

Prisons and “The Degree of Civilization”

By [David Swanson](#)

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Prisoners risking death by refusing food in the Pelican Bay supermax, and those hunger striking in solidarity in prisons around California are a judgment of our sickness.

“The degree of civilization in a society,” said Dostoyevsky, “can be judged by entering its prisons.”

Civilization is something we no longer seem to aspire to. The United States locks up more people and a greater percentage of its people than anyone else. We lock them in training centers for anger and violence. We subject them to rape, assault, humiliation, and isolation. We throw the innocent in with the guilty, the young with the old, the nonviolent with the violent, the hopeful with those who’ve lost all interest in life.

And we routinely subject large numbers of prisoners to the torture of near-total isolation. We lock human beings in little boxes for 22 or 23 hours per day. When it’s done to an accused whistleblower like Bradley Manning, we protest. But what about when it’s done to thousands of people, many of them baselessly accused of being members of gangs? Where is the outrage?

We should be refusing to eat. We should be shutting down our government with nonviolent action. We should be risking the lives we have. Instead the burden has fallen to those who have little or no lives to risk. The prisoners themselves are taking action and gaining power from behind bars.

Look at the prisoners’ [demands](#). They want an end to group punishment of individual rules violations. That seems like a basic requirement of justice. Bombing a nation because some terrorists spent time there may make sense to our politicians, but it is horribly unjust to the people living and dying under the bombs. Stopping and searching people who look like they might be immigrants may make sense to those whose hatred of immigrants is distorting their thinking, but it is outrageously unjust from the perspective of the innocent people repeatedly harassed. Punishing everyone in a prison for something one person did make sense if the goal is cruelty. But will the innocent prisoners thus abused eventually emerge from prison believing they’ve been given fair treatment by a justice system with which they should comply? Or will they be released thirsting for vengeance? Or thirst for vengeance while never being released? And will we be able to keep what we have done to them secret from ourselves? Will we not continue to grow more ill?

They want an end to the use of completely unreliable criteria for labeling a prisoner a gang member and on that basis subjecting them to the torture of isolation. Should a tattoo or the word of someone offered decent food in exchange for a name really be the test of whether a human being should be placed at risk of severe mental damage? Should anything? Would

we stand for another nation treating people this way? Don't tell me it's necessary and responsible. It would cost a lot less money to offer children decent schools and food and guidance than it does to imprison men. This is a luxury. It's a sick indulgence of a wealthy country. We can afford to engage in massive sadistic cruelty. But that shouldn't mean that we have to do it.

They want compliance with the recommendations found in the latest study our government produced to make itself feel better despite ignoring it. They want an end to the long-term solitary confinement that takes people's minds away. They are risking death by starvation to end death by deprivation of human contact. We could risk a lot less to do it for them.

They want adequate food provided to all prisoners and an end to the practice of depriving some and feeding others as a tool for manipulating people like wild beasts. They want basic decency, including the ability to make one phone call per week. They want standards of health and humanity that do not even begin to approach those we are required by international treaty to provide to prisoners of war. For that matter, they want to cease being treated in a manner that would get you locked up with them if you treated a dog or a cat that way.

All the prisoners are asking of us is that we [spread the word](#). But in fact they are not asking this of us. They are offering it to us. They are leading us where we need to go, and doing it from behind bars. We would need to go to this place even if we had no prisons. We are allowing our government to destroy the physical environment. Our children will have no more reason to eat than these prisoners do, if we fail to act. We are allowing our government to murder on a massive scale through what it calls the "Defense" Department, a name as skillfully chosen as that of a "Corrections" Department. We need to do some real defending and correcting. Some of us have [plans for October](#). The least among us are showing us how right now.

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