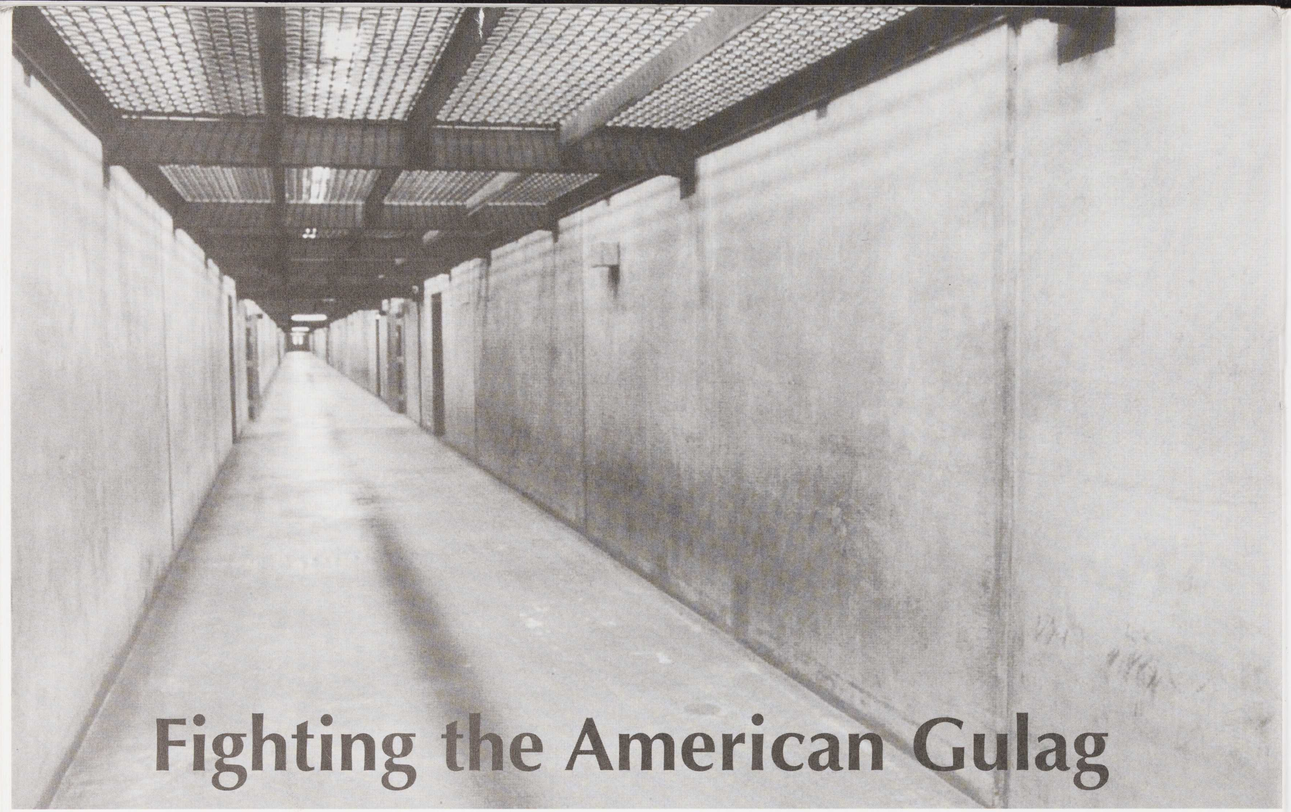


Fighting the American Gulag

by Corey Weinstein, M.D.

A confused, mentally ill black prison inmate gets into a few fights, which results in his transfer to a high-security prison. There, in solitary confinement, his mental condition deteriorates into constant raving. No psychiatric care is provided. He finally covers himself with his own excrement. His treatment from the guards is a hot "nigger bath" that causes disfiguring third-degree burns over 40 percent of his body.

Prison staff harass and taunt an inmate known as the "jailhouse lawyer," until finally in frustration he throws cold coffee at a guard. He is firehosed while being pulled out of his isolation cell, and years of legal work for the many prisoners he assists is destroyed.

A particularly violent and racist white prisoner housed in a supermax unit is chosen by guards to be a "torpedo." Guards release him from his cell to attack a Latino prisoner the guards dislike.

Elsewhere, homeboys from the barrio are rounded up from all over the state prison system and sent to the supermax for the "crime" of being brown and associating with their friends.

Beyond maximum-security lies the chilling world of "supermax" incarceration. As these new gulags explode in number, so grows the vast population of prisoners of color warehoused within their bleak, solitary walls.

Accompanying the explosion of prison construction in the U.S. over the past 25 years has been a dramatic increase in building high-security "prisons within prisons," known as supermaximum, security housing units (SHU), or "control units." It is estimated that more than 35 states now have such units, which normally house about 2 percent of a state's total prison population.

Isolated from ordinary prison facilities, control units are designed to do just what their name implies: physically control each convict with minimal guard contact. For out-of-cell movement, guards cuff prisoners' hands behind their backs and then fully shackle them in waist chains and leg irons. Twenty-three hours a day, prisoners are kept in solitary confinement in their 8-by-10-foot cells. They have little opportunity for work, education or social interaction, and they are forbidden from congregating with other inmates. Not surprisingly, the population of control units — mostly people of color — reflects the racially discriminatory nature of the criminal justice system in general and prisons in particular.

Cruel and Unusual

Prisoners often wind up in a control unit as punishment for an infraction at another prison, and punishment is exactly what they get. Goon-squad, backroom beatings; hogtying in chains; verbal harassment; racist taunting; food and mail tampering; denial of medical and psychiatric care; and interference with legal efforts — all these tactics are common in control units. But such everyday conditions of confinement also happen to violate all international standards for the treatment of prisoners and the U.S. Constitution's prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment.

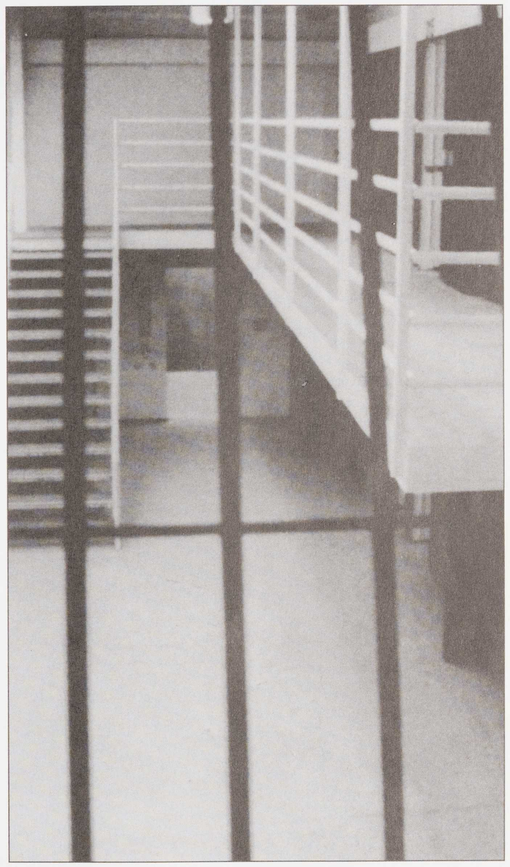
The Federal Bureau of Prisons (FBOP) has had a "supermax" prison for many years; Alcatraz was the best known. When Alcatraz closed, the bureau refitted a federal facility in Marion, Illinois, to serve as a control unit. During the 1970s various states built small solitary confinement units called Adjustment Centers (AC). While originally planned as treatment facilities for difficult-to-manage prisoners, the ACs soon became holding pens for Black Muslims and others who organized convicts. It was in the San Quentin AC in 1971 that black revolutionary George Jackson suffered a martyr's death during a brief takeover of that "prison within a prison."

Now, the FBOP is opening a new control unit in Florence, Colorado, while other high-tech, electronically controlled and monitored units open state by state: Pelican Bay, California; Westville, Indiana; Canon City, Colorado; Florence, Arizona; Potosi, Missouri; Trenton, New Jersey; Southport, New York; Shelton, Washington; Starke, Florida; and so on.

To counter the supermax construction boom, citizens' groups are forming, motivated by stories of prisoners' resistance and routine abuses. The Committee to End the Marion Lockdown (CMEL) began more than a decade ago in response to the systematic beating and chaining of all prisoners in the Marion FBOP unit following the murder of a guard. In 1991 the Prisoners Rights Union of California responded to a flood of prisoner complaints and jailhouse legal action by forming the Pelican Bay Information Project (PBIP) to oppose California's control unit, the Pelican Bay Security Housing Unit.

Hunger-striking prisoners in the Westville, Indiana, Maximum Control Complex located a small group of radicals, the Committee for Freedom, to help draw attention to their protest. Human rights activists in Boulder, Colorado, accepted the double responsibility of organizing against the new federal unit in Florence and their state control unit in Canon City. They call their group the Colorado Committee Against Control Unit Torture (ACUT).

Human Rights Watch, an international watchdog organi-



Above: A Pelican Bay SHU cellblock
Left: A corridor at Pelican that inmates call the "torture hallway" because of the abuses that occur between its walls.

Photos courtesy Pelican Bay Information Project