 1971, many attempts were made to set up these brainwashing methods in federal prisons. Because the Bureau had the

authority to transfer prisoners arbitrarily to any federal prison in the country, they didn't care where their programs were set up. Even one program, if it were uncontested by prisoners, lawyers, and the public, would be sufficient for their needs.

## LONG-TERM CONTROL UNIT

One of the Bureau's more successful programs was implemented inside Marion. There, hidden from public view since its inception, a long-term Control Unit was established under the guise of a "behavior modification" program. Originally set up in July, 1972, to punish 102 prisoners who had participated in a peaceful work stoppage, the Control Unit has become a permanent part of the prison, holding almost exclusively those prisoners who have resisted the Bureau's practice of denying basic first amendment rights to freedom of expression and religion — rights still supposedly retained by imprisoned persons. The Control Unit also holds state prisoners who have been contracted to the federal prison system; and some U.S. colonies have been known to send their prisoners to Marion.

What is so significant about the Control Unit at Marion? Why is it different from the various solitary confinement units we've heard so much about? First, it is a "dump" for the entire U.S. prison system, not just one prison. Second, the Control Unit is used for purposes other than simply punishing prisoners who start fights, try to escape or get caught breaking everyday prison rules (these prisoners are housed in I Unit, a segregation unit separate from the Control Unit [also known as H Unit]). In this unit you will find prison activists — men who write newspapers, legislators and community organizations about the conditions they are forced to live with. Many Black Muslims are in the Control Unit, especially the ones who have fought to gain access to their ministers or who have fought to practice their religion openly inside the prison. You will find socialists in the unit, as well as men who have sued the prison system because of inhumane living conditions, systematic harassment or sadistic beatings. A bad report from a guard, or just a "bad attitude" can be sufficient grounds for sending a man to the Control Unit. Eighty per cent of the men in the Control Unit are Black, Chicano, Puerto Rican, or Asian. The Control Unit was built to stop all religious, political, and social activity that didn't coincide with the Bureau's position that all prisoners must take a subservient role.

Once in Marion's Control Unit, a prisoner has no idea when he will be released. A stay for two years is not unusual, and some prisoners have been held there for as long as three or four years. The prisoners in H Unit are generally the most committed political and religious activists, men willing to lead fasts and work stoppages to protest prison conditions; or jailhouse lawyers who file suits on behalf of other prisoners.

H Unit holds 72 prisoners. Because only eleven men are allowed to work at any given time, even work becomes a privilege. Education is a privilege, too. General population prisoners can attend classes in the education department, while Control Unit prisoners can only take correspondence courses. Recreation and religious opportunities are often denied. Recreation lasts for one-half hour when it is allowed at all, and only two men can be out at one time. Talking from cell to cell is discouraged, and prisoners can be subjected to disciplinary action because of it.

The visiting procedure forced upon prisoners and their loved ones is yet another demeaning aspect of being confined in the Control Unit. Even when a prisoner's family can afford to travel to out-of-the-way Marion, they are separated from the prisoner by a plexiglass shield and must talk to one another by means of a telephone. This, coupled with mail (which is frequently stopped, sometimes discarded, sometimes refused — as are books, magazines and newspapers) are the only means of communication that the prisoner has with the outside world.

What is it like to live in the Control Unit? All prisoners are locked in 11 x 9 foot cells. They are kept in these cells for 23½ hours a day. Earl Gaither, a prisoner in the Control Unit, described it in a letter:

**"Living in the Control Unit is impossible for a free man to understand. The only way you can understand it is to go into your bathroom, lock the door, lie down in the bathtub and stay there for three years."**

## MORE REPRESSION

The most oppressive living conditions in the Control Unit are cells known as "boxcars." These cells have two doors, one of steel, one of plexiglass. The doors prevent any sound from entering, which means the only sounds a prisoner hears are those he makes himself; if the prisoner screams from inside the cell, he cannot be heard. These doors also prevent fresh air from entering the cells, and when hot air is blown in in the winter, the boxcars become virtual ovens. Contrary to usual practice, if more than one prisoner has a visit at the same time, prisoners are brought to the visiting area in handcuffs. When a prisoner is placed in a boxcar cell, all his personal property is taken from him. This gives the guards an opportunity to rummage through the prisoner's belongings, destroying possessions and documents at their own whim. While the Control Unit cells are allegedly used to "treat" prisoners, the boxcars are used solely for punishment.

In any segregation unit, prisoners are wholly dependent on guards for meals, showers, clothes, mail, etc. In such a milieu, sensitive guards cannot stop racist, often sadistic guards from harassing, beating, and, in



some cases, tear gassing prisoners. Guards in the Control Unit watch prisoners 24 hours a day.

One variation in this incessant torment is drugs. Many prisoners in the Control Unit are given drugs for pacification — dangerous drugs like prolixin and thozazine.\* Prison doctors prescribe these drugs regularly; and it is not unheard of for prisoners to be the subjects of drug assaults if they refuse to take the drugs voluntarily.

It is much easier to get into the Control Unit than it is to get out. There are prison review committees which work arbitrarily since there are no set guidelines put forth by the Bureau of Prisons. The prison consistently

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*\*Both these drugs are phenothiazine derivatives, intended for use in the treatment of hospitalized psychotics and schizophrenics. Generally considered unpredictable, these drugs have an unusually wide range of contraindications, side effects, and adverse reactions; and may cause, among other things, irreversible damage to the nervous system.*

makes up its own rules to hold prisoners in the Control Unit until they are deemed "ready" to be released to I Unit or to the general population. Some prisoners — again, the ones most active politically or religiously — are written up for disciplinary infractions in a way that will allow the prison officials to hold them indefinitely. A federal judge can intervene on behalf of a prisoner and order his release if the prison officials cannot justify keeping him in the Control Unit. However, this can only happen if the prisoner has enough money to retain a lawyer. Counselors, psychologists, and caseworkers — people who allegedly are in the prison to help prisoners — rarely talk to a man before he is punished. After he is in segregation, they come only to convince the prisoner he was wrong in his actions; and that the best way out of segregation is to submit to prison officials. It is indeed rare to find a prison staff member who will side with a prisoner, no matter how fabricated the disciplinary charges may seem. And it is unheard of for a prison staff member to admit to a prisoner that he has been locked up because of the racist attitudes that pervade the prison staff; or because he was doing constructive things for other prisoners, or demonstrating that things can be accomplished in spite of prison officials, with sufficient determination.

The purpose of all this is control — complete control of the prisoners' lives, their every thought, every need, every word and action. The essence of the Control Unit is explained in a passage by Dr. James McConnell, a University of Michigan psychologist:

**"I believe the day has come when we can combine the use of sensory deprivation with drugs, hypnosis, and manipulation of reward and punishment to gain almost absolute control over an individual's behavior."**

All that is missing at Marion is the hypnosis.

## SOME OF THE BROTHERS

Here are some short accounts of men who are now, or have been held in the Control Unit:

**Victor Bono** is a Chicano from Los Angeles. He is a Marxist, and accomplished poet and writer. Victor was sent to the Control Unit in August, 1972. For the next three years he received no disciplinary reports, yet he was not released from the unit.

**Warren X. Ballantine** is a Black man from the Virgin Islands. He is a member of the Islamic religion. Warren was sent straight to the Control Unit from his sentencing court, with a brief stopover in the segregation unit in Atlanta. He was never given a hearing in regard to his transfer to the Control Unit, and he remains there to this day.

**Joseph Brown** is a White man who was first sent to the segregation unit at the federal prison in Leavenworth, Kansas in February, 1973. His charge at that time was leading a demonstration against prison conditions. A week after being put in segregation, Joseph was transferred to the Control Unit, without a hearing. He is an essayist, writ writer, and prison activist.

## A HISTORY OF EVENTS IN THE MARION CONTROL UNIT

*July, 1972 . . . . . The unit was opened after 102 prisoners protested the beating of Jesse Lopez, a Chicano prisoner, by a guard.*

*Fall, 1972 . . . . . The Control Unit was officially established by the Bureau of Prisons. The unit was then called CARE (Control and Rehabilitation Effort.)*

*October, 1973 . . . . . Jackson Fee, a 55 year old white prisoner who was ultimately found hanged in H Unit, became mentally disturbed after long confinement in the Control Unit.*

*After he threw a tray of food at a guard, he was beaten by ten guards with pick handles, chained, and thrown in a boxcar. At the time of his beating, Fee had filed many complaints against Marion officials in federal court.*

*October- . . . . Three other prisoners in the Control Unit suffered  
December, 1974 . . . . mental breakdowns. Other prisoners went on a  
hunger strike, slashed their wrists and achilles  
tendons to force prison doctors to treat the sick men.*

*July 29, 1974 . . . . . Bill Ruiz, a 25 year old Chicano prisoner, broke his  
hands beating them against the walls of his cell. He  
had been in the Control Unit since the day he testified  
against the behavior modification program at the  
federal prison hospital at Springfield, Missouri in  
1971.*

*May, 1975 . . . . . Paul DuHart, a 30 year old Black prisoner, was found  
hanged in his cell in the segregation unit. DuHart,  
who had been classified mentally ill by prison doctors,  
had recently been sent to the Control Unit from the  
prison hospital.*

*May 30, 1975 . . . . . Kenneth Wylie, a 25 year old Black prisoner, suffered  
five epileptic fits in his Control Unit cell. He received  
no medical care.*

*November 9, 1975 . . . Willie "Gypsy" Adams was found hanged in his cell.*

## THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

Until now, only prisoners themselves, a few lawyers, and other concerned people have done anything to end the cruel practices at Marion's Control Unit. Prisoners have protested with work stoppages and hunger strikes. They have sued the Bureau of Prisons, both as individuals and in class action suits. One suit, Adams vs. Carlson (Norman Carlson is the director of the Bureau of Prisons), forced Marion officials to release 36 prisoners from segregation. The judge in this case said that the 36 men, who had participated in a 1972 hunger strike, were sent to the Control Unit for punishment, not treatment; and that such punishment for eleven months was disproportionate to the work stoppage action.

A recent suit, filed by prisoners, the ACLU's National Prison Project in Washington, D.C., and the People's Law Office in Chicago, asks that the Control Unit be closed completely because it denies prisoners' rights under the U.S. Constitution; freedom of religion and speech, freedom from cruel and unusual punishment, and the right to hearings to determine when a man can be sent to the Control Unit and when he can be released. This case, **Bono vs. Saxbe**, was tried in July, 1975, in the federal court in Benton, Illinois. Over 100 Illinoisans and Missourians attended

the trial on short notice. At the trial, Marion's former warden, Ralph Aaron, admitted that the purpose of the Control Unit was "to control revolutionary attitudes that are prevalent in the prison **and the society at large.**" (Emphasis added.) James Henderson, the Regional Director of the Bureau of Prisons, testified that the Control Unit was "the foundation for order for the entire U.S. prison system."

No decision is expected in this suit until the beginning of 1976. Plaintiffs' lawyers are urging the judge to form an expert panel to visit the Control Unit and make recommendations to the judge for his decision. The Bureau of Prisons is opposing this panel. They don't want anyone investigating the Control Unit or talking to its prisoners. Although they are hired by taxpayers' dollars, they are afraid to let the taxpayers see precisely what things their money is buying. What are they afraid of? Dr. Bernard Rubin, a Chicago psychiatrist who has visited the Control Unit and subsequently made a report of his visit, testified that:

**"The setting demeans, dehumanizes and shapes behavior so that violent behavior is the result . . . Coercive programs that attempt to change attitudes or behavior always fail unless you kill the prisoner, disable him, or imprison him for life."**

The problems in Marion's Control Unit are unique in some regards and not others: the use of sensory deprivation cells, for example, adds another dimension to repressive measures used by prison officials, though punitive austerity has always been a tactic used in our prison system.

Most significant is understanding Marion's role in the overall U.S. criminal justice apparatus. Faced with the fact that increasing numbers of prisoners were seeking their constitutional rights from a system that had traditionally oppressed with impunity, the government felt compelled to devise a prison that could deal with two "problem" elements: the classic disruptive prisoner, whose basic pathology had been exacerbated by the system; and the revolutionary — politically more sophisticated, aware of his rights, and unable to be broken by the usual means.

For centuries, penal systems have imprisoned people's bodies behind bars. With the opening of the federal prison at Marion, we see the birth of a tax funded program to arbitrarily imprison and alter — with drugs, isolation, and surveillance — their very minds.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

**1. Write letters urging that the Control Unit be closed completely. Also, urge that an expert panel should guide the judge's decision. Again, the name of the case is Bono vs. Saxbe, and letters should be written to the presiding judge: Judge James Foreman, U.S. District Court, 750 Missouri Avenue, East St. Louis, 62202. Send copies of this letter to: Norman Carlson, Director, U.S. Bureau of Prisons, 101 Indiana Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C., 20515; Congressperson Robert Kastenmeier, U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515 (he is the chairperson of a House subcommittee dealing with prisons); and to our office, so we can know how you feel.**

**2. Help us reach more people. Write for more copies of this pamphlet, and send us the names of persons or organizations we can send it to.**

**3. Set up speaking engagements for the lawyers in the case and for the members of the Committee to Support the Marion Brothers.**

**4. We are just starting this campaign for the rights of prisoners in the Control Unit. It will be a long, hard campaign. You can help most right now by making a contribution to help cover the tremendous costs of organizing the campaign. The money will be used for office expenses, telephone, staff, travel, visits to Marion, and much more. Please make checks or money orders payable to the Committee to Support the Marion Brothers.**

**Send all inquiries and contributions to: Marion Brothers, c/o People's Law Office, 110 S. Dearborn, Suite 707, Chicago, Illinois, 60603. Or telephone (312) 236-3504.**

