

Solitary confinement and the brutality of the US prison system

“Angola 3” prisoner Albert Woodfox released after 45 years

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“He is a man buried alive; to be dug out in the slow round of years; and in the mean time dead to everything but torturing anxieties and horrible despair. ... The system here, is rigid, strict, and hopeless solitary confinement. I believe it, in its effects, to be cruel and wrong.

“I believe that very few men are capable of estimating the immense amount of torture and agony which this dreadful punishment, prolonged for years, inflicts upon the sufferers. ... I am only the more convinced that there is a depth of terrible endurance in it which none but the sufferers themselves can fathom, and which no man has a right to inflict upon his fellow-creature.

“I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain, to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body; and because its ghastly signs and tokens are not so palpable to the eye and sense of touch as scars upon the flesh; because its wounds are not upon the surface, and it extorts few cries that human ears can hear; therefore I the more denounce it, as a secret punishment which slumbering humanity is not roused up to stay.” — Charles Dickens, “Philadelphia, and its Solitary Prison,” 1842

Alfred Woodfox, 69, was released on Friday, February 19, after 45 years locked behind bars. Most of those years were spent in solitary confinement at the Louisiana State Penitentiary. The circumstances surrounding Woodfox’s trial and incarceration epitomize the brutality of the United States prison system, and the arbitrary and sadistic manner in which judicial authorities mete out their punishments.

Woodfox is the last of a group of three prisoners known as the “Angola 3” to be released from prison. The notoriously brutal Louisiana penitentiary is known as Angola, deriving its name from the slaves who once worked its field, most of whom came from the African nation of same name. Angola is the oldest and largest maximum-security prison in the US, housing more than 6,000 inmates.

One of these prisoners is Gary Tyler, a black man from Louisiana who was arrested as a teenager in 1974 and convicted for a murder he did not commit. Now 57, he has spent more than four decades behind bars, only avoiding the execution chamber because Louisiana’s death penalty was ruled unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court.

Woodfox along with prisoners Herman Wallace and Robert King—all supporters of the Black Panther Party—were targeted by

prison and state authorities for their political beliefs and outspoken criticism of conditions at Angola.

Woodfox and Wallace were convicted of the April 1972 killing of prison guard Brent Miller. There was no forensic evidence or reliable witnesses linking them to the crime, but they were tried and convicted within two hours by an all-white jury. King was convicted of the death of a fellow inmate in 1973.

Wallace was set free October 1, 2013, at the age of 71, on humanitarian grounds. He died three days later of advanced liver cancer. King was released in 2001 after a court reversed his conviction. Combined, the Angola 3 spent more than a century in solitary confinement.

Woodfox, whose conviction was twice overturned on the basis of ineffective counsel, racial bias and lack of evidence, was released Friday after a negotiated deal with the Louisiana attorney general, pleading no contest to manslaughter in the Miller case. While it counts as a conviction, Woodfox did not admit guilt and maintains his innocence.

During the vast majority of his incarceration in Angola, Woodfox was held alone for 23 hours a day in a six-foot-by-eight-foot cell, with the view through metal bars of only a concrete corridor. He was allowed only one hour a day outside the cell, in order to shower, walk up and down the corridor, or have an isolated walk in the exercise yard.

Prison authorities have made the spurious claim that such conditions do not constitute true solitary confinement, as Woodfox and others have been allowed limited conversation with other inmates through the bars. But there is no other reasonable way to define this type of incarceration, which serves no other purpose than vindictive retribution by means of isolation and sensory deprivation amounting to psychological torture.

Such prolonged solitary confinement had been largely abandoned in the US at the turn of the century. However, by the 1970s, federal and state authorities began to adopt the practice on a widespread basis, having abandoned any pretense of prisons serving as places of rehabilitation.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, as prisons were filled with victims of mandatory sentencing and “tough on crime” laws, solitary confinement became one of the means to control and punish this growing population. Among the 2.2 million people in America’s prisons and jails today, there are more than 80,000 men, women

and children in solitary confinement, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

A 2003 Human Rights Watch report found that anywhere from one-fifth to two-thirds of these prisoners are believed to have some form of mental illness, many of them finding themselves in prison as mental health facilities shut their doors, particularly to workers and the poor.

Although conditions vary from state to state, in addition to 22- to 24-hour confinement and severely restricted human contact, systemic policies for solitary prisoners include grossly inadequate medical and mental health treatment; physical torture such as hog-tying, restraint chairs, forced cell extraction; sensory deprivation, permanent bright lighting, extreme temperatures, and forced insomnia; chemical torture, such as stun grenades and stun guns; sexual intimidation and other forms of brutality and humiliation [American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)].

The effects of solitary confinement have been shown to be debilitating, including visual and auditory hallucinations, hypersensitivity to noise and touch, insomnia and paranoia, distortions of time and perception, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and an increased risk of suicide, according to the AFSC. Despite these horrifying outcomes, the use of solitary confinement continues to expand in the US today.

In a legal document in 2008, Woodfox described an attack of claustrophobia he suffered frequently in solitary: “I feel like I am being smothered, it is very difficult to breathe, and I sweat profusely. It seems like the cell walls close in and are just inches from my face. I try to cope by pacing, or by closing my eyes and rocking myself.”

Ironically, the first experiment in solitary confinement was initiated by a group of Quakers at Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia (toured by Charles Dickens in 1842, as quoted above), believing that prisoners isolated in stone cells with nothing but a Bible would repent, pray and contemplate their crimes. But it would soon become clear that the practice, instead of rehabilitating prisoners, made them insane, drove them to commit suicide, or rendered them unable to function in society.

The practice was slowly abandoned in subsequent decades. In a US Supreme Court opinion in 1890, Justice Samuel Freeman Miller wrote of prisoners in solitary confinement in Philadelphia: “A considerable number of the prisoners fell, after even a short confinement, into a semi-fatuous condition, from which it was next to impossible to arouse them, and others became violently insane; others still, committed suicide; while those who stood the ordeal better were not generally reformed, and in most cases did not recover sufficient mental activity to be of any subsequent service to the community.”

In a study in the 1950s, University of Wisconsin professor of psychology Harry Harlow conducted a cruel experiment on rhesus monkeys in a solitary chamber dubbed “the pit of despair,” in which the animals were placed in an inverted pyramid chamber with slippery sides that made climbing out impossible. Harlow found that after a day or two most of the subjects were hunched in the corner of the bottom of the apparatus, finding “their situation to be hopeless.”

Harlow also found that monkeys kept in isolation wound up

“profoundly disturbed, given to staring blankly and rocking in place for long periods, circling their cages repetitively, and mutilating themselves.” Fast-forward to today and it would seem that, in a rational society—under conditions where 65 years earlier an experiment conducted on a group of *Homo sapiens*’s fellow primates demonstrated that solitary confinement amounts to torture—the practice would be abandoned.

That this is not the case is an indictment of decayed capitalism in 21st century America, and a judicial system that has long-since abandoned any pretense of rehabilitating the prisoners bloating its jails and prisons.

Instead, it is a system based on deliberate vengeance, which is of a piece with the explosion of police killings across the country as well as drone assassinations, including of US citizens, and airstrikes against civilian populations in countries around the world.

Doing away with solitary confinement requires dismantling the sprawling US prison-industrial complex, something that can only be done ultimately through the socialist reorganization of society in the interests of the working class.

Asked his opinion of the US penal system on his release, Alfred Woodfox told the *Advocate* of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, that the “prisons have become industries.” He said, “These corporations come there and take advantage of slave labor.”

The *New York Times* quoted Woodfox on solitary confinement: “I’ve seen grown men turn into babies—you know, they just lay in their bed in a fetal position and don’t talk. I’ve seen guys who can’t stop talking. I’ve seen guys that scream all day.”

In contrast to his captors, Woodfox’s continued defiance of those who unjustly imprisoned him for more than four decades is a testament to human resilience. He still has a pending civil case in federal court on the issue of solitary confinement. His plans include starting a community-based organization to aid people recently released from prison and working for progressive prison reform.



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