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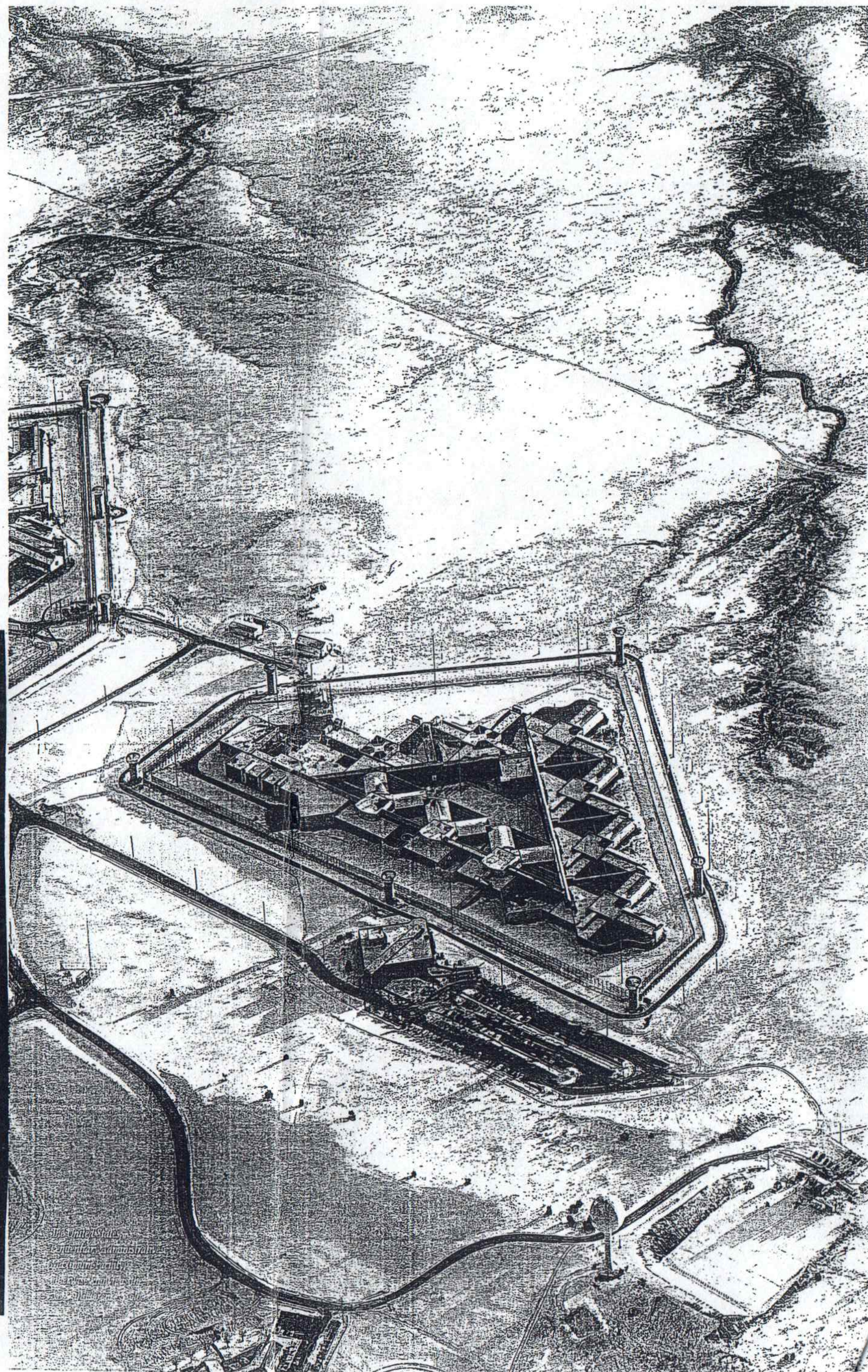
By Mark Binelli
Photograph by Jamey Stillings



'Guantanamo North': Inside Secretive U.S. Prisons

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March 3, 2011

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Part 1 of a two-part series

Reports about what life is like inside the military prison for terrorism suspects at Guantanamo Bay are not uncommon. But very little is reported about two secretive units for convicted terrorists and other inmates who get 24-hour surveillance, right here in the U.S.

Data And Graphics

Population Inside The CMUs

Learn more about the prisoners NPR identified, including their cases and release dates.

For the first time, an NPR investigation has identified 86 of the more than 100 men who have lived in the special units that some people are calling "Guantanamo North." The Communications Management Units in Terre Haute, Ind., and Marion, Ill., are mostly filled with Muslims. About two-thirds of the inmates identified by NPR are U.S. citizens.

Civil rights groups have filed lawsuits that accuse the U.S. facilities of some of the same due process complaints raised by people at the island prison.

Who Belongs In The Prison Units?

Avon Twitty, 56, knows a lot about these Communications Management Units, or CMUs. He spent three years in one. These days, he lives in a house with chipped white paint, next to a highway in Washington, D.C.

This is the first time he has talked about his experience.

Enlarge David Gilkey/NPR

Avon Twitty spent several years in the Communications Management Unit in Terre Haute, Ind. He was recently released and is part of a lawsuit challenging the legality of the special prison units.

Twitty spent 27 years in prison for shooting a man dead after a neighborhood argument in the 1980s. Years before that, he converted to Islam. He has never been convicted of a terrorist offense.

But prison officials sent him to one of the special units in Terre Haute to finish out the remaining few years of his sentence. Twitty says he never found out why. He has a piece of paper saying he allegedly took part in "radicalizing" people, but the transfer document doesn't explain who, or why. Twitty reads from one of the many letters he wrote to prison leaders, asking for answers.

"So my question was, what government agency labeled me a terrorist?" Twitty asks. "... What terrorist offense did I commit against the American government or any American citizen? What evidence demonstrated my guilt? Why was I not afforded my

constitutional right to a due process hearing?"

Inside The Special Units

Prison officials opened the first CMU with no public notice four years ago, something inmates say they had no right to do under the federal law known as the Administrative Procedures Act.

File Photo/AP

John Walker Lindh was captured in Afghanistan in 2002 after fighting with the Taliban.

The special unit in Terre Haute contains 50 cells housing some of the people the U.S. describes as the country's biggest security threats, including John Walker Lindh.

He was picked up on the battlefield in Afghanistan, after fighting on the side of the Taliban. Prison officials have never released the names of inmates in Terre Haute or in a companion unit in Marion. But an NPR investigation found out who some of them are.

The units' population has included men convicted in well-known post-Sept. 11 cases, as well as defendants from the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the 1999 "millennium" plot to bomb the Los Angeles airport, and hijacking cases in 1976, 1985 and 1996.

Also under surveillance in the CMUs are men who have threatened officials from behind bars, ordered murders using contraband cell phones, or engaged in other communications that officials want to monitor.

From The NPR Archives

Some of the prisoners inside the Communications Management Units that NPR identified include those from high-profile terrorism cases. Here are several reports on those cases:

- Holy Land Convicted Of Funneling Money To Hamas
  Nov. 25, 2008
- The 'Paintball Jihad': Virginia Men Guilty in Terror Case
  March 4, 2004
- Terrorism Charges in Oregon
  Oct. 5, 2002
- Lackawanna Arrests
  Sept. 14, 2002
- Captured American Returns from Afghanistan
  Jan. 24, 2002

The population also includes several black Muslims who have been disciplined for alleged radicalization and recruitment while incarcerated for other crimes.

When the Terre Haute unit opened in December 2006, 15 of the first 17 inmates were Muslim. In August 2008, 38 prisoners signed up for Ramadan observances.

As word got out that the special units were disproportionately Muslim, civil rights lawyers say, the Bureau of Prisons started moving in non-Muslims.

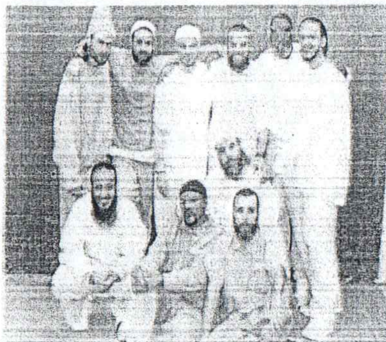
The group included tax resisters, a member of the Japanese Red Army and inmates from Colombia and Mexico. Inmates say the guards there called them "balancers."

The Bureau of Prisons says a total of 71 men now live in the units.

Segregation Allegations

Alexis Agathocleous, a lawyer at the Center for Constitutional Rights, has a hunch about how the population came to be.

"We were concerned about what appears to be racial profiling and also a pattern of designations to the CMUs of people who have spoken out at other prison units and advocated for their rights and have taken leadership positions in religious communities in those other prisons," he says.



Enlarge Courtesy of Avon Twitty

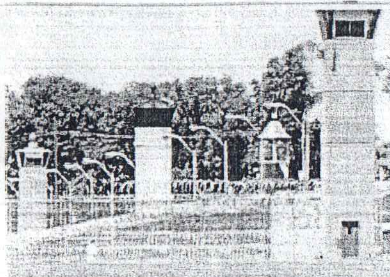
This photo of inmates from the Communications Management Unit in Terre Haute was taken in 2007. Among those pictured are (left to right, bottom row) Ibrahim al-Hamdi, Avon Twitty, Enaam Arnaout.

They are segregated from other prisoners because officials worry that they could recruit other inmates for terrorism or direct people in the outside world to commit crimes.

American University law professor Stephen Vladeck reviewed NPR's findings. He says he has some questions about the secrecy surrounding the units and whether the prison is sending the right people there.

"I think the real question is, what are the constraints and how are we sure that the right people are being placed in these units and not the wrong ones?" Vladeck says.

"Mixing prisoners from different backgrounds who actually don't necessarily live up to those criteria I think is troubling," Vladeck adds, because it means some inmates might not belong there, and others who do belong may not be getting the attention they deserve.



M. Spencer Green/AP

The federal prison facility in Terre Haute, Ind., is home to one of the communications management units.

NPR found two reports, marked "law enforcement sensitive," from 2009. In them, intelligence analysts for the Bureau of Prisons describe religious tension among different Muslim groups in the special units, including at least one violent episode involving a man described as an enforcer.

In those units, people convicted of international terrorism mingle with more conventional criminals. So Omar Mohammed Ali Rezaq, who hijacked an EgyptAir flight with other members of a Palestinian terrorist group in 1985, lives in the CMU along with Muslims who were convicted in U.S. government sting operations but who didn't have the resources to carry out a plot on their own.

Eavesdropping And Restrictions

Guards and cameras watch the CMU inmates' every move. Every word they speak is picked up by a counterterrorism team that eavesdrops from West Virginia. Prison officials budgeted more than $14 million for the snooping operation last year, according to appropriations documents and congressional testimony.

More From This NPR News Investigation

Restrictions on visiting time and phone calls in the special units are tougher than in most maximum security prisons. Inmates who lived in the CMUs

Part 2: Leaving 'Guantanamo North'

Prisoners in the special units get 24-hour surveillance, but what happens upon their release?

TIMELINE: The History Of The CMUs

A chronology of the Communications Management Units in Terre Haute, Ind., and Marion, Ill.

and their spouses talked to NPR about them for the first time.

Hedaya Jayyousi's husband, Kifah, served in the U.S. Navy. He also taught engineering. Then he was convicted of supporting groups in Bosnia and Chechnya that the U.S. government says are tied to terrorism. Kifah Jayyousi has lived in both CMUs.

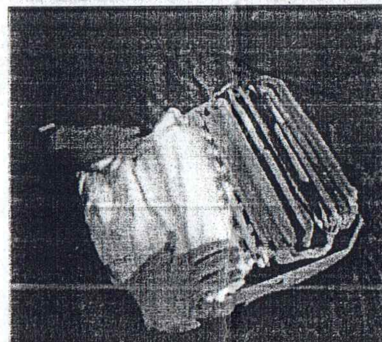
Mrs. Jayyousi now looks after their five children. Unlike most other prison inmates, the people in the CMUs are not allowed so-called contact visits, where they can touch their families. They get fewer hours of visiting time and fewer phone privileges, too.

"What happens is we really get very stressful because the way the visit [is] set," Hedaya Jayyousi says, "we need to hold the phone in our hands, very thick glasses. You can't hear him. [The girls] can't touch him."

A History Of Lawsuits

For the past year, Twitty and other inmates have been suing the Federal Bureau of Prisons. They say the special units were set up outside the law and raise serious due process issues. Unlike prisoners who are convicted of serious crimes and sent to a federal supermax facility, CMU inmates have no way to review the evidence that sent them there or to challenge that evidence to get out.

Twitty says he actually spent months longer in prison than he had to because of his designation to the special CMU unit. The halfway house in Washington wouldn't accept him for several months.



Enlarge David Gilkey/NPR

Avon Twitty's file folders contain his paper trail of grievances over the years while inside the Communications Management Unit at Terre Haute.

A federal judge in Washington, D.C., is considering whether to let the prisoners go forward with the lawsuit.

Agathocleous, from the Center for Constitutional Rights, is representing the CMU inmates in their ongoing civil rights case (*Aref et al. v. Holder et al.*). He says he's noticed something about his clients:

"There is a tenfold over-representation of Muslim prisoners at the CMUs," he says. "So 6 percent of the national prison population is Muslim, and somewhere in the neighborhood of between 66 and 72 percent of prisoners at the CMUs are Muslim."

Harley Lappin, who leads the Bureau of Prisons, described the special units to Congress in 2009.

"You've got a second tier where we don't have to have them as restricted, but we want to control their communications," Lappin told members of the U.S. House of Representatives. "They are housed in Communications Management Units where we can target, again, communication, both written and verbal,

and oversee visits more adequately than in our general population facilities."

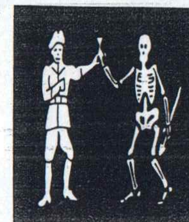
The unit at Terre Haute includes open cells, an outdoor basketball court and a dining room with checkerboards painted on some of the tables, according to Ken Falk, a lawyer at the American Civil Liberties Union in Indiana. He is one of the few people to see inside the unit at Terre Haute and is representing several inmates in a lawsuit ([illegible]) that alleges that the Communications Management Unit violates their religious rights.

He says Muslim inmates are allowed to do all kinds of things together, except pray. That, he says, is breaking a law known as the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. The law requires the federal government to follow the least burdensome approach when it comes to peoples' religious faith and practice.

"The problem from our perspective in the CMU is that the prisoners are out anyway and they're allowed to engage in all sorts of activity, and they're not allowed to engage in group prayer," Falk says. "In fact, prisoners have been punished when two prisoners have gone back to their cells together to pray."

Ed Ross, a spokesman for the Bureau of Prisons, didn't want to comment on the court cases. He says the special units help make sure inmates are monitored at all times. The units are designed for people convicted of terrorism, prisoners who have dealt drugs or tried to recruit or radicalize others behind bars; and prisoners who have abused their communications privileges by harassing victims, judges and prosecutors, Ross says.

Terrorism experts say all those restrictions in the special units might minimize radicalization inside U.S. prisons. The Justice Department inspector general and some members of Congress say that has been a big problem in the past.



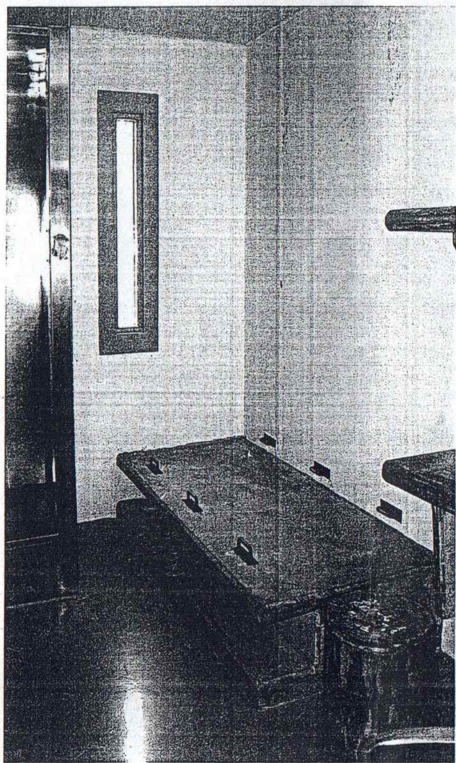
In prison, Rodney Jones told me, everyone had a nickname. Jones's was Saint E's, short for St. Elizabeths, the federal psychiatric hospital in Washington, best known for housing John Hinckley Jr. after he shot Ronald Reagan. Jones spent time there as well, having shown signs of mental illness from an early age; he first attempted suicide at 12, when he drank an entire bottle of Clorox. Later, he became addicted to PCP and crack and turned to robbery to support his habit.

I met Jones a few blocks from his childhood home in LeDroit Park, a D.C. neighborhood not far from Howard University. It was a warm October afternoon, but Jones, 46, was wearing a puffy black vest. The keys to his grandmother's house, where he currently lives, hung from a lanyard around his neck. His face was thin, a tightly cropped beard undergirding prominent cheekbones, and he had a lookout's gaze, drifting more than darting but always alert.

Jones had been out of prison for three years, a record for him, at least as an adult, but he still sounded a bit like Rip Van Winkle as he marveled at how gentrified his old neighborhood had become. We sat on a cafe's sun-dappled terrace, surrounded by creative-class types. A chef wandered outside to pluck some fresh rosemary from a planter. Jones was the only black patron at the cafe and probably the only person who remembered when it used to be a liquor store. "You wouldn't be sitting here," Jones said. He nodded at some toddlers playing across the street. "That park right there, that wasn't a park. That was just an open field where everybody gambled. At any given time, you would hear shots ring out."

From the age of 15, Jones found himself in and out of juvenile detention, St. Elizabeths or prison — never free for much longer than a month or so. The outside world came to feel terrifying; once, he wanted to get back inside so badly, he bought a bag of crack and called the cops on himself. "That was the world that I knew," he said.

It hadn't been easy for Jones to transition back to a life of freedom. He managed to stick it out, he said, because he was determined not to return to the place where he spent the final eight years of his last sentence: the United States Penitentiary Administrative Maximum Facility in Florence, Colo., known more colloquially as the ADX. The ADX is the highest-security prison in the country. It was designed to be escape-proof, the Alcatraz of the Rockies, a place to incarcerate the worst, most unredeemable class of criminal — "a very small subset of the inmate population who show," in the words of Norman Carlson, the former director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, "absolutely no concern for human life." Ted Kacynski and the Atlanta Olympics bomber Eric Rudolph call the ADX home. The 9/11 conspirator Zacarias Moussaoui is held there, too, along with the 1993 World Trade Center bombing mastermind Ramzi Yousef; the Oklahoma City bomber Terry Nichols; the underwear bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab; and the former Bonanno crime-family boss Vincent Basciano. Michael Swango, a serial-killing doctor who may have poisoned 60 of his patients, is serving three consecutive life sentences; Larry Hoover, the Gangster Disciples kingpin made famous by rappers like Rick Ross, is serving six; the traitorous F.B.I. agent Robert Hanssen, a Soviet spy, 15.



In the Control Unit, the most restrictive section of the ADX prison, most of the beds are equipped with strap-down rings.

Along with such notorious inmates, prisoners deemed serious behavioral or flight risks can also end up at the ADX — men like Jones, who in 2003, after racking up three assault charges in less than a year (all fights with other inmates) at a medium-security facility in Louisiana, found himself transferred to the same ADX cellblock as Kaczynski.

Inmates at the ADX spend approximately 23 hours of each day in solitary confinement. Jones had never been so isolated before. Other prisoners on his cellblock screamed and banged on their doors for hours. Jones said the staff psychiatrist stopped his prescription for Seroquel, a drug taken for bipolar disorder, telling him, "We don't give out feel-good drugs here." Jones experienced severe mood swings. To cope, he would work out in his cell until he was too tired to move. Sometimes he cut himself. In response, guards fastened his arms and legs to his bed with a medieval quartet of restraints, a process known as four-pointing.

One day in 2009, Jones was in the rec yard and spotted Michael Bacote, a friend from back home. The familiar face was welcome but also troubling. Bacote was illiterate, with an I.Q. of only 61, and suffered from acute paranoia. He had been sent to the ADX for his role as a lookout in a murder at a Texas prison, and he was not coping well. His multiple requests for transfers or psychological treatment had been denied. He was convinced that the Bureau of Prisons was trying to poison him, so he was refusing meals and medication. "You would have to be blind and crazy yourself not to see that this guy had issues," Jones said, shaking his head. "He can barely function in a normal setting. His comprehension level was pretty much at zero."

Bacote had paperwork from previous psychiatric examinations, so Jones went to the prison's law library (a room with a computer) and looked up the address of a pro bono legal-aid group he had heard about, the D.C. Prisoners' Project. Because Bacote couldn't write, Jones ghosted a query. "I suppose to have a hearing before coming to the ADX," Jones, as Bacote, wrote. "They never gave me a hearing." He continued, "I need some help cause I have facts! Please help me."

The story of the largest lawsuit ever filed against the United States Bureau of Prisons begins, improbably enough, with this letter. Deborah Golden, the director of the D.C. Prisoners' Project, fields approximately 2,000 requests each year, but Bacote's, which she received in October 2009, caught her eye. "I thought I might be missing something, because it was inconceivable to me that the Bureau of Prisons could be operating in such a blatantly illegal and unconstitutional manner," she said. Golden was referring to B.O.P. regulations that forbid the placement of inmates who "show evidence of significant mental disorder" in prisons like the ADX.

Groups like Golden's D.C. Prisoners' Project tend to focus their reform efforts on state-run prisons — in part because the Prison Litigation Reform Act, passed by Congress in 1996, made it more difficult for prisoners to file federal lawsuits, and in part because the federal government possesses, as Golden put it, "an inexhaustible supply of resources." A droll 42-year-old attorney who once considered rabbinical school, Golden has spent her entire career practicing human rights law. As she investigated Bacote's claims, she came to realize there were dozens of inmates at the ADX with comparable stories, or worse: cases of self-mutilation, obvious psychosis, suicide. Her organization had never considered filing such an enormous suit. Because it is so difficult to win cases against the federal government, challenging the B.O.P. "just didn't fit into anyone's strategic goals," Golden explained. The last major B.O.P. lawsuit to result in a settlement was in the mid-'90s (Lucas v. White, brought by a group of female inmates who had been sexually assaulted). But the clarity of Bacote's claims gave her pause. "A lot of cases we see involve matters of interpretation: Who knew what and when," she said. "This didn't seem to involve that kind of uncertainty. I wasn't sure if we had a chance. But it seemed like a court had to see it."

Since opening in 1994, the ADX has remained not just the only federal supermax but also the apogee of a particular strain of the American penal system, wherein abstract dreams of rehabilitation have been entirely superseded by the architecture of control. Throughout our country's history, there have been different ideas about what to do with the "worst of the worst" of our criminal offenders, ranging from the 19th-century chain gangs, who toiled in enforced silence, to the physical isolation of Alcatraz Island. The use of solitary confinement in the United States emerged as a substitute to corporal punishments popular at the end of the 18th century. The practice was first promoted in 1787, by a group of reformers called the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons. At a salon hosted by Benjamin Franklin, a pamphlet was read calling for the construction of a "house of repentance," in which solitude could work to soothe the minds of criminals — an enlightened alternative, the group believed, to inhumane "public punishments" like "the gallows, the pillory, the stocks, the whipping post, and the wheelbarrow." Inmates at Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary, which opened in 1829, were completely isolated from one another in cells outfitted with skylights, toilets and access to private outdoor exercise yards, where they worked at various trades, took all meals and read the Bible. Other states tried but quickly abandoned, the so-called Pennsylvania System, and an 1890 Supreme Court ruling against the use of solitary on Colorado's death row noted that "a considerable number of the prisoners fell, after even a short confinement, into a semifatuous 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."

The concept soon fell out of favor, and beginning in the 1930s, the hardest cases in the federal system — men like Al Capone and George (Machine Gun Kelly) Barnes — were housed in the converted military prison on Alcatraz Island, until it was closed in 1963 because of the costly upkeep inherent to an island prison. By the end of the decade, many of its prisoners had been transferred to the new "control units" at a federal penitentiary in Marion, Ill., where they were kept in solitary confinement. In 1983, after the assassination of two guards in separate attacks on the same day, by members of the Aryan Brotherhood, the Marion penitentiary was converted to the first modern all-lockdown facility, the entire prison now a solitary unit. (One of the guards' killers, Tommy Silverstein, is now at the ADX. He has been in solitary confinement for the past 22 years.)

Beginning in 1989 with California's Pelican Bay, states began building their own lockdown penitentiaries, inspired by the Marion model. The renewed use of solitary coincided with the era of mass incarceration and the widespread closing of state-run mental-health facilities. The supermax became the most expedient method of controlling an increasingly overcrowded and psychologically volatile prison population. A result of this unfortunate confluence has been a network of ever more austere and utilitarian penitentiaries, built specifically to seal off a significant portion of state and federal inmates, using methods that would shock many Americans. According to a 2014 Amnesty International report, more than 40 states now operate supermax prisons. On any given day, there are 80,000 U.S. prisoners in solitary confinement.

Norman Carlson, the B.O.P. director at the time of the Marion attacks, spearheaded the construction of a federal supermax that could eventually replace Marion. Florence, a faded Colorado mining town, lobbied hard for the $60 million prison to be built within its city limits, with residents eventually donating 600 acres of land to the B.O.P.

The ADX can house up to 500 prisoners in its

BAD COMPANY

Some of the ADX's most infamous residents.

Eric Rudolph
The Atlanta Olympics bomber.

Terry Nichols
The Oklahoma City bomber.

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab
The underwear bomber.

Michael Swango
The doctor who may have poisoned up to 60 patients.

Ramzi Yousef
The mastermind of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

Zacarias Moussaoui
The 9/11 conspirator.

Ted Kaczynski
The Unabomber.

Larry Hoover
The Gangster Disciples kingpin.

Rudolph: Erik S. Lesser/Getty Images. Nichols: Larry W. Smith/Getty Images. Abdulmutallab: Associated Press. Swango: Ed Betz/Associated Press. Yousef: Associated Press. Moussaoui: Associated Press/Sherburne County, Minn., Sheriff's Office. Kaczynski: Associated Press/Department of Motor Vehicles. Hoover: Associated Press/The Chicago Sun-Times.

eight units. Inmates spend their days in 12-by-7-foot cells with thick concrete walls and double sets of sliding metal doors (with solid exteriors, so prisoners can't see one another). A single window, about three feet high but only four inches wide, offers a notched glimpse of sky and little else. Each cell has a sink-toilet combo and an automated shower, and prisoners sleep on concrete slabs topped with thin mattresses. Most cells also have televisions (with built-in radios), and inmates have access to books and periodicals, as well as certain arts-and-craft materials. Prisoners in the general population are allotted a maximum of 10 hours of exercise a week outside their cells, alternating between solo trips to an indoor "gym" (a windowless cell with a single chin-up bar) and group visits to the outdoor rec yard (where each prisoner nonetheless remains confined to an individual cage). All meals come through slots in the interior door, as does any face-to-face human interaction (with a guard or psychiatrist, chaplain or imam). The Amnesty report said that ADX prisoners "routinely go days with only a few words spoken to them."

Robert Hood, the warden of the ADX from 2002 to 2005, told me that when he first arrived on the campus, he was struck by "the very stark environment," unlike any other prison in which he ever worked or visited – no noise, no mess, no prisoners walking the hallways. When inmates complained to him, he would tell them, "This place is not designed for humanity," he recalled. "When it's 23 hours a day in a room with a slit of a window where you can't even see the Rocky Mountains – let's be candid here. It's not designed for rehabilitation. Period. End of story."

Hood was not trying to be cruel with such frankness. The ADX was built explicitly to house men often already serving multiple life sentences and thus facing little disincentive to, say, murder a guard or another prisoner. Still, during his own tenure, Hood said he made a point of developing one-on-one relationships with as many inmates as possible – he described Salvatore (Sammy the Bull) Gravano as "a very likable guy, believe it or not," and he bonded with the Unabomber over their shared interest in running marathons – in hopes of eliciting good behavior in exchange for whatever he could do to make their sentences more bearable. But he also needed them to understand that even as warden, he lacked the authority to change the rules of their confinement. In the past, Hood has memorably described the ADX as "as clean version of hell."

David Shelby in the ADX in 2013.

Five years ago, a major lawsuit against the Federal Bureau of Prisons would have sounded quixotic. But in the present moment, the ADX case feels like the crest of a wave, as the excessive use of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons has come under intensifying scrutiny. Senator Dick Durbin, Democrat of Illinois, held the first-ever congressional hearing on the issue in 2012. Dr. Craig Haney, a psychology professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, testified that "a shockingly high percentage" of the prisoners in solitary confinement are mentally ill, "often profoundly so" – approximately one-third of the segregated prisoners on average, though in some units the figure rises to 50 percent. The emptiness that pervades solitary-confinement units "has led some prisoners into a profound level of what might be called 'ontological insecurity,'" Haney, who worked as a principal researcher on the Stanford Prison Experiment while in graduate school, told the senators. "They are not sure that they exist and, if they do, exactly who they are."

According to David Cloud, a senior associate at the Vera Institute of Justice, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to the reform of the criminal-justice system, "The research is pretty conclusive: Since people started looking at this, even 200 years ago, when a guy named Francis Gray studied 4,000 people in 'silent prisons,' the studies have found that the conditions themselves can cause mental illness, stress, trauma." The devastating effects of solitary confinement, even on those who showed no previous signs of psychological problems, are now so broadly accepted by mental-health professionals that policy makers are finally taking notice. Last year the New York State attorney general approved a deal forbidding the placement of minors and mentally ill prisoners in solitary; in January, New York City banned solitary for anyone under 21. Gov. John W. Hickenlooper of Colorado signed a similar bill at the urging of the state corrections chief, Rick Raemisch, who spent a night in solitary confinement and wrote about it in a New York Times Op-Ed, concluding that its overuse is "counterproductive and inhumane." As Cloud told me, "Even if you tried to employ solitary confinement with the most humane intentions, people are still going to lose their minds and hurt themselves."

Golden recognized that a lawsuit against the B.O.P. would still be a long shot – and that a co-counsel with deeper pockets than her own would be necessary. So she approached Arnold & Porter, a white-shoe law firm with a history of taking on high-profile pro bono cases. Ed Aro, a partner based in Denver, was intrigued; a close family member had spent time in prison, and other relatives had suffered from mental illness. Aro himself, though, was a trial lawyer who mostly represented corporations and had never set foot in a correctional facility. The prison jargon so baffled him at first that Golden had to send him a glossary that she put together.

A Colorado native who looks the part, Aro, 50, favors cowboy boots and fleece jackets, and his cheeks have the ruddy, slightly cured quality of a man who enjoys vigorous exercise at high altitudes. "Juries are my stock in trade," he told me. "They bring me in when the story is complicated and there's not going to be a settlement and they need someone to tell a convincing narrative. With this case, I worried, How do you weave a narrative and humanize people at a prison like this?"

As he tried to get a handle on the lawsuit, he made the two-hour drive to Florence nearly every week. For years, conditions inside the ADX had remained largely a mystery; from 2002 on, the Amnesty report noted, ADX officials denied every media request for a visit or prisoner interview, aside from a restricted tour in 2007. (The B.O.P. declined to comment for this article or to allow a site visit.) Aro assumed he would find a small number of prisoners who had somehow slipped through the cracks. "The thing that shocked me most was how massive the problem was," Aro said. "The ADX is the most closely monitored and evaluated subset of the prison population in the entire country. With the extent of the problem, it's incomprehensible to me that the B.O.P. didn't notice what was going on." How, Aro wondered, did the toughest prison in the United States become a mental asylum – one incapable of controlling its own population?

He enlisted Dr. Doris Gundersen, a Denver-based forensic psychiatrist, who was allowed inside the ADX as part of his legal team. After evaluating 45 prisoners, she estimated that 70 percent met the criteria for at least one serious mental illness. She and Aro spoke to inmates who swallowed razor blades, inmates who were left for days or weeks shackled to their beds (where they were routinely allowed to soil themselves), an inmate who ate his own feces so regularly that staff psychiatrists made a special note only when he did so with unusual "voracity." A number of prisoners were taken off prescribed medications. (Until recently prison regulations forbade the placement of inmates on psychotropic medication in the Control Unit, the most restrictive section of the ADX, as, by definition, such medication implies severe mental illness.) Others claimed that they were denied treatment, aside from "therapy classes" on the prison television's educational station and workbooks with titles like "Cage Your Rage," despite repeated written requests. (The ADX lawsuit says that only two psychologists and one part-time psychiatrist serve the entire prison.)

Gunderson and Aro met one inmate, Marcellus Washington, sentenced to life for carjacking and armed robbery, who slashed his wrists in a suicide attempt and was punished for it: He lost his television and radio privileges for several weeks. They met another inmate, Herbert Perkins, also serving life for armed robbery, who, after slashing his throat with a razor and being rushed to a hospital, was returned to the same cell, given a mop and bucket and ordered to clean up the blood.

They also met David Shelby, a schizophrenic who, in 1995, became convinced that God wanted him to free Charles Manson from prison and that the best way to achieve this would be to send threatening letters to President Bill Clinton. He arrived at the ADX in 2000. Nine years later, in response to another command from God, Shelby, who just a few months earlier tried to commit suicide by slashing his arms, legs and stomach, fashioned a tourniquet around the base of his left pinkie, hacked off the top two joints with a Bic razor blade and ate his finger with a bowl of ramen. When he became agitated and summoned a guard to say he'd done a "terrible thing," he mostly meant that he'd eaten meat; for the previous few months, he had been a vegetarian.

Aro had interviewed about 25 ADX prisoners when, in October 2011, he met the man who would become the face of the lawsuit. This particular inmate, Jack Powers, who was 52, refused to take a seat during their first meeting; years in solitary had made him skittish around other humans. Still, Aro immediately found Powers striking: bright, articulate, no history of institutional violence.

"If you looked at Jack's criminal history," Aro said, "at the bizarre, unhappy confluence of circumstances that led him to the ADX and into this incredible descent into madness, it's impossible to believe what happened to him has nothing to do with his conditions of confinement." In his search for a compelling character whose story could explain the lawsuit, Aro thought as he left the prison that day, it wouldn't get much better than Jack Powers.

Jack Powers in the ADX in 2011.

Jack Powers grew up in Norwich, N.Y., the son of a Vietnam veteran who beat him regularly. Powers ran away from home at 14; a few years later he was sent to prison on burglary charges. He was released in 1982, at 21, and he married and moved to Holland, Mich., where he founded a construction company and beauty salon. But by the end of the decade, both businesses had gone bankrupt, and he began robbing banks – at least 30, according to his 1990 conviction. He never armed himself; he always just slipped a note to the bank teller. He thinks his wife (now ex) turned him in.

At the U.S. penitentiary in Atlanta, where he was serving his 40-year sentence, he befriended a new inmate named Eduardo Wong, a heroin smuggler with supposed ties to Chinese organized crime. "Nice guy," Powers said in a recorded deposition. "I mean, relatively speaking." Wong and Powers liked to play chess. "But it wasn't that long, just a matter of weeks," Powers said, "before things went awry."

Wong became a target of members of the Aryan Brotherhood, who threatened to kill him if he didn't procure cash for them. Powers warned Wong about the seriousness of his situation, but Wong hesitated. One afternoon, a group of men ran onto their tier and stabbed Wong multiple times while Powers was held in the cell next door at knife point. After they ran off, Wong stumbled into Powers's arms, blood gushing from his neck. "John, help me," he said. Powers managed to carry Wong down several floors to the prison hospital, where he died.

During the murder investigation, Powers was moved to a protective custody unit. Shortly after his transfer, though, the face of an Aryan Brotherhood member appeared at the food slot of his door. "If you tell on my boys," the man warned, "I'm going to chop your head off." But Powers had a teenage son in Syracuse he wanted to reconnect with, so in exchange for what he believed would be a sentence reduction, he agreed to appear as a witness for the government. Three of the four Aryan Brotherhood members he testified against were convicted and received life sentences.

Powers had no history of mental illness before his incarceration. But after Wong's murder, he began to display symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, which manifested in the form of panic attacks, near-constant anxiety and nightmares in which inmates with weapons cornered Powers in an isolated area of the prison. By 1999, he had not received his sentence reduction and had become convinced that the B.O.P. was planning on transferring him out of protective custody. So he decided to escape.

He put a dummy in his bed, hid inside a grate in the rec yard and scaled the side of a building with a homemade grappling hook. From the rooftop, he jumped over a 16-foot electric fence, then climbed a second barbed-wire fence with FedEx boxes tape to his arms and legs. Once outside, he stole a car and headed to Syracuse to see his son.

When his son didn't answer his phone, he tried to visit his half sister. (She wasn't home, but when he spotted a neighbor struggling with a lawn mower, he cut her grass.) The police picked him up after two days. A reporter from The Syracuse Post-Standard interviewed Powers at the local jail and asked him whether he would do it again. The article reads as a lighthearted human-interest feature about a gentleman bandit, and Powers's affirmative answer became the kicker. "Without life's normal sensations and emotions and feelings," Powers said, "what have you got?"

In October 2001, Powers, now considered a flight risk, was transferred to the ADX – where all three of the Aryan Brotherhood members Powers had testified against were serving their own sentences. Powers's PTSD intensified. Tagged as a snitch and, more damaging, as an enemy of the Aryan Brotherhood, even unaffiliated prisoners avoided speaking to him. The guards, Powers said, treated him differently as well. If the whole unit is against a prisoner, he explained, "it's like, the majority prevails. If they're trying to be cool with the rest of these guys, then they can't be cool with you."

Over the next decade, Powers, by any rational accounting, lost his mind. He cut off both earlobes, chewed off a finger, sliced through his Achilles' tendon, pushed staples into his face and forehead, swallowed a toothbrush and then tried to cut open his abdomen to retrieve it and injected what he considered "a pretty fair amount of bacteria-laden fluid" into his brain cavity after smashing a hole in his forehead. In 2005, after slicing open his scrotum and removing a testicle, Powers was sent to the *(Continued on Page 56)*

Left: From David Shelby. Right: From Jack Powers.

JUDGMENT CALLS

Different nations take very different approaches to the convicts they deem the most dangerous.

By Jessica Benko

INCARCERATION RATE (PRISONERS PER 100,000 RESIDENTS)

- 600+
- 599-450
- 449-300
- 299-150
- 149-0
- N/A

San Pedro Prison, Bolivia
The prison's only goal is to prevent escape. There are no guards inside the walls. Its 1,500 inmates must purchase or rent their cells, according to their means; they govern their own community, complete with markets for food, clothes and drugs. Wives and children often stay inside, and there are two nurseries within the prison.

Ezeiza Penitentiary Complex, Argentina
Despite underground movement-detection cables, remotely controlled doors and extensive video surveillance, 13 inmates managed to escape at once from the maximum-security facility in August 2013 through a tunnel. In all, roughly 100 inmates escaped from Argentine prisons in 2013, most likely aided by corrupt staff.

Pollsmoor Prison, South Africa
An elaborately structured prison gang called the Numbers Gang — and its subgangs, the 26s, 27s and 28s — plagues the overcrowded Pollsmoor. The Numbers have operated for decades throughout South African prisons, with baroque hierarchies and rituals; its power is so widespread that years of attempts to eradicate the gang have failed.

Petak Island Prison, Russia
Here, in total isolation on an island in Novozero Lake, 193 prisoners serve life sentences. Only two small wooden bridges connect the island to the mainland. Prisoners spend 22.5 hours a day in a small-group or single cell and the other 1.5 hours in an outdoor cage.

Qincheng Prison, China
This maximum-security prison holds many political prisoners who are accused of crimes against the state. According to several memoirs, prisoners are largely isolated from one another and identified only by number. More recently, it has become home to corrupt politicians, who are held in more luxurious conditions. ◆

Al-Ha'ir Prison, Saudi Arabia
Though Saudi Arabia is routinely criticized for public floggings, executions and suspected use of torture, this high-security prison for inmates under terrorism charges is known for its high level of comfort. It offers welfare payments for families and a hotel for extended family visits — all intended to entice dissidents to recommit to society.

Tihar Jail, India
The largest prison complex in South Asia, Tihar encompasses nine high-security facilities with more than 11,000 inmates, despite an official capacity of 5,200. Nearly 25 percent are in for murder charges or convictions. Rehabilitation programs include art and music therapy, meditation and workshops for carpentry, baking and textiles.

Bang Kwang Prison, Thailand
Known as Big Tiger or the Bangkok Hilton, Bang Kwang holds death-row inmates and those with sentences longer than 25 years. Until 2013, it was common practice to weld metal shackles onto the legs of prisoners for years at a time; permanently for those condemned to death.

JAIL BREAKS How the G20 nations divide on three controversial subjects. (* indicates unknown)

Life imprisonment without parole: ●
Juveniles tried as adults: ◉
Capital punishment: ○

Argentina ●	France	Japan ○	South Korea ○
Australia ● ◉	Germany ◉	Mexico	Turkey ●
Brazil ○	India ○	Russia ○	United Kingdom ● ◉
Canada ◉	Indonesia ●* ○	Saudi Arabia ●* ◉ ○	United States ● ◉ ○
China ● ○	Italy	South Africa ◉*	

Source for map: International Center for Prison Studies. Sources for survey: Amnesty International; University of San Francisco Law School.

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