

An example of the sadistic treatment of US prisoners

Mike Tyson thrown in solitary confinement after being denied psychiatric medication

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Jail officials in Montgomery County, Maryland on Wednesday ordered Mike Tyson to remain in solitary confinement another three weeks because the former heavyweight boxing champion erupted in anger after being denied antidepressant medication for two days.

Tyson, a man with well-known psychiatric problems, will be locked in his 8 by 5-foot cell 23 hours a day and will not be able to receive visits or telephone calls, except from his attorneys or doctors. He will only be allowed to leave his cell for one hour of recreation each day.

Tyson, 33, is serving a one-year sentence for assaulting two motorists after a minor auto accident last summer in Gaithersburg, Maryland.

Tyson's lawyers said a jail psychiatrist had withheld the boxer's medication, leading to his outburst February 19 in a cellblock day room. Jail officials said Tyson ripped a television off a wall where it was bolted, and threw it to the floor. He then allegedly threw the TV towards a set of bars, behind which two correction officers were standing. Tyson was charged with assaulting the officers because they claim some shards of plastic from the TV went through the bars and hit them.

Jail officials said Tyson refused to take his usual dosage of the anti-depressant Zoloft when authorities brought it to him at the usual time the night before the incident. When Tyson refused to meet with the jail psychiatrist, the doctor cut the dosage in half, saying he would not give the full dosage to an inmate he had not evaluated. Tyson then reportedly refused to take the half-dosage last Friday morning.

Paul Kemp, one of Tyson's lawyers, said Tyson was being unjustly punished for an incident that occurred

because the boxer's psychiatric treatment had been interrupted. Kemp said Tyson didn't recognize the lower dosage pills because they were smaller, so he did not take them. Kemp said Tyson did not want to see the psychiatrist because he had already spoken extensively to his own doctor. The lawyer said Tyson's doctor told the jail psychiatrist the day before the incident that "it would be inadvisable to do anything to [Tyson's] medication." Kemp also said that he has not been allowed to see the jail's medical records.

Tyson was thrown in solitary the day of the incident. Then during a closed-door disciplinary hearing Wednesday two jail supervisors condemned him to an additional 20 days in solitary confinement. Tyson was represented at the hearing, not by his attorney, but by a senior corrections officer.

There is something particularly sadistic about the treatment meted out to Tyson, a troubled man with many problems. Tyson has reportedly attempted suicide on at least one occasion, been diagnosed with a chemical imbalance and manic depression, and has erupted many times into abusive and violent behavior.

But the treatment he has received is far from unusual in America's jails and prisons. It has only come to light in this instance because the victim is a celebrity followed by the media who can afford high-priced attorneys.

As of mid-1997, 1.7 million people were held in US jails and prisons, a figure that has doubled since 1980. The vast majority of these inmates are poor and unable to pay for adequate legal representation, and the punishment they sustain from jail guards and authorities is rarely exposed.

The human rights group Amnesty International

recently noted: "Every day in prisons and jails across the USA, the human rights of prisoners are violated. In many facilities, violence is endemic. In some cases, guards fail to stop inmates assaulting each other. In others, the guards are themselves the abusers, subjecting their victims to beatings and sexual abuse. Prisons and jails use mechanical, chemical and electro-shock methods of restraint that are cruel, degrading and sometimes life-threatening. The victims of abuse include pregnant women and the mentally ill."

This incident is also another chapter in the personal tragedy of Mike Tyson. The young man grew up poor and abandoned in Brooklyn, New York, until he was "discovered" by a boxing instructor at a New York state corrections facility after being arrested at the age of 12 for purse snatching. His violent temperament and instability proved profitable for promoters and sponsors who made millions from his fights. By the age of 20 Tyson became the youngest heavyweight boxing champion, but after a series of defeats in the ring, the notorious ear-biting incident with challenger Evander Holyfield and a host of legal problems his cash value plummeted and the young man ended up in jail.

After the recent incident, however, jail authorities were quick to assure the media that Tyson's disciplinary problems probably would not hurt his chances to enter a work-release program where he could resume training or boxing during the day.



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