

MARION PRISON: INSIDE THE LOCKDOWN!



Introduction

The following is a transcript of a radio report on conditions at Marion Federal Prison in Southern Illinois. The report was broadcast on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" on Oct. 28 and Nov. 1, 1986. Oct. 28, 1986 marked the third anniversary of the imposition of a state of lockdown at Marion. Lockdown means that nearly all of the roughly 350 prisoners at Marion are kept locked in their cells for 23 hours each day. They are fed their meals in their cells, and when a prisoner does leave his cell for a visit or a court appearance, he is handcuffed and shackled and escorted by three prison guards. The men are allowed no contact visits and most have no access to work or exercise. Early on in the lockdown the prisoners at Marion were systematically subjected to severe beatings, and though the frequency of physical brutality has lessened, the threat is always there. Because of these charges of physical abuse, Marion is being monitored by Amnesty International. Lockdown is a state sometimes imposed in a prison for a short time following a riot. At Marion, prison authorities have decided to make it the permanent mode of operation. The following report consists mainly of interviews with prisoners and prison officials at Marion. It describes the treatment of the prisoners at Marion under the lockdown, reports on the justifications for this treatment given by prison officials, and gives the thoughts of some of the prisoners on what they see as the lockdown's brutal logic.

Marion is the highest security federal prison in the country. According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the prisoners at Marion are the "worst of the worst." These are men, they say, who by the violent nature of their crimes, by their records of violence towards guards or other prisoners while in prison, or by the likelihood of their attempting escape, pose a threat to the safe operation of any prison in which they are held. The Bureau of Prisons maintains that the high level of security at Marion is necessary to hold these men safely. Furthermore, they argue that by concentrating these prisoners in one institution, they are able to operate the rest of the prison system on a more open basis.

The Bureau of Prisons' public statements about Marion, though, are misleading. This begins with its portrayal of the prisoners held there. The Bureau of Prisons assigns a security level from 1 to 6, level 6 being the most severe, to every prisoner in the system, based on the factors mentioned above. The prisons in the system are rated on the same scale, and prisoners are in principle assigned to them on this basis. Marion is the only level 6 prison in the system for men. By the Bureau of Prisons' own admission in Congressional hearings, 80% of the prisoners at Marion are not rated at level 6. In other words, they are there for reasons other than the level of security which Marion provides. Not all prisoners at Marion have committed a violent crime, and not all prisoners are told why they have been sent there. Prisoners from state prison systems as well as federal prisoners can be placed in Marion. Reasons for a prisoner's placement or transfer there can include the filing of lawsuits against the prison system or complaining too much about prison conditions, attempting to organize prisoners in such things as work strikes, or otherwise resisting the authority of the prison system. Prison officials describe such men as having shown "a resistance to fitting in" to prison life, and for them the repressive conditions at Marion are a program designed to correct this sort of behavior, to force them to "fit in." Prisoners have also been placed in Marion because of the political nature of their crimes. Prisoners from the Black liberation, Puerto Rican independence, American Indian, and North American Anti-Imperialist movements have been and still are held at Marion. At the new control unit for women prisoners recently built in Lexington, Ky., three out of the four women currently held there are in prison for political crimes. These people are held under these brutal conditions for their refusal to "fit in" in our society. For all these prisoners the mission of Marion and Lexington is the same. It is to break their spirit through isolation, physical domination, and humiliation.

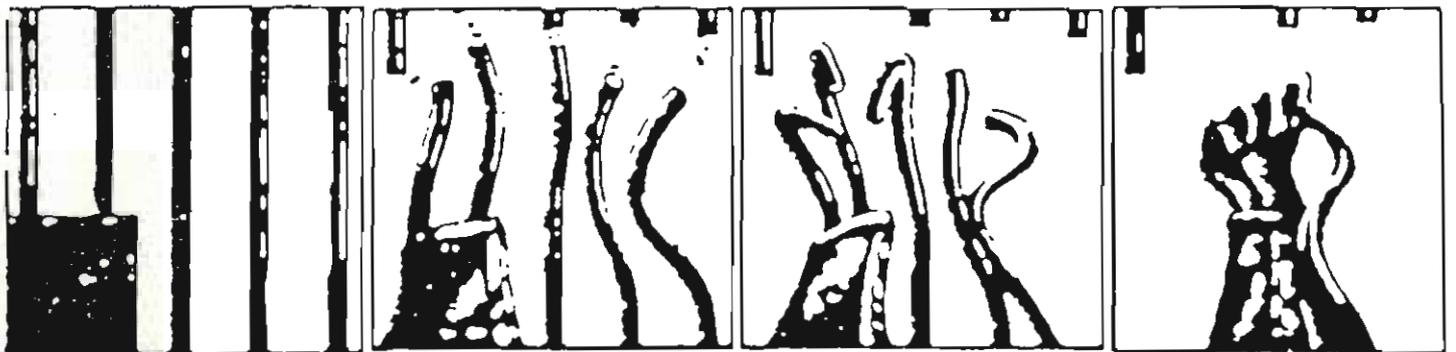
Marion does not exist in a vacuum. The lockdown at Marion can only be understood in terms of the role of prisons in our society, and of Marion's place within our prison system. The most striking fact about prisons in this country is the disproportionate number of Black people and other people of color that they hold. Although Black people make up only 12% of our population, they make up over 46% of our prison population. Hispanic people make up 10%. The imprisonment rate for Blacks in the U.S. is 6 times higher than for Whites, and nearly one out of every four Black men will go to prison in his lifetime. These figures about Blacks in prisons are a natural counterpart to figures for Black people on the outside; the high poverty rate for Black families, the high unemployment rate for Black men and women, and the high infant mortality rate in Black communities. The roots of the problem of crime in this country lie in these basic social and economic injustices, and the problem of crime can only be solved by solving the problems of poverty, unemployment, poor education, and poor health care.

Unfortunately, the popular approach towards solving the crime problem is the get tough approach. Currently, the number of prisoners in state and federal prisons is increasing at the staggering rate of 50,000 per year, 10% of the total prison population. This increase is not due to any similar increase in the crime rate, rather it is the result of pressure on the courts by the government for higher conviction rates and longer sentences. At the same time, the emphasis within the prison system is on increased security rather than work and educational programs. The lockdown at Marion is a further step in this process. At Marion the mission is not reform, or even warehousing, but control. Furthermore, there is evidence that the Bureau of

Prisons intends the repressive measures at Marion to serve as a model. Wardens and other officials from the state and federal prison systems are given tours of Marion. It seems likely, contrary to the Bureau of Prisons' argument that running Marion in this way will free up the rest of the system, that the level of brutality with which the prisoners at Marion are treated will serve as a standard for the treatment of prisoners in the rest of the system.

The lockdown at Marion must be ended. Conditions at Marion are inhumane and counterproductive, and it serves as a very bad model for the rest of our prison system. Unfortunately all means of formally challenging the lockdown in the courts and in Congress have been tried and have failed. A subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee has twice held hearings on the lockdown and has concluded that the lockdown should be ended, but refuses to demand this action from the Bureau of Prisons. Many lawsuits have been filed by prisoners charging the prison guards with physical brutality and contesting the constitutionality of the lockdown. But the courts have ruled in these cases that the inmates are not credible witnesses, thus denying the evidence of brutality, and have upheld the constitutionality of the lockdown. The only avenue left to end the lockdown is public awareness and public outrage at the denial of prisoner's human and legal rights at Marion.

People in the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown have been working for over two years to educate people about the conditions at Marion and to create such an awareness. We are printing the transcript of this report because it provides a unique view inside the walls of Marion. If you have questions about the lockdown or about the work of the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown, please contact us.



For more information, call 663-5046, or write the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown, 343 S. Dearborn, Ste. 1607, Chicago, IL 60604

Part I: N.P.R. program on Marion Prison, broadcast 1 November 1986.

Noah Adams (in studio): It's "All Things Considered". This is Noah Adams.

Lynn Neary (in studio): And I'm Lynn Neary. The federal penitentiary in Marion, Illinois is the most restrictive federal facility, a level six prison, a rating created just for Marion. Since it was built in 1962 Marion has evolved into the new Alcatraz, classified by prison authorities as the end of the line for the nation's worst convicts.

NA (in studio): This is the only American prison being monitored by Amnesty International. Human rights abuses have been alleged against guards at Marion. Three years ago, after two guards were killed, Marion was locked down: that means that all 350 inmates are kept in their cells virtually around the clock. It's a story we must bring to you with a warning: to tell about Marion Penitentiary, and the charges of abuses, we must present some graphic and violent statements. Tonight N.P.R.'s Jacki Lyden reports on what's happened at Marion since the lockdown began three years ago today.

Voice: Hold that door there a second, please.

Jacki Lyden (on site): The executive assistant to the warden begins a tour of Marion Prison with a passage through five steel grids that separate the outside world from the interior cell blocks. The hallways are empty, save for another official, who offers the greeting "How are you?" The executive assistant responds "Proud to be here." It's the sort of greeting men on a difficult mission might

mean killing another inmate or guard. It could also mean he's disruptive, someone who organizes work strikes, leads religious services or files too many legal writs. Not every man at Marion is told why he's here, and not every man here has committed a violent crime. A prisoner has no chance to appeal a transfer before being sent to Marion, and sometimes arrives in the middle of the night without warning. The current warden at Marion is a recent arrival himself. Gary Henman, warden since June, says he was handpicked by the director of the Bureau of Prisons. He calls it a plum assignment.

Gary Henman: I'm not going to quote the Attorney General, I guess...well, I'll tell you what he said in our last wardens' conference. The only institution he mentioned by name, when he gave a little talk to all the wardens, was Marion. He described Marion inmates just like cancer cells: if you don't contain 'em in one place, they're going to spread. And that's the purpose of Marion. You end up with...you have the worst of the worst.

JL (on site): Inmates at Marion are often described in inhuman terms, and their treatment is officially justified on the basis that they behave like animals. Guards have the power to chain a man, spread-eagled and naked to a concrete bunk. Guards three to an inmate brandish steel-tipped riot batons whenever they move a single prisoner through the prison. The prisoner wears leg irons and is cuffed behind his back. The security, force and intimidation are a demonstration of raw power,

...restrictions like 23 hours a day cell time for years on end, shackles on a prisoner every time he's moved, or concrete bunks with steel rings, used to chain a man spread-eagled...

exchange, controlling 321 prisoners, each one of whom is classified as one of the most dangerous, predatory and escape-prone in the federal system. Standing at the entrance to a cell block, one has the embarrassed sense of being at the zoo. Nothing is visible except for cages and keepers, bars, wire-mesh and concrete, until a hand flutters out between the bars of a cell and disembodied voices begin to call out. This is a warden's prison. The federal courts have given both federal and state prison authorities the power to initiate a transfer to Marion for any reason. Ostensibly, a man is sent to Marion for failure to adjust in another prison. That could

and it is power which is used to control the population at Marion. Indeed when a prisoner steps out of line he expects to get beaten. Guards call it "counseling." But that's tit for tat, a fair exchange that holds guards and prisoners in check in an open prison, but when prisoners are locked down, as at Marion, guards wield so much force that the only real check on how they use it is their own sense of professionalism, and without that restraint things can go very wrong behind a prison's wall. It was against just such a background that Marion's current state of tension began brewing. Three years ago two inmates killed two guards. There are at least

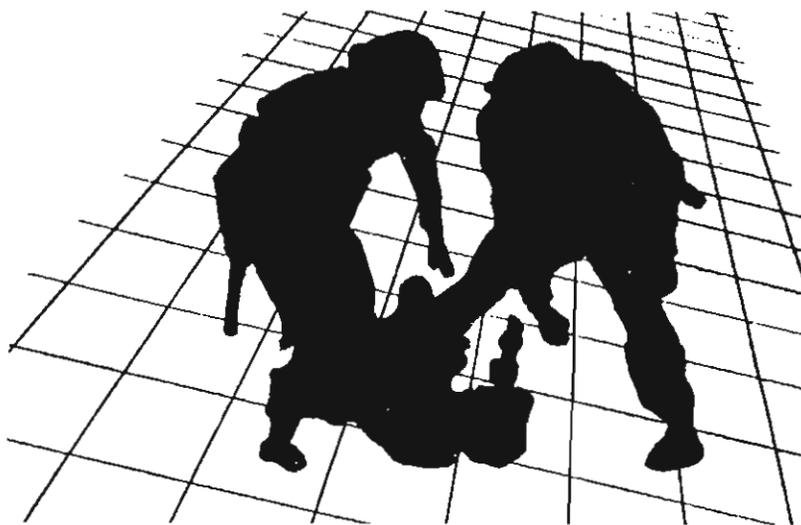
two versions of what happened. The Bureau of Prisons says the guards were killed because the inmates are vicious and brutal. The inmates say the guards were sadistic and had it coming. The Bureau of Prisons responded to the killings by calling in officers from other federal prisons, S.O.R.T., or Special Operations Response Teams. On October 28th Marion was put on deadlock. Inmates say the S.O.R.T. teams went through the cell blocks and systematically beat, tortured and humiliated prisoners to teach them a lesson about who controls the prison. About fifty prisoners later testified to this in federal court, but the magistrate dismissed them all as not credible witnesses. He believed only one prisoner who said there were no beatings. The other prisoners are still trying to get into court. One of them is John Campbell, who's serving time for bank robbery and escapes.

John Campbell: Now I belong here, and I'll tell you, I've told everybody, that I belong to Marion as to what Marion is supposed to have been prior to the way it is now. And I'm not disputing that, but I...no one belongs in an environment where he's buried alive, where he's in a...like a tomb for the dead, your dead is for dead people. And the police have total control over you, and they know they have total control, and they abuse that control frequently, either on a psychological level or physical level. And this is continuing today, right up to 1986. It's more discreet now. They won't beat you as quick as they would in '82 and '83 and '84. But if you want to try them, and when I say try them, disagree with their policy, and be vocal about it and be stubborn about it, well they'll damn sure take you down the hall and they'll beat you in the head with one of them clubs, and knock your kidneys out. I've even had guards pinch me like, you know little girls who pinch little boys in school, I've had 'em do that. I'm talking about when I'm leg-ironed and I'm handcuffed and I'm naked and I'm being held down by twelve or fifteen guards. What kind of mentality is doing these things? But this is the kind of mentality that they're bringing into this system, and they know that they can get by with this.

JL (on site): John Campbell has a copy of a suit he tried to file on his own behalf. It details how Campbell was sexually humiliated by guards with riot batons, by whom, and how many times. Campbell, and other prisoners at Marion, aren't fighting their original sentences or imprisonment. They're fighting their treatment at Marion, a prison they see designed not only to incapacitate men, but to silence their protests. They see Marion as a special punishment for a certain kind of inmate, not as they say the sickos or weirdos, the sex offenders or serial killers, but for those who hold on to their hostility and aggression, or who've challenged prison

authority. They are sent to Marion to learn to behave. Warden Henman says that usually means serving at least twenty-seven months time at Marion, but the average term is closer to five years and can be indefinitely lengthened. Warden Henman says prisoners must change their behavior.

GH: Their aggressive behavior, their assaultive behavior, their negative behavior, and making sure that they are not a danger...



JL: Uh-huh.

GH: ...or have proven that they can change to the point where they can exist in a more open population.

JL: Okay, how do they prove that?

GH: Through all kinds of ways. They prove it through their own individual motivation, their own individual effort to increase their skills and their abilities to talk about their feelings, their involvement with self-improvement. And also their conduct, the time going by without doing the things that they were sent here for.

JL: You mean without...without an Incident Report, you mean?

GH: Sure. How do you know about Incident Reports?

JL (on site): Because Incident Reports are one of the first things mentioned when prisoners and their attorneys talk about lack of due process at Marion. An Incident Report equips every guard at Marion with something stronger than a riot baton, the power to wipe out all good conduct time a prisoner has earned. On Incident Reports it is Bureau practice to take the word of a guard over that of an inmate. Prisoners' attorney, Nancy Horgan, says that at Marion an Incident Report, also called a "shot," is difficult to avoid.

Nancy Horgan: The shots, or the rule violations, are not clear-cut because disobeying a direct

order, which is one of the most common shots given at Marion, can mean violating any unwritten policy of the prison, and that policy is enforced at the whim of the guard. There are unwritten rules to the effect that prisoners can't hang laundry on the bars of the cells. There are unwritten rules that prisoners have to have their cell furniture arranged in a certain way. Some guards enforce them, some don't, and since they're unwritten, nobody knows exactly what they are. So lots of people get shots not for things like, you know, "Hung his underwear on the bars of the cell" but "Disobeyed the direct order of the guard," which sounds much more serious. And a single one of those violations sets a prisoner back so that he has to start over again his time.

JL (on site): It is possible to avoid Incident Reports and still sit in Marion for a long time. There's a work program for a handful of inmates who are in an honor unit, but getting there is at the warden's discretion. Many prisoners don't believe they can work their way out of Marion, and that it is meant to be the end of the line for them. It's a feeling reinforced at Marion, where the mission is security, and not rehabilitation. Prisoners can take only one correspondence course at a time. Their personal mail can be read, and few relatives travel to Marion to peer through sheets of plexiglass. No contact visits are allowed. Inmates eat alone in a cell, where they can take one step in one direction and two steps in another. The isolation is physical and psychological. If a man doesn't lie down and shut up, says inmate Ronnie Bruscino, he may find himself getting a digital rectal search, which everyone at Marion calls a "finger wave." There are other ways to detect contraband, so inmates consider finger waves the equivalent of a rape. It's perhaps the most controversial practice at Marion, and one of the points Bruscino has included in a class action challenging lockdown conditions.

Ronnie Bruscino: You know, all you have to do is read a little psychology. It's just, you know, break 'em down, break their family ties or any ties they have with any friends or anybody out there. You know, dominate 'em, talk back to 'em and break their spirit.

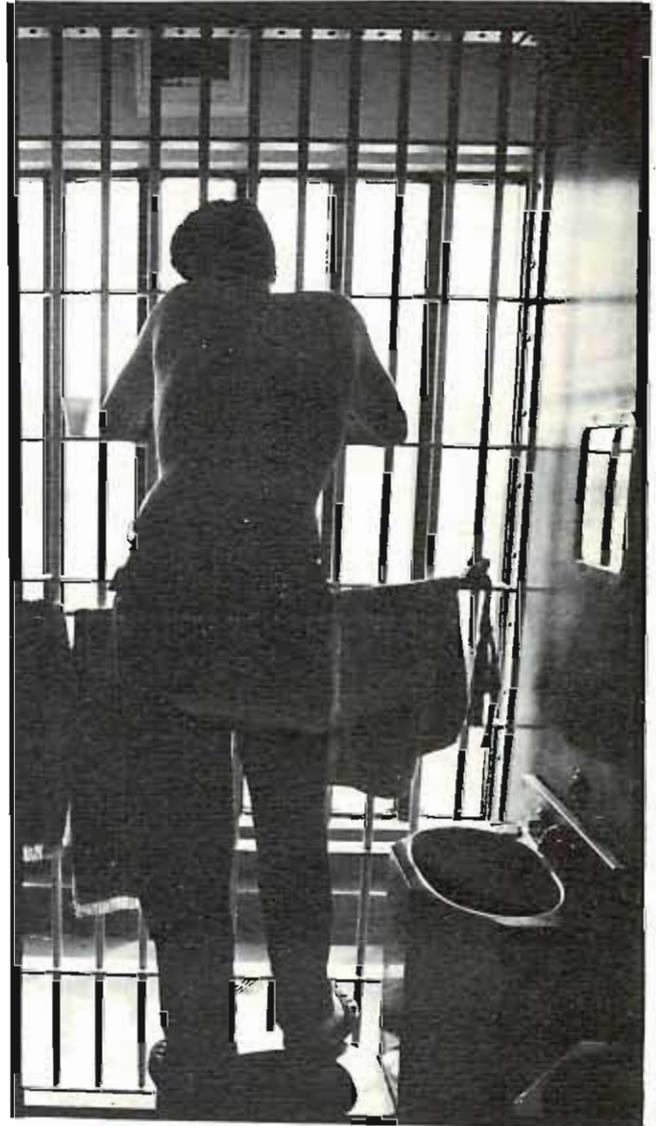
JL: But how do we know that they're not really needing to look for contraband, I mean we've seen tapes of people who've taken hacksaw blades out of their noses, and how do we know that that isn't necessary in this prison?

RB: That goes on in any prison. That goes on in an F.C.I., in a-level two institution, you know, I mean we showed the court that x-rays are more effective than a finger wave. The point wasn't let's x-ray him, because I asked for an x-ray every time he gave me a finger wave and they told me no. "We were told to give you a finger wave."

JL: Uh-huh.

RB: So it's all about, let's hold this guy down, tell him he's a homosexual, tell him he's a girl, tell him we're running this institution. You know, and uh, they won't rape me like that. They can tell me that all they want, but..

JL: But what would be the point, though, it sounds like an awful lot of trouble for a prison to go through.



RB: Why, they've broken a lot of guys here. I've seen the guys that just...they can do anything they want to him now and they just...they're like when you beat a dog and he urinates all over himself, and every time he sees you he cringes after that. They've done that to a lot of these guys.

JL (on site): Bruscino, originally sent to prison for counterfeiting, and now serving a life sentence for an inmate murder, says he was told he could transfer out of Marion if he dropped his lawsuit. Agreements between the courts and the Bureau of Prisons dictate that all inmates must drop

litigation before they can be transferred. But for some inmates, staying and fighting the system is an end in itself. There's a point at which this sort of confinement breeds hostility, which is why lockdowns are historically temporary measures, according to former state prison director, Gayle Franzen. Franzen speaks from experience. He became director of Illinois Corrections in 1978, just after a full-scale riot at Pontiac Prison, in which three guards and three inmates were killed. After six months, at the court's insistence, Franzen brought Pontiac off lockdown, and he doesn't think Marion merits different treatment. A self-described hard-liner, he calls the notion that the inmates at Marion are more violent than other maximum-security prisoners, bunk.

down institution since 1978, long before the guards were killed several years ago. It's an insinuation the Bureau of Prisons denies. Marion officials admit there was such a plan, but it was a contingency the inmates eventually made necessary. The period between 1980 and 1983 was a troubled time at Marion. The Bureau of Prisons responded to a work strike by dismantling the prison industry, and confining inmates to their cell blocks. For their part, some guards felt they were carrying out irrational and contradictory order changes, calculated to agitate already restive inmates. They say warnings they relayed from inmates to the Administration were suppressed or ignored, particularly from the Control Unit, where two guards were killed. The Administration calls those killings, three years ago,

...the last time an American prison was run with most of the inmates in their cells was in the 1800's. The practice was abandoned because it drove prisoners insane.

Gayle Franzen: They're treating a problem with what appears to be the creation of a larger problem, which is much more frustration, much more tension, much more want to do violence just to kind of get even, by people who don't...wouldn't necessarily participate in violent acts. And that's what's frightening about the response to the violence they had down at Marion.

JL (on site): For the past three years the Bureau of Prisons has defended its decision at Marion. Norman Carlson, director of the Bureau of Prisons, says Marion may not quell hostility, but he disputes allegations that it's dangerously tense.

Norman Carlson: I don't think it's true to the degree that some of the critics have alleged that it is. As I said before, any time you run a maximum-security institution there will be hostility between the staff and the inmate population, and I think that's inevitable. And I certainly am not concerned at this stage about the operation of the institution.

JL (on site): Marion has a purpose within the federal prison system, says Mr. Carlson, which is to concentrate the most dangerous inmates in one place.

NC: I don't advocate running places like Marion if there were alternatives. Unfortunately I don't know what those alternatives are, so I guess the only way I can respond is by saying that until a better solution comes along, I think that Marions are necessary.

JL (on site): There are charges that the Bureau of Prisons wanted a permanently locked

brutal and senseless, but there's at least tacit admission on the part of some Marion officials that one inmate retaliated against the sadism of a particular guard. David Hale was a guard in the Control Unit, who says he tried to avert trouble at Marion but later became a part of it. His story is supported by other guards who didn't want their names known. Hale became the only guard to testify in court about the beatings, but he had by then been discharged by Marion and was found not to be a credible witness, along with the inmates.

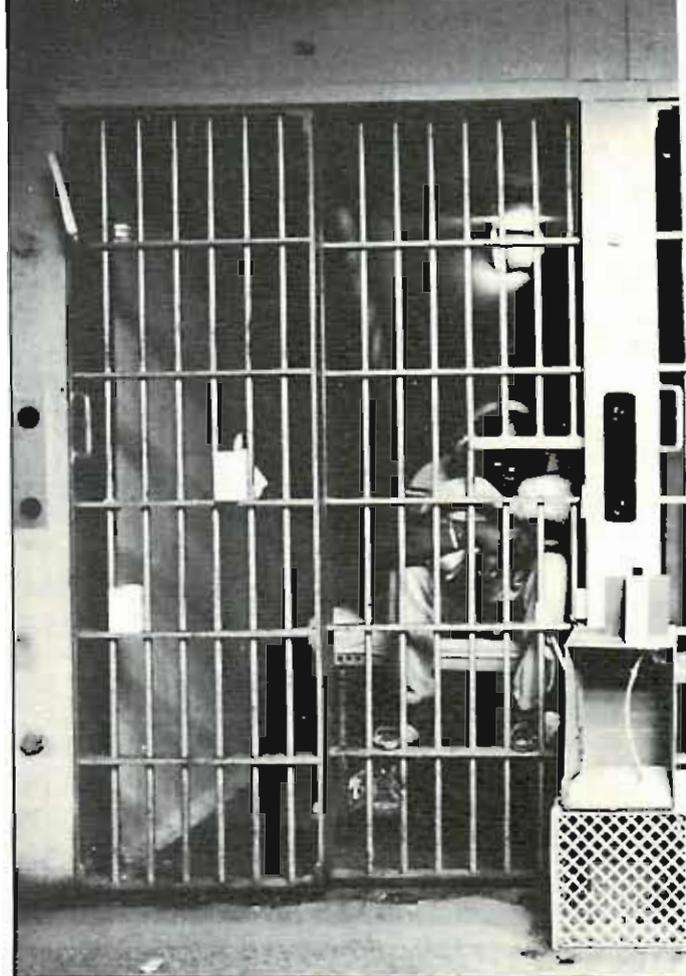
David Hale: The way the inmates are thinking up there right now, is because the population wasn't involved in the guards getting killed. You had two inmates kill the two guards and here the general population was locked down, they were taken out of their cell one by one, stripped down naked, and they were beaten. And you've never seen a beating. It's not like three or four people going down here in the tavern and jumping on a drunk and rolling him and kicking him and beating him. These people were beating. One inmate was beaten unconscious, and after he was unconscious a guard, about 215-230 pounds, put the heel of his shoe on this unconscious man, put the heel of his shoe on his ear, then sat there and spun in circles, ripping his ear up. Guards was bragging about how far they shoved a riot baton up a certain inmate's rectum. Had one inmate that had, you know, might have contraband in his rectum like this, well some of the M.T.s and some of the guards was bragging about they didn't pull it out like this, they hooked two fingers and turned it, then pulled it out. Now them inmates didn't kill no guards, but they was

treated like this because two other inmates did kill guards. False teeth were destroyed, eye glasses, legal material, clothing, anything of any value to the inmates, pictures, letters, was destroyed, in front of a lieutenant. Brand new watches was thrown up against a wall. "They can't have it...If it don't work they can't have it, right boss," "That's right." Brand new radios throw 'em up against the wall, break 'em. Throw in 'em the trash. And, see now, these inmates are setting there, they see all this happening, it's happening to them, it goes to court and everybody says "No, I never saw anybody beaten, I never saw any abuse. Them people is lying, that didn't happen." And the judge and the public, nobody cares. What would you do if you was in those shoes? It'd be like somebody broke in your home and raped you, beat you and tortured you and there's...you got witnesses and you go to court and the law turns your head and says "Ah, get out of here, you can't file no charges." Could you live with that? That's what they're living with.

JL (on site): Half the prisoners who were at Marion three years ago have been transferred. For those who remain at Marion there's fear that acceptance of a lockdown means the whole cycle of violence and reprisals could occur again. The House Subcommittee on the Courts, Civil Liberties and the Administration of Justice has reviewed the lockdown twice. Subcommittee chairman Robert Kastenmeier says he hopes Marion will move off lockdown, but he won't use his power to order prison authorities to do so. It's doubtful there'd be support in Congress for such a move. The last time Kastenmeier held a Marion hearing, only two of his colleagues on the committee showed up. Kastenmeier's office did begin an investigation into the beatings, but aides to the congressman admitted backing off the investigation after the Bureau of Prisons objected. The class-action lawsuit is still pending in court. Nancy Horgan, an attorney who's representing the prisoners, doesn't expect the federal courts to favor the prisoners, because the courts' preliminary judgement called the lawsuit "an abuse of the judicial process."

Nancy Horgan: There's almost a conspiracy of silence about Marion, among the courts, Congress and the government, the executive branch of the government. I mean, I think all these people know that prisoners got beaten up in Marion. I think all these people know that conditions at Marion are very harsh. Now nobody except the Bureau of Prisons actually ever goes to Marion, so they don't know how harsh. I'd think they'd be shocked if they knew how harsh. But all those bodies, especially the courts and Congress, are not going to interfere, it's like, they just don't want the heat. They are not going to get involved in this. It's just an avoidance of their responsibilities, you know,

Photo by Tony O'Brien



*"If I really want to take my frustration
do is know he's going back in that*

because it's not politically a good idea, or because they just...[sigh] I don't know what it is with the courts, it's like the courts are afraid ever to say a prison administrator is wrong or is brutal or is stupid or is ignorant or is malevolent, they just won't say it.

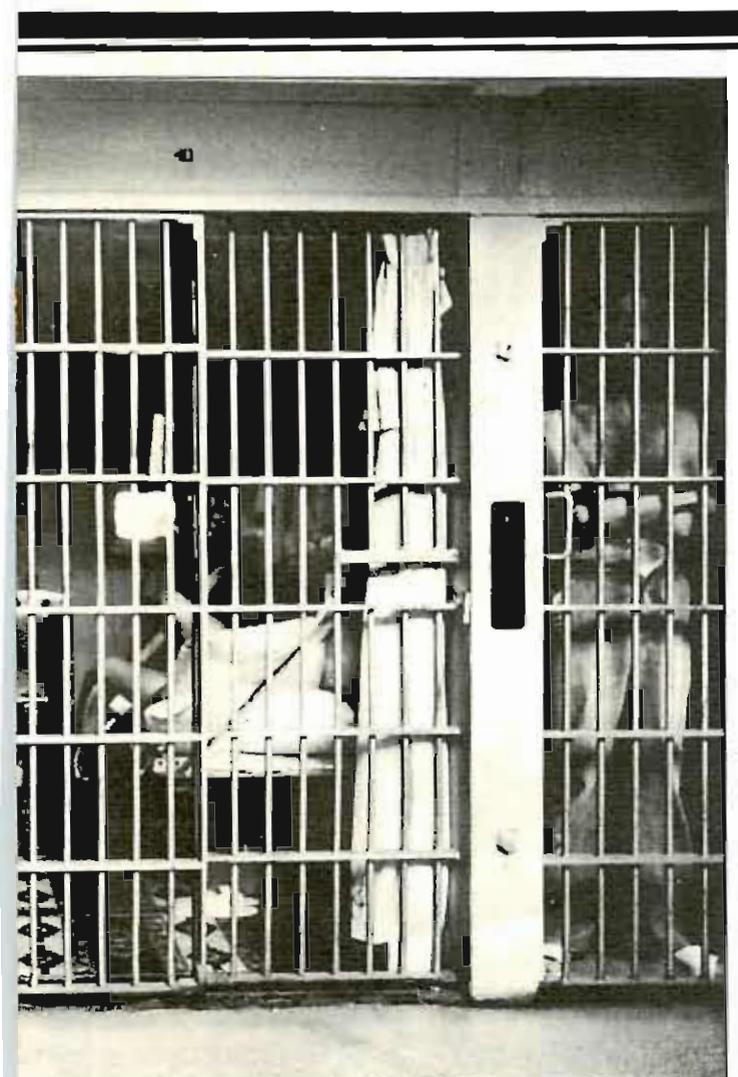
JL (on site): It's the Justice Department that guides Marion's policy and which pays Bureau of Prisons salaries, while federal prosecutors defend its practices. For the Bureau of Prisons and some state correction systems, Marion Prison is a useful solution. Closed prisons based on the Marion model put

Correction now is under the big eye of the public. And the courts and the...and Congress. And you can bet that we're striving to be consistent, to be humane in our treatment. We have to, not only from a personal standpoint, we have to because of the scrutiny we're under. And it's easier to do it. I don't have to go down here and beat an inmate to get out my frustrations on him. One of my famous sayings is an inmate who'd tell me I lied to him, and of course there's little things that get you, that will get me in a hurry, my answer to him is I don't have to lie to you, I'm leaving here this evening at four o'clock, and I won't be back until tomorrow morning. If I really want to take my frustrations out on an inmate, all I have to do is know he's going back in that cell for twenty-three more hours. I don't have to beat him.

JL (on site): When George Wilson shuts the door on Marion at the end of the day, he leaves behind prisoners who live with the policies the Bureau of Prisons makes. Most of those hours are spent in six by nine foot cells. On the surface, Marion appears to be fulfilling its mission. But there's been a tremendous price to pay. Frustration at Marion is continual. In penological terms, Marion follows the "repressive" or "concentration" model, and though there are isolation units in American prisons and temporary lockdowns, the last time an American prison was run with most of the inmates in their cells was in the 1800's. The practice was abandoned because it drove prisoners insane. "Going off" is what it's called at Marion. Going off means losing self-control. It's fear of doing just that, even as he nears parole, which worries inmate Tyrone Thomas-Bey.

Tyrone Thomas-Bey: Like I told the associate warden at one time, right, and he said that there are a great many things that we were going to have to learn how to be, and one of 'em is to be, you know, subordinate to the administration. And we say, well, okay, we can recognize what you're saying but, you know, the only difference between a diamond and a piece of rock out there on that track, you know a piece of gravel, the only difference between it is the amount of pressure that you put upon it for a certain amount of time. And the pressure that you're putting on people up here, you're gonna make 'em hard, you're gonna make 'em, you know, you're gonna make 'em hard as diamonds, and some of 'em are gonna come out and be the exact thing that you never wanna see.

JL (on site): The prisoners we talked to at Marion say they would rather not be that hard. They can laugh a lot, but bitterness, cynicism, anger and determination are also on their faces, faces the outside world, of course, doesn't see. I'm Jacki Lyden reporting.



*tions out on an inmate, all I have to
cell for twenty-three more hours."*

George Wilson, assistant warden

limits on a prisoner's rights and give prison authorities more power, but Marion's executive assistant to the warden, George Wilson, says it is public scrutiny that provides a check on abuse of that power by prison authorities. He says Marion once discouraged press and public review, but that has changed.

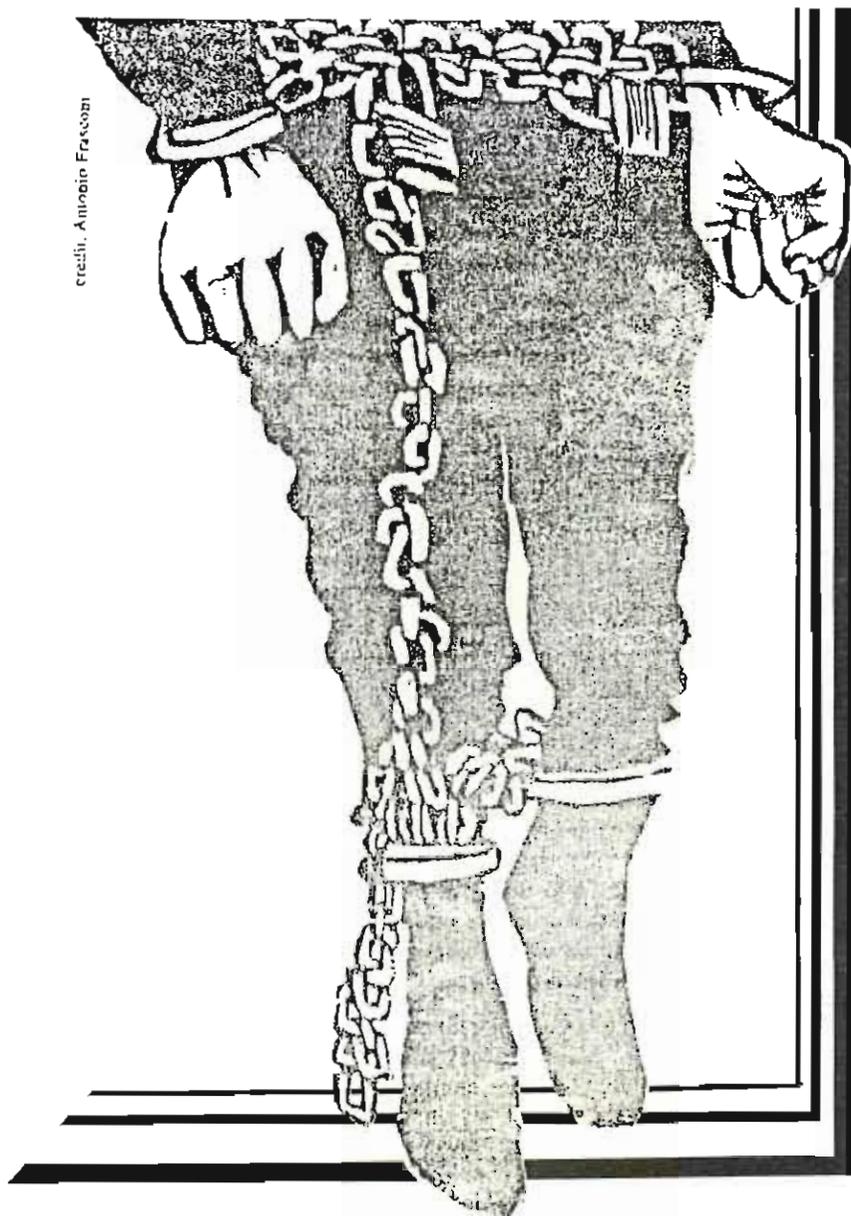
George Wilson: Ten years ago, would you be...would I be sitting here with you. I'd be laughing. "Heh, there those people, they're not coming in the institution anyway, that's what...you know, we'll do what we want to do". Let me tell you,

Part II: N.P.R. program on Marion Prison, broadcast 28 October 1986.

Alex Chadwick (in studio): The Marion Federal Penitentiary in southern Illinois is the prison of last resort, where the U.S. Bureau of Prisons says it puts the worst and most difficult law-breakers. It is also the most restricted prison in the whole country. The inmates there are locked inside their cells twenty-three hours out of every day, that, the response of the prison administration several years ago to the murder of two guards at Marion. The lockdown continues to this day. All of this you may have learned if you heard our report on Marion Prison, a documentary carried earlier this week [28 October 1986] on "All Things Considered." You would have heard two inmates arguing that the very strict conditions at Marion are actually counter-productive, if indeed they are intended to reduce violence and tension. Many of the inmates say the lockdown at Marion actually makes things worse. But, you would not have heard Randy Gometz, who is probably going to be in Marion for the rest of his life. He got left out of the piece because you have to leave some things out. Still, Randy Gometz offers insights into what it means to be a prisoner at Marion, and they're insights we think are worth sharing with you, although they come with this caution: prison language is rough, and it may offend some listeners. Our Marion story was reported by N.P.R.'s Jacki Lyden, who is joining us this weekend as co-host of "All Things Considered," Jacki?

Jacki Lyden (in studio): Alex, let me describe my interview with Randy Gometz which my producer Paula Schiller and I did at Marion. It took place under dramatic circumstances. Randy was brought down the hall by three guards. He was shackled behind his back and at the legs, and as we spoke in a small office there the guards all stood behind him with their riot batons drawn, and yet another prison official listened to the interview while we talked. All I knew about Randy at that time was that he'd been convicted of being an accomplice in the killing of a guard at Marion, and all he knew about us is that we were waiting to interview him in front of the staff. Randy was as chained and overpowered as a man could possibly be, and yet his face was defiant. It was clear that he and these guards regarded each other as opponents, and we asked him if it had always been this way for him, or if his relationship with the guards had changed since the lockdown.

Randy Gometz: Now that they've got lockdown, now that they know that the courts have backed up what they're going to do, they're going to keep it locked down for the duration...



credit: Antonio Frascari

JL: Uh-huh.

RG: ...and they get to walk around with clubs like they got right now hanging over me. They get much more feeling of security, and anytime you get in a situation like this, where they know they're getting backed up by the upper echelon, they tend to get a little more balls. They feel they can do whatever they want to do, and they do it. And I'm talking verbally...I can remember a few years ago they never talked to you in the tone of voices, and the derogatory things they say to you. In passing years it's becoming the status quo. They never did that a few years ago when the doors was open...

JL: Uh-huh.

RG: ...because they knew if they did they were apt to get jacked up behind it, and now it's just come to be status quo, where they can say or do just about anything they want, and people just like him right there is going to back 'em up.

JL (in studio): The guards behind Randy scarcely moved while he talked. Because of the guard killing, Randy says he has a stigma Ajax won't wash off. The man who actually committed the murder, Tom Silverstein, is locked in total solitary confinement in another prison.

RG: Tommy Silverstein's an artist. He would spend weeks doing stuff, and this guard through the guise of a shakedown, he'd go in there and just smudge his artwork up, tear it up, ruffle it up...

JL: Uh-huh.

RG: ...go in there and change a regular, normal mattress for a piece of cardboard, for no reason; I mean he would go out of his way to go find a mattress just to go take a regular mattress from him. The guy's got a Wyatt Earp authority complex, and you've got to...this is a macho environment in here. If you ride people and you put spurs on 'em on a twenty-four hour basis, you're locked up in this...Tommy was locked up in here for four of five years...you're in a cell, I mean things affect you in cells different than they do anywhere else, I mean you can't envision it sitting where you're sitting...

JL: Uh-huh.

RG: ...but things affect you, you've got no recourse, and after a while you've got to either let it go...you've only got a couple of options, you either let it go or you handle it yourself. And he let it go for a long time, and a long time this guard took that for a sign of softness. The more Tommy would back up the more this guy would grind, until he finally got to the point where he thought that blue shirt was a shield, where he could do anything he wants, just like a lot of these other guards walking around here right now think, that blue shirt is a shield...

RG: ...it's sad that it happened, let's put it this way, it's not like I rejoice that it happened, but he got what he had coming...and let me tell you something, it's just like, in prison there are certain rules, I know if I do certain things, somebody will kill me for it, or try to kill me for it. It's no different than him, or any guard. There are certain things you can do as an inmate, or as a guard, but there's lines, and you can't cross them lines repeatedly and repeatedly without having to pay for it. Sooner or later you're going to have to pay for it, and it caught with him.



JL: I guess I'm just thinking that, I don't know, that...you want people to understand that what goes on here is something that reflects on them, but then when you talk about some of the rules that apply here they seem so insane...

RG: They are...

JL: ...so...

RG: ...they are...

JL: that it's hard...

RG: ...that doesn't make 'em less valid, you see what I'm saying...

JL: Uh-huh.

RG: ...just because they seem real outrageous or ridiculous to you, you sound like [chuckle] it sounds like a real fuckin' arena in here...

JL: Uh-huh.

Q: They say they're human beings. Are they that to you?

A: Some of 'em.

--a guard at Marion

JL: Uh-huh.

RG: ...and he kept on, and he kept on and he got rubbed out behind it, and it's just too bad...

JL: I guess I'm...

RG: ...and that's what it is, it is an arena in here. And...

JL: Hum.

RG: ...I don't know, it's...well let me put it

like this also, the bottom line is...is...I'm a convict, I'm a criminal, I'm a...I've got a violent past, whether I...well I'm not proud of that either, but how I see myself is not how John Doe Square is going to get into society and talk about himself. He's going to pat himself on the back for being a modern, futuristic, far-seeing, liberal-minded, individual with...a Christian that believes in God and all these things...

JL: Uh-huh.

RG: ...I don't profess none of that. I'm a criminal, so you know, the moral rules and guidelines that they follow out there don't necessarily apply to me.

JL: But doesn't that just mean that you should sit here forever, though?

RG: Well, I'm going to anyway [chuckle].

JL: Well at one point there might have been a chance that you didn't have to...

RG: Sure.

JL: ...you know.

RG: I blew it...I blew it.

JL (in studio): Randy Gometz would be a free man now had he not been convicted as an accomplice in the guard's death. He came in with a fifteen year sentence for bank robbery. Now he's serving 169 years.

RG: Man, I'm telling you, and you move on a guard, when you go to take his life, what you're doing...and let's face it, I don't care if you got a thousand years, you still have a chance of parole, it may be twenty years, it may be twenty-five years, but there is at least that glimmer way down that tunnel, but when you move against the guard, and you kill a guard, you are...you are knowingly throwing away your whole life, I mean there is no ifs, and



and butts about it, when you move on a guard, and you get jammed and busted behind it, what you've done is you've traded your whole life away. That's a heavy thing to do, I mean when you do that you're...that should give you an idea the desperation a man's going to be movin' in if he's down to that, when he's willing to trade his whole goddamn life in.

JL (in studio): The entire time he spoke the three guards stood behind Randy close enough to touch him, glaring, tense, one guard looked particularly pale and tight-lipped. It's an expression Randy Gometz described as "rocks in their jaws," and he said it's the look guards at Marion will always have for him. We asked the guard, Randy McManus, to talk to us about what he thinks of the prisoners in his charge, and he consented to do it, though he clearly didn't find talking to us easy.



Randy McManus: This is, you know, it's just a working relationship. I mean, I come in here at six o'clock in the morning and do my job until two in the afternoon, and that's it.

JL: What do you think your job is?

RM: It's to protect and take care of...I'm mean I'm not gonna...you know, if something happens, I'll be there.

JL: Uh-huh...is that if some trouble happens?

RM: Right.

JL: Right.

RM: Right.

JL: But beyond the occasional flare-up, what's your job...I mean, just to make sure that it doesn't happen?

RM: Right.

JL: Um...do you think about Marion when you go home, about being here at all? I mean, do you take any...

RM: Well, I try not to, no. No.

JL: Well, do you have any personal feeling about them at all, when you hear them talk about

this place, or just in terms of your everyday dealing with them.

RM: Personal feelings?

JL: Yeah.

RM: A person wouldn't be human if they didn't have any personal feelings, but I don't let that interfere with my job, no.

JL: Huh. You must have an opinion, though, of them.

RM: I have to wonder how a person can live with himself when he says, you know, makes remarks like, well, so-and-so had it coming, I'm glad he got his. You know, that's...that makes you wonder how he lives with himself.

JL: Uh-huh. Well, he did a fair job of explaining that, for better or worse I suppose.

RM: Yeah, I suppose it's everybody's opinion, I didn't care much for his explanation, but...

JL: Uh-huh. But now you're going to have to go and face that man...

RM: I just got done feeding him lunch, it's...it's part of the job.

JL: They say they're human beings, are they that to you?

RM: Some of 'em.

JL: And some of them aren't?

RM: They're all human beings, but some of 'em you can relate to, just like anybody on the street, you can relate to 'em easier than...some peo-

poised for trouble, hour after hour and year after year. It's the kind of atmosphere, penologists say, that's particularly dangerous because it dehumanizes inmates and staff. If you're not careful, says one State Director of Corrections, you have a staff out of control, because it will be possible for a guard to



think of abuse as normal, and the job could become one that attracts people for that very reason. For prisoners, twenty-three hours a day of cell confinement, indefinitely, can break a person's spirit, desensitizing him into passivity, or provoking him into violence as a way to resist that kind of degradation. Every prisoner we talked to had a different way of describing that. One prisoner called it the kind of pressure that turns rocks into diamonds. Inmate John Campbell describes it this way:

John Campbell: You can make anybody into a killer...you know I mean you can, for real, you can turn anybody into a killer, and if...especially if he's brought up in a violent-orientated world. Most

"There's almost a conspiracy of silence about Marion, among the courts, Congress, and the executive branch of the government."

--Nancy Horgan, attorney

"What would you do if you was in those [the prisoners'] shoes? It'd be like someone broke in your home and raped you, beat you and tortured you...you got witnesses and you go to court and the law turns its head and says "Ah, get out of here, you can't file no charges." Could you live with that?"

--David Hale, former guard at Marion

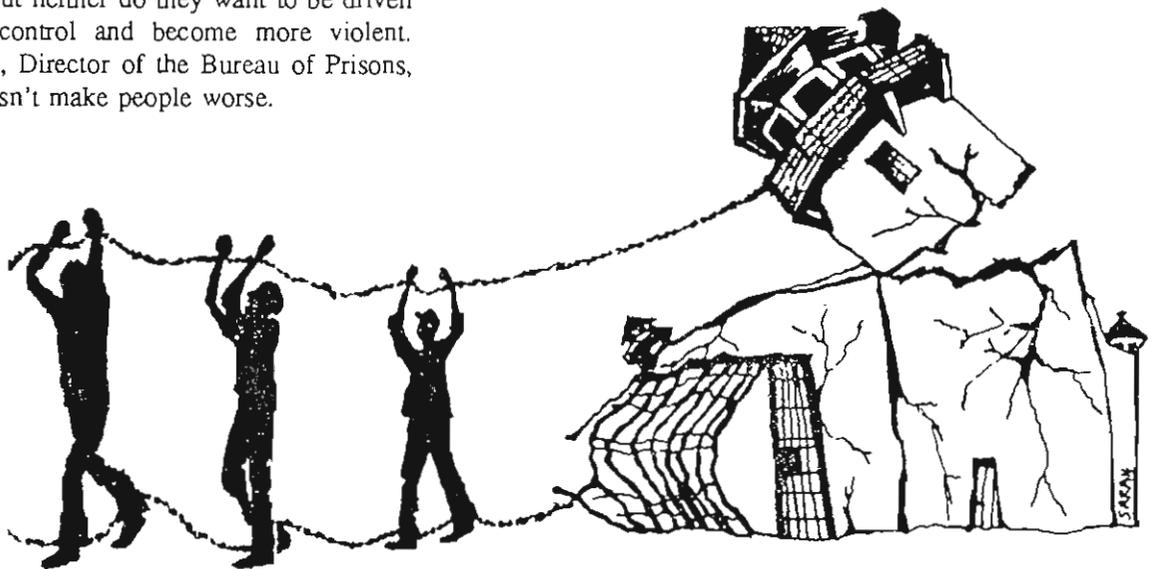
ple you can't, you know, it's just one of those things.

JL (in studio): Prisoners and guards at Marion face each other, suspicious, not talking,

killers don't want to kill, to start with...I'm not talking about serial killers or sickos, I'm talking about a person that responds to violence-type situations, or desperation or out of desperation. And you can take

that person and eventually, when you've grabbed all hope and there's no more illusions and there's no more pink colors for him to grasp at, and as people start dyin' on him, and his business deteriorate and he don't have any money comin' in for canteen, and...I mean these are little pin pricks that in their self singularly are nothing, but when you got a thousand pin pricks and then they start multiplying, and pretty soon you're just bleeding all over with pin pricks, you gonna jump outta something, and you gonna wanna hurt something, and you generally gonna wanna hurt the people that are inflicting this pain on you, irregardless of what you are.

JL (in studio): John Campbell is forty-two, a bank robber, who says he'll probably always be a bank robber, and for that he expects society to take away his liberty and send him to prison. The question raised at Marion is where punishment stops and retribution begins. Inmates don't want to be coddled, they say, but neither do they want to be driven crazy, or lose control and become more violent. Norman Carlson, Director of the Bureau of Prisons, says Marion doesn't make people worse.



Norman Carlson: There's rumors to that affect, but I think the research that's been done, at least that I've seen, there's no evidence that long-term incarceration in that type of institution is going to cause a violent person to become more violent than he was before.

JL: Uh-huh. Well, I don't know, that's not so much what I hear from the prisoners. One man said...

NC: Certainly they have a different point of view than we have, well that's, you know, we're different roles. My role is to operate a Federal Bureau of Prisons for society, as part of the federal criminal justice system. They have a different role in our society. They're the ones that have been convicted and sentenced to incarceration by federal courts.

JL: I realize that they live with the decisions that you guys make...

NC: No, they live with the results of their criminal activity. If they didn't commit a crime in the first place they wouldn't be in the situation they are. They are there as a result of a full due process court proceeding in U.S. District Court somewhere in this country.

JL: Right, right. That gets them into prison, but you have a lot of discretion over what happens to them after that.

NC: Providing we maintain a constitutional places of incarceration, and as you probably know, Marion has never found to be unconstitutional.

JL (in studio): Norman Carlson says it's people like Randy Gometz, who've been violent while they're in prison, that make Marion Penitentiary's restrictions necessary, restrictions like twenty-three hours a day cell time for years on end, shackles on

a prisoner every time he's moved or concrete bunks with steel rings, used to chain a man spread-eagled to the surface. Randy Gometz says he's proof of how this kind of security has failed, and turned him into a convicted murderer, and he views it as much a judgement on society as on himself.

JL: Why should people care what happens behind these walls?

RG: Well, I guess it depends on the standard we're going to accept as human beings, I mean, you don't lose that status by coming in here. Like me, love me, hate me, let me live or kill me, whatever...

JL: Uh-huh.

RG: ...you know as long as I'm alive I'm a human being, I don't care whether anybody likes me or not, but I'm no different...you don't think I don't have a mother that loves me...

JL: Uh-huh.

RG: ...that cries over me, just like you've got a mother and everybody in this planet's got mothers, and families that...people to care about them...

JL: Uh-huh.

RG: ...and just by me being a prisoner doesn't mean...didn't make me lose that status as a human being, and I'm in here just like anybody could be in here. Things happen, you know. People go right, people go wrong, I mean it's real wierd, you never really can predict. When I was a kid I never envisioned myself being in this situation.

JL: What did you envision yourself doing?

RG: You know, as a kid it's just like probably everybody, I wanted to...you know I went through all the whole phases...I was going to make a career out of the Navy, I was going to...I was going to have children, I was going to have a family, I was going to be a square, I mean [chuckle] the same

thing that everybody had, you know...

JL: Uh-huh.

RG: ...so, I don't know about people on the streets whether...how they, you know, how they should feel about us, I know...it depends on what they're going to call themselves and how they view themselves, and how they view us is going to reflect on how they...what kind of person they are, and...you know what I'm trying to say, it's just going to reflect on them and themselves, so if they don't give a shit about me that tells a lot about them individually and personally, you know, because they don't give a shit about themselves.

JL (in studio): Randy Gometz says he only has three choices now, at Marion. He can lie down and do as much time as he can stand, he can try and escape or, he can commit suicide.

