

#5

USES & EFFECTS OF: CONTROL UNIT PRISONS

BONNIE KERNESS
INTERVIEWS:



Black Liberation Army POW

*Sundiata
Acoli*



Black Liberation Army PP

*Jalil
Muntaqim*

These interviews were conducted to be heard at:

**NATIONAL
CAMPAIGN
TO STOP
CONTROL
UNIT
PRISONS**

**Hearings On
Control Unit
Prisons In The
United States**

EXCERPTS FROM THE HISTORY OF CONTROL UNITS

PRESENTATION GIVEN BY

MS. BONNIE KERNESS AT THE NORTHEAST
HEARINGS ON CONTROL UNITS

APRIL 27, 1996



A Control Unit is a prison within a prison. It is a place where people are placed not for what they have done, but rather for who they are and what they believe. While specific conditions in control units may vary, the goal of the units is to disable prisoners through spiritual, psychological and/or physical breakdown... Along with arbitrary placement, a control unit is marked by years of isolation from both the prison and outside communities while being housed in solitary or small group isolation. People in those units often spend 23 to 24 hours a day in complete sensory deprivation...

The use of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons began in 1829 and it soon became evident that people in isolation often suffered mental breakdown. Thus, the general practice of isolation in U.S. prisons was abandoned soon after... The Federal government has justified its building of the new isolation penitentiary in Florence, CO by stating that it houses the "most predatory" of U.S. prisoners... this is a lie...

The development of control units can be traced to the tumultuous years of the civil rights movement. The Viet Nam war and the prisoners' rights movement. By 1974, both the Federal prison in Marion, IL and the CA department of Corrections had isolation sections called control units... As of 1996, more than 40 control units or control unit prisons have opened across the country to the point where Human Rights Watch concluded in its 1991 report on "Prison Conditions in the United States" that; "Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the human rights situation in US prisons is a trend we observe that could be labeled 'Marionization'... the confinement... is administered by prison officials without independent supervision and leads to a situation in which inmates may in fact be sentenced twice; once by the court to a certain period of imprisonment; and the second time, by the prison administration, to particularly harsh conditions. This second sentencing is open ended - limited only by the overall length of an inmates sentence - and is imposed without the benefit of counsel..."

When we speak about the history of control units, we also have to reflect on people such as Ojore Lutalo... who is entering his eleventh year in a control unit. Ojore represents the thousands of people who have been placed in these

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Effects & Uses of Control Units

I

SUNDIATA ACOLI



The following interview was conducted by Bonnie Kerness with Sundiata Acoli from Allenwood's federal prison for the hearings on Control Units held on April 27, 1996 in Philadelphia.

Bonnie Kerness: Sundiata how are you?

Sundiata Acoli: I'm doing fine Bonnie. How are you?

B: Good. Sundiata you were one of the earliest people in a control unit in the United States in Trenton State prison and then again at Marion. Can you tell us about your experiences, both the impact of the experiences on you, and your assessment of how control units are used in this country.

S: Yes. At Trenton State Prison they created a control unit over night by rounding up two hundred- fifty prisoners. They cleared out an entire unit and began to pile us up in this unit. We had to leave all our property in the old cell and we were put in a new cell. Trenton was built before the civil war, I think 1835, so the cells were very small. You could outstretch your arms and touch both walls, you could reach over your head and touch the ceiling and they had fold up bunk beds and in order to walk around in the cell you had to fold the bunk bed back into the wall. The space was actually smaller

than the space requirement for a ninety pound German Shepard dog.

Anyway they rounded two-hundred-fifty of us up and it was really a smoke screen to round up about fifty or sixty either Political Prisoners or prisoners that were involved in African study classes, because within a month of rounding all of us up they had let everyone else out except for about fifty or sixty of us who were more politically inclined.

We had no contact visits. They immediately took our contact visits. We had no access to the law libraries or any programs, and recreation was cut to two hours twice a week in an alleyway between two buildings. The only equipment there was one parallel bar, one basketball and one basketball hoop.

And there was a tremendous amount of uproar. The main question the prisoners were asking was "why were we rounded up," and they never sufficiently answered that. And that's the nature of control units, that they never do answer that, because it's built to be able to select which prisoners they want to round up you know, which prisoners they want to put in there and hold them in there for an indeterminate amount of time.

B: Did anyone have any charges?

S: No. None of us had charges.

B: I know now in Trenton State Prison the control unit is pretty much a brand new state of the art sensory deprivation unit. Was the control unit at that time, and I think your talking about the early 70's?

S: Yeah, 1975.

B: Was it also a sensory deprivation unit?

S: Definitely sensory deprivation. Because we had to spend 23 1/2 hours a day, really 23 hours and 50 minutes in these cells all day, 10 minutes out to shower. And to be cramped in as cell that small is definitely sensory deprivation. But also there is a tremendous amount of noise in the cells because prisoners are hollering up and down the range. You have to holler up to one range to the other and there is concern about why they're locked up, you know uproars. And in the meantime the guards are harassing and instituting provocations on prisoners. So it's a continuous uproar and confusion going on.

B: Which is very much the opposite of what it is today. The folks say the silence there is eerie.

S: Yeah, it's deafening, right.

B: Can you talk a little about the time you spent in the Marion (IL) Control Unit?

S: Marion was basically the same way. When I first went to Marion, it was a general population prison, you had the control unit but the prisoners in the Marion facility itself was a general population. The same thing happened while I was at Marion that happened at Trenton State Prison. In 1983 they locked Marion down completely and turned the entire prison into a controlled prison and instituted the same basic measures. Recreation twice a week, no programs and provocations and harassment and beatings. The same thing happened at MCU (Trenton). They begin to arbitrarily implement rules that were geared to put you in a position where they could brutalize you. At Marion- the same thing. They locked down

the unit and began to take prisoners out of the cells and beat them and throw them in the hole and the same thing.

There's a report on the whole Marion thing where for nine months they roamed the prison beating prisoners at random.

B: One of the things they did in the Management Control Unit (MCU) in Trenton was they spent one entire summer, waking folks up dressed in full riot gear with the dogs. They'd wake them up at one o'clock in the morning, make them pack up and switch cages. Then two weeks later, they would do the same thing.

S: When I was in MCU (Trenton) they started that same procedure. See, what it was is that when we used to go to the yard first they would pat search us, and we would go to the yard and come back they would pat search us and we would go back to the cell. That was for recreation. One day arbitrarily in the middle of bringing people back from the yard they told a guy to strip search. And he stripped, and they said "spread your anus", and he spread his cheeks, and they said "not your cheeks, your anus." And naturally he was concerned at why he was the only one stripped searched and he didn't do it fast enough so they jumped him and forcibly spread his anus. Behind that, prisoners stopped going to the yard in protest against them beating him and the institution of an anal search.

Then they instituted a rule where every time you change your cell you had to be stripped searched. Since they couldn't do it to prisoners going to the yard, because we all stopped going to the yard. And then anytime they would change a cell, they would just arbitrarily changed your cells, and say "you're going to go from cell 16 to cell 20," you had to strip search and the same thing happened. They would demand

that you spread your anus and if you didn't do it fast enough they'd jump on you and do it forcibly. And they did that to so many prisoners because they could select the prisoners that they wanted to change cells just arbitrarily. And then they would forcibly spread your anus and then they would charge us with assault on them.

And this happened to so many prisoners and caused such an uproar between prisoners' families in the street and prisoners being charged with assault, which carries a 7 year sentence, that a federal judge finally stepped in and said you could do the same type of search with a hand held metal detector.

B: Sundiata, people are going to be listening to this interview all over the country. One of the things we're hoping is that the panels of listeners which will be listening to testimony like this will form conclusions and be willing to write those conclusions. Is there any comment that you specifically want to address to the panel of listeners about the uses of control units?

S: Yes, in particular the human control and psychological control measures that they use. First, control units were created so that prison officials could select particular people to put in those units. Then they create programs that are designed to punish you physically and terrorize you psychologically. And when all is said and done, it's an experiment in human control, how to change entire populations into informers or collaborators. Or either to break your spirit or to destroy your image and possibly destroy your person. So that's what it does, they are practicing all these experiments on prisoners in settings where they can manipulate it whichever way they want. But these techniques that they are practicing and

learning in the control units, they eventually export these same techniques to manipulate, control and divide communities in the street. So that people in general can never get together to unite against there common oppressor.

B: I always think of Angela Davis' quote, "if they come for me in the morning, they going to come for you in the night."

S: Right. That's the real sinister part about these control units. That they're experimentation factories. And that they really take these techniques, once they get them perfected and apply them in the street. And the other danger, is when people think the control units only pertain to prisoners, but it doesn't work like that.

B: Sundiata, thank you so much.

S: Thank you.

JALIL MUNTAQIM

This is Bonnie Kerness recording Jalil Muntaqim in an interview for the hearings on control units held on April 27, 1996 in Philadelphia.



Bonnie Kerness: Jalil how are you?

Jalil Muntaqim: I'm doing pretty good Bonnie.

B: Jalil, can you please give us your assessment on the purposes of a control unit, your experiences with control units either yourself or with others that you know?

J: Well my experiences with control units have basically been based upon my political activism inside the prisons and of course through the nature of my case having been a member of the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army. In this understanding, or based upon this type of experience, I have been placed in control units for what has often been considered organizing or teaching prisoners.

My experiences have been of sensory deprivation and of course, isolation. In NY State, as an example, and particularly in the Elmira institution, there are prison cells that are for the most part, sensory deprived. There are no visuals outside of the cells, except for the back of the cells which is a doorway, which looks directly towards a wall. Also the ventilation is very bad, there is no peripheral vision. My experi-

ence there in Elmira has been one where they had many individuals there who were mentally impaired. So they would make noise all hours of the day and all hours of the night.

B: Just so you know, we are seeing this all over the country. The mentally ill, very many of the folks who are let out of the hospitals onto the streets and filtered into the prisons, are now in control units. In NJ we had one man who had been tormented to death.

J: Well, it's been similar. I have not confronted anything that lead to anyone's death, but I have had times where I've experienced individuals who are so mentally out of it that they have had to have been restrained, sedated and in certain instances removed from the control unit and sent to outside hospitals. Because they could not handle the situation anymore.

B: Jalil, can you talk a little bit about some of the feelings about being inside of a sensory deprivation cage? The claustrophobic feelings, any other things you may have experienced.

J: Yes, definitely. My last experience, I did in fact have an anxiety attack. I was subject to feelings of being closed in and unable to breath from the ventilation system. The anxiety is more or less a panic attack. My ability to handle it has worked in trying to calm my nerves, going into meditation, trying to exercise, trying to create a another mental environment, think about other things. Just basically trying to control myself from not succumbing to such panic attacks.

B: Can you talk a little bit more about your experience with

the political uses of these isolation units?

J: Well, for instance in CA as one of my experiences, when I was in the Adjustment Center in San Quentin, they had an area they called "max-B" where they kept individuals who they felt were capable of influencing the prison population. Either they were considered to be gang members or they were considered to be political as was my case. What they did was essentially to corral us into twenty-three hour lock ins and leave them there. They had no programs, no way to validate ones existence other than your own personal ability to find something to read or trying to communicate outside of your cell, more often than not, through loud talking.

But yes, they use it as a way to isolate individuals who they consider to be political and prevent them from influencing the general prison population. Naturally, when it comes time for individuals to reach their parole date, that is a strike against them.

B: You mean because they were placed in a control unit, it is a strike against them?

J: Right, whether they did anything or not.

Then there is also the situation whereby there is a lack of communication to the outside world. You're not having the opportunity to get onto the phone as regularly. Or your mail is being tampered with by the administrators. Those who control the control units feel that they can do that without impunity, due to the fact that you are isolated.

B: Right, and were seeing that all over the country too. With people in isolation, the tampering with the mail is much, much more prevalent.

J: Tampering as well as censorship, you know, so you don't have the type of information that one would say supports your ideas or your politics.

B: People will be listening to this tape who don't know very much about control units, about control unit conditions, about the purposes for control units. Is there anything that we haven't talked about?

J: I think another thing that is important to understand as far as control units is the experiences of additional constraints or restraints. For instance going to and from the shower, going to and from the one hour recreation period. Often times they would handcuff a person and essentially make them defenseless against any provocations by the administrators. And that's a concern. In CA, naturally, because of the gangs, they can restrain a person and essentially set him up to be injured when they would let out a rival gang member while the other person is restrained in hand cuffs or some other type of restraints. So those are concerns that people should really consider in their deliberations on the issues of control units.

B: Yeah, in Jersey they shackle them and in Florence (CO) they submit them to anal probes coming and going. Which is pure humiliation, it has nothing to do with security.

J: It's degrading. And those are ways in which they try to break a person down psychologically.

B: Which is the ultimate aim.

J: Sure

B: Jalil, thank you very much, it was good to talk to you.

J: Your welcome.

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Prisoners addresses may change

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sensory deprivation cells based on who they are and what they believe. Throughout the country, we see in these units former members of the Black Panthers, former members of Black Liberation Army formations, Islamic militants, Puerto Ricans fighting on behalf of independence, members of the American Indian Movement, jailhouse lawyers and prison activists. Hardly the "most predatory" prisoners, as the government would have us believe. The history of control units is unalterably entwined in the history of those who have opposed the social problems of this government. In 1978, Andrew Young stated that US prisons held "hundreds, maybe thousands of people I would categorize as political prisoners". The outcry from the government was deafening and Mr. Young was forced to retract his statement. The government, however, has acknowledged developing an intelligence program called COINTELPRO which had as its objective the crippling of the Black Panther Party and other radical forces in the sixties and seventies, and it is no accident that the advent of the control units parallels the use of COINTELPRO by government forces...

Control units are clearly punishment and arguably torture. They embody the central threat to human rights that the constitution was intended to check - arbitrary state power. and it is the growing use of that arbitrary state power which is so frightening to me. The treatment and surveillance that control unit prisoners endure is worse than inhumane. It is physical and psychological torture. If we dig deeper into the existence of such practices, the political function they serve is inescapable. Police, the courts and the prison system all serve as social control mechanisms.

Prisons reflect both the structure of a society and the nature of the struggle against that structure. Many of the men and women living in control units are visionaries for a more just, humane and non-racist society. For the most part, they are political dissidents, prison activists and jailhouse lawyers. I believe that the government has attempted to build a wall of silence around them. Not surprisingly, those of us that speak out on their behalf often find ourselves under some form of government surveillance. The overall situation in the country in terms of growth of control units, the conditions in them and the number of people being caged in isolation/sensory deprivation is worsening...

I have come to believe that the politics of the police, the courts, the politics of the prison system and the politics of the control unit, is the politics of social control - and it effects every one of us in ways that are a call to action. The criminal justice system that operate these places need to examine their ability to continue to function as they have been functioning. Congress needs to exercise its oversight authority over the Bureau of Prisons. Above all, though, the public itself needs to recognize that we are all "wardens" in some sense and we all have a responsibility to gain the facts and act on the knowledge that we gain...

Thank you.

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