

Isolating the Messenger: The Solitary Confinement of Bradley Manning

by Polly Mann and Patty Guerrero

Is the desire to expose the truth, reason enough to torture someone with solitary confinement?



Pickets were out in support of Bradley Manning in front of Senator Amy Klobuchar's office, Minneapolis after she called for life imprisonment for Manning. Some local supporters also joined Veterans for Peace in Washington, D.C. See more at bradleymanning.org.

Bradley Manning is the accused whistle-blower comparable to Daniel Ellsberg who released the Pentagon Papers during the Viet Nam War (or to courageous former FBI agent Colleen Rowley now a peace and justice activist with WAMM). But while Julian Assange is the center of the Western world's attention regarding WikiLeaks, Private Bradley Manning of the U.S. Army is scarcely mentioned. There's good reason. When WikiLeaks released raw footage revealing U.S. soldiers in a helicopter killing two unarmed newsmen on a Baghdad street and injuring children who were passengers in a vehicle that stopped to help the victims, it reverberated around the

world. Bradley Manning was accused of downloading this and other material so that it could be made public. And its veracity could not be denied.

Private Manning was arrested and put in Camp Afrikan in Kuwait in May of last year. He was then transferred to the U.S. Marine brig in Quantico, Virginia, and has been in solitary confinement (23 out of 24 hours per day) ever since, charged with illegally communicating, transmitting and delivering national defense information.

Manning's online photo is pleasant, open-faced, boyish. Daniel Elsberg said, "[from] what I've heard so far of Manning and Assange...they are two new heroes of mine." But Manning spent his 23rd birthday in confinement. His alleged crime was providing the world with information that governments did not want provided. Where did he come from? He was born in Oklahoma and lived for some years, after his parents' divorce, with his mother in Wales, and then returned to the U.S. and at 18 enlisted in the U.S. Army.

In discussions with computer hacker Adrian Lamo, who later reported him to authorities, Manning said he was disturbed at evidence of U.S. machinations throughout the Middle East. He was hopeful that the videotapes would result in worldwide discussion, debates and reforms. In allegedly forwarding the information to WikiLeaks, Manning expressed his feelings that he hoped worldwide discussion would take place: "If not, then we're doomed as a species. I will officially give up on the society we have if nothing happens. I want people to see the truth regardless of who they are, because without information, you cannot make informed decisions." (Lawrence Winans. Dissenting Democrat blog: advocating for democracy, not Democrats. December 27, 2010)

Is the desire to expose the truth reason enough torture someone with solitary confinement? On December 15th activist and journalist Glenn Greenwald gave details of Manning's incarcerations on Amy Goodman's "Democracy Now." Under constant surveillance, he is barred from all exercise, denied bed sheets (his blanket is a rough, scratchy synthetic) or a pillow, subjected to insanity-inducing conditions of isolation, such as 24 hours of light, and regularly administered doses of antidepressants to prevent his brain from snapping from the effects of isolation. (Is this a case where medical personnel are violating their oath of "Do No Harm"?)

Conditions such as this increase an individual's vulnerability and can destroy a person's mind and drive him or her into insanity. A March 2010 article in The Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law explains that psychological stressors such as isolation can be as clinically distressing as physical torture. Surgeon and journalist Atul Gawande in a widely-praised March 2009 New Yorker article concluded "all human beings experience isolation as torture." His article states that "EEG studies going back to the 1960s have shown diffuse slowing of brain waves in prisoners after a week or more of solitary confinement."

Dr. Stuart Grassian, a prominent psychiatrist who has written and spoken extensively on solitary confinement of a prisoner alone in a cell for all or nearly all of the day states that such a condition can cause severe psychiatric harm. The prisoner will likely suffer permanent harm as a result of such confinement. A long sentence of punitive confinement is an imposition of pain of staggering proportions, and it is imposed without due process safeguards that anchor our system of criminal justice.

A 2006 bipartisan National Commission on American Prisons called for the elimination of solitary confinement. "Prisoners who end up locked in their cells 23 out of 24 hours a day every day can only be described as living under torturous conditions." The report documented numerous psychiatric studies of individuals who became overly anxious, confused and hallucinated with sudden violent and self-destructive outbursts. There are horrifying stories of individuals subjected to isolation who have succumbed to extreme long-term psychological breakdown.

It seems we have not come very far from the Middle Ages and even Colonial America. When Alexis de Tocqueville of France toured our prison system in America, he wrote of the utter "perfect" desolation of the American penitentiary, of the "profound silence" within its "vast walls" likening it to the "silence of death."

During a tour of the US in 1842, Charles Dickens wrote with pathos, "The system here is rigid, strict and hopeless solitary confinement. Over the head and face of every prisoner who comes into this melancholy house, a black hood is drawn, and in this dark shroud, he is led to the cell from which he never again comes forth, until his whole term of imprisonment had expired. He is a man buried alive---dead to everything but torturing anxieties and horrible despair."

In many studies it has been shown that even where there was semi-starvation, physical pain and sleep deprivation, social and sensory isolation was still the central pathogenic factor in such confinement.

People should be stunned and amazed and saddened that our own government can treat a U.S. citizen/soldier like this. Even after a person has been in solitary confinement and is eventually released he will probably never be the same again. The potentially catastrophic effects of the restricted environmental stimulation have been the subject of voluminous medical material.

Not only is the restriction of environmental stimulation and social isolation toxic to mental functioning, but also locking a person up like this is unethical and unlawful. Dr. Steven Miles of the University of Minnesota's Ethical Studies Department and author of *Oath Betrayed: America's Torture Doctors* says that the conditions of confinement of Bradley Manning are beyond those necessary for pretrial detention of a person who is not convicted or adjudicated dangerous. "These punitive detention conditions violate the 'United Nations' Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment' that says

that 'cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment should be interpreted so as to extend the widest possible protection against abuses, whether physical or mental, including the holding of a detained or imprisoned person in conditions which deprive him, temporarily or permanently, of the use of any of his natural senses, such as sight or hearing, or of his awareness of place and the passing of time.' This standard specifically prevents the United States from using so-called torture-lite. The pretrial and preconviction treatment of Mr. Manning may violate the Convention Against Torture that states that suffering in prison may not exceed that which is 'inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions.'"

In an online article by Dennis Leahy at World Beyond Borders, Leahy says he spoke with Lt. Brian Villiard from the Public Affairs Office at Quantico Prison. Lt. Villiard indicated that because Manning is assessed as a POI (Preventive of Injuries detainee) he is receiving treatment which otherwise he wouldn't be subjected to?such as the rough "blanket," the 24 hours of light and sleep deprivation.

Lawrence Winans of Dissenting Democrat had this to say: "The U.S. ought at least to abide by minimal standards of humane treatment in how it detains him. The treatment of Pt. Manning particularly egregious where he has merely been charged, but never convicted, of wrongdoing. These inhumane conditions make a mockery of Barack Obama's repeated pledge to end detainee abuse and torture, as prolonged isolation is at least as damaging, just as violative of international legal standards, and almost as reviled around the world as the waterboard, hypothermia and other Bush-era tactics that caused so much controversy."

There is a Bradley Manning Support Network (bradleymanning.org) whose advisory board members include among others: Medea Benjamin, co-founder of Code Pink; Daniel Ellsberg; former State Dept. official and U.S. Army Col. Ann Wright (ret); documentary filmmaker Michael Moore; former CIA analyst Ray McGovern; executive director of Iraq Veterans Against the War Jose Vasquez; and Kathleen Gilberd, co-chair of the National Lawyers Guild's Military Law Task Force. The website contains petitions, donation certificates, etc. This support network calls upon Quantico Base Commander Col. Daniel Choike and Brig Commanding Officer CWO4 James Averhart to put an end to the inhumane, degrading conditions Bradley Manning is subject to. People are asked to phone Col. Choike at +1-703-784-4242 or write to him at 3247 Elrod Ave, Quantio, VA 22134, to ask that Bradley Manning's human rights be respected, that he be treated mercifully and that his lawyers redouble their efforts to remove the POI status.

Polly Mann is a co-founder of WAMM and continues to be active with the organization. Her column appears regularly in the WAMM newsletter. Patty Guerrero is a long-time WAMM member, founder of Conversational Salons at the Mad Hatter's Tea House, St. Paul and is an activist on the Tackling Torture at the Top Committee (T3).