

America's Dehumanizing Prisons

Close Down Guantanamo?. What about our Own Hell-Holes?

By [Sherwood Ross](#)

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From Florida to California, America's dehumanizing prisons confront President Obama and our governors with a challenge every bit as daunting as Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib.

In California, the state's 33 adult prisons teem with nearly double the inmates they were designed to hold," *The New York Times* reports. In Florida, officials say they must build 19 more prisons over the next five years.

In both states, advocacy groups would rather see non-violent prisoners nearing the end of their sentences released early than build more new bunks. Barney Bishop, president of the influential business lobby Associated Industries of Florida, has released a position paper calling for a halt to the scheduled construction of three new, 1,300-bed prisons at a cost of \$300 million. "It doesn't make sense to me," Bishop told the *Miami Herald*.

Florida has got 99,000 inmates behind bars and it will have an estimated 124,000 in the slammer by 2014. The figure is skyrocketing because "get tough" politicians voted in mandatory minimum sentences and mandatory life terms so that, in the words of Bill Bales, a criminology professor at Florida State University, "there is no release valve available, unlike in states that have parole." Mandatory sentences may also discourage prisoners from trying to get time off for good behavior.

"Many inmates are serving long sentences for nonviolent crimes, including minor drug offenses," *The Times* noted in an editorial last January 1st. In Hawaii, an estimated 30 percent of prisoners have been doing time on such charges. In an editorial last January 1, *The Times* noted, "although it has less than 5 percent of the world's population, it(the U.S.) has almost one-quarter of the world's prisoners. And for the first time in history, more than 1 in 100 American adults are behind bars."

There are grim signs those who run our prisons at all levels have lost their grip on their jobs. In California, health conditions in the prisons are so bad they are currently in the hands of a federal receiver, who said the state needs to spend \$8 billion to rehab its old prisons and build new ones.

"Overcrowding is dangerous for the prisoners, for the corrections officers and for the public," said Michael Bien, a California lawyer for the inmates who asked Federal District Court judges to reduce the prison population by 52,000 over the next two years by early paroles of non-violent offenders.

Mocking the concept that our prisons are “country clubs,” one Federal inmate wrote in the *Honolulu Weekly*, “Can you imagine a country club where 130 snoring, stinking, farting guys sleep stacked on bunk beds arranged not even two feet apart in a tiny little dormitory and then stand in line in the morning to use one of six toilets, which are only rarely in working order at the same time?”

According to Human Rights Watch, mistreatment of prisoners is practically a tradition. In 1995, a federal judge found a stunning pattern of staff assaults, abusive use of electronic stun device guns, beatings, and brutality at Pelican Bay Prison in California, and concluded the violence “appears to be open, acknowledges, tolerated and sometimes expressly approved” by high ranking corrections officials. Another federal judge four years later concluded that Texas prisons were pervaded by a “culture of sadistic and malicious violence.”

“In recent years, U.S. prison inmates have been beaten with fists and batons, stomped on, kicked, shot, stunned with electronic devices, doused with chemical sprays, choked, and slammed face first onto concrete floors by the officers whose job it is to guard them,” HRW says.

What’s more, many prisoners are dumped into numbing solitary confinement not because of any infraction against prison rules but owing to their political views. As one man who experienced this wrote in the *Socialist Worker* last year: “There is no way to articulate the excruciating torture of sensory deprivation. Picture living in a cage, about the size of a bathroom. You are there 23 hours a day, day in and day out, year in and year out. You are allowed one hour a day out in a cage the size of a tiny living room. You are allowed one five-minute phone call every six months, which is monitored. Your mail and reading material is maliciously scrutinized and censored. When leaving your cage, you are subjected to a dehumanizing strip search which includes a genital and anal probe, and then handcuffed. You are completely under the control of prison guards who carry pepper gas and long, black batons that some refer to as “spic and nigger beaters.”

That’s one inmate’s perspective. Yet an overview report titled “Rights For All” by Amnesty International found: “Some prisoners are abused by other inmates, and guards fail to protect them. Others are assaulted by the guards themselves. Women and men are subjected to sexual, as well as physical, abuse. Overcrowded and underfunded prisons, many of them privatized, control inmates by isolating them for long periods and by using methods of restraint that are cruel, degrading and sometimes life-threatening. Victims include pregnant women, the mentally ill and even children.” And the Justice Department itself conceded four years ago that sexual assaults on inmates is a “significant problem” in federal prisons.

Indeed, U.S. prisons have a long and tragic history of punishing innocent individuals. Historian Howard Zinn recalls that during World War One conscientious objectors in prisons were tied up and subjected to a form of what we today would call waterboarding.

Senator Jim Webb, the Virginia Democrat and former Navy Secretary under President Reagan, has called for a national commission to probe the U.S. prison system. This is an urgent matter, particularly as the Bush regime outsourced a goodly fraction of the job to contractors Wackenhut and Correctional Corporation of America.

The last thing this country needs, though, is another study of our prison system if it will only gather dust in bookcases on Capitol Hill. We need to take the profit out of prisons, beginning with the liberation of all inmates jailed on marijuana charges. (Note: I am *not* a user.)

Too often, our jails are seen as money-making opportunities for those in charge. In Decatur, Ala., according to a published report, the sheriff fed prisoners on \$1.75 a day, and pocketed the change, salting away \$212,000 over the past three years while his charges went hungry and lost weight. Every prisoner helps create jobs and money-making opportunities for such sheriffs, as well as wardens, guards, social workers, psychiatrists, judges, bail bondsmen, etc.— not the kind of jobs you would boast about in a democracy.

Perhaps if USA had cleaned up its deplorable prisons at home it would not be exporting them globally. It could not be charged with being The World's Jailer. There are likely few abuses inflicted on Muslims in a Guantanamo or Abu Ghraib that haven't been first tried in USA. It is ludicrous and hypocritical for a White House to claim it is exporting democracy while it ignores the abuse of its own imprisoned.

As Tom Paine once opined on this subject: "When it shall be said in any country in the world, 'My poor are happy; neither ignorance nor distress is to be found among them; my jails are empty of prisoners, my streets of beggars; the aged are not in want, the taxes are not oppressive'— when these things can be said then may that country boast of its constitution and its government." Folks, we gotta ways to go.

Sherwood Ross formerly reported for the Chicago Daily News and the Miami Herald. He currently heads a public relations firm for non-profit organizations, book publishers, and good causes. Reach him at sherwoodr1@yahoo.com.

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