Many things can be said about prisons in America. Like most things there are multiple, often competing perspectives. Policy makers, prison administrators, correctional officers, crime victims, average and ordinary citizens all have their own varying vantage point on an issue which plays such a large part in the societal landscape of America. What follows is my own perspective, and it comes from that of experienced prisoner.

Not wanting to waste space or bore you to death telling my story I will paint some broadstrokes, since context is important. I am white, 49, smart, but with a terrible propensity for stupidity. I was raised in the suburbs of Chicago, observed a bitter and nasty divorce of my parents at 8 and my mom and me and my brother were probably the only trio in America to live on both sides of our next door neighbor. Dad went to Miami to marry his mistress and we three moved from a beautiful, 2-story five-bedroom house to a 3-bedroom ranch - on the other side of our neighbor! A turbulent and volotile adolesence followed what had been a very happy and wonderful childhood. I did not even finish the 9th grade. At 15 I was exiled to Miami to live with my dad, (and his new family); that ended in disaster.

Before I turned 17 I was on my way to prison for the armed robbery of a pizza delivery man. I was so drunk at the time of the crime that detectives had to tell me the next morning what I had done. Off to prison. I got 10 years; did 4 1/2. When I got out at 20 I married a beautiful and accomplished woman of 29 who already had a Masters degree, compared to my G.E.D.

The marriage unfortunately didn't last longer than 4 years, but 25 years later Linda and I are great friends. A year after my divorce I was convicted in the Middle District of Pennsylvania, federal court, for 5 counts of Bank Robbery. I spent the next 10 1/2 years in one of America's most notorious Maximum Security federal penitentiaries in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, which had housed many of America's most infamous, including Al Capone, John Gotti, Whitey Bulger, Joe Gallo. Even Al Pacino's fictional character in "Carlito's Way" had been in Lewisburg. During my 10-year stay there were not dozens but hundreds of high-profile, sometimes very famous criminals. Lewisburg was not merely serious, it was ultra-violent and if you could not at least swim with the sharks you would not be there long. I arrived in 1994. In '95 there was a major riot, in '96 a double murder, in '97 another double murder. Before I arrived in '94 HBO did a documentary about Lewisburg; while I was there The History Channel did one; Leslie Stahl was there twice for stories and later Lisa Ling would do a 2-hour piece for National Geographic Explorer about the double murder that happened in '97.

Lewisburg Really was the Big House. Ten years there was a unique and difficult social experience. But the Sun came up and went down enough times for me to get out.

In 2005 I re-entered the world with high hopes of resurrecting my life and Righting my direction. Although I was well-poised to succeed in life for more than the first time, and even though I got off to a tremendous and impressive early start after those long years in Lewisburg, I once again chose the Road to

Ruin and self-inflicted doom. It's embarressing to admit, but side-tracked by the tragic combination of addiction and recklessness, after less than 4 years of freedom I was indicted on a 7-count bank Robbery indictment. Then to show the profoundly deep capacity to exacerbate my self-inflicted demise, 10 months after my arrest, after pleading guilty but before Sentencing, I escaped custody while be transported to a court hearing. Although handcuffed and shackled I overpowered and disarmed my 2 transport officers, left them handcuffed together in their car (after changing clothes with one of them), and got away. I Robbed another bank the following morning. Attempting to get out of town in a stolen car I was captured after a short but dramatic chase which ended in a spectacular crash. (Google it if you want to see pictures). When it was all said and done the federal Court gave me 62 years. On an appeal (that I wrote) I got it down to 37 years. The State Court gave me a concurrent 30-year sentence; this was for car-jacking, involving the car I crashed in. At 49 I have now spent exactly half of my life in prison and won't get out until I am 67, at least. It's hard to tell a life story in 750 words but that is the short version. That is the sad outline of a squandered life. Now that the humiliating part is out of the way, I'll give my own perspective about prison.

Broadly and generally speaking, prison is terrible no matter what. Even if you're in an "easy" prison with little violence and a variety of available activities to participate in, being separated from society and confined hurts. Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary was dangerous; Mistakes could be deadly, or at the very least, costly. You had to

Know what to do and what not to do. I saw many men, even bad-ass mother fuckers, smacked. But if you knew how to avoid the landmines it was not terrible from top to bottom. Here's what I mean: Cell doors opened at 6:00 a.m. and we were only locked in our cells from 10:00 p.m. until 6:00 a.m. You could move around the joint at will - yard, chapel, gym, library, barbershop, arts & crafts, etc... If you didn't have to be at a job assignment you could go where you wanted. The agenda of the administration was to keep things moving and leave guys more or less alone to do their time. Murders resulted in lockdowns; non-fatal stabbings, assaults and fights were swept off the road in minutes and things moved on with barely an interruption. Lewisburg was a pervasively ugly place and it was a constant challenge to get through months and years surrounded by 1,000 of America's hardest convicts. But you could, to some degree, devise a routine that was constructive and productive, which was deemed successful merely if it kept despair at bay, which was always lingering, always stalking.

Now, years later, I find myself in what can only be described as one of the worst prisons in America: Menard State Penitentiary in Illinois. (This is the prison Harrison Ford was en-route to in "The Fugitive" when the prison bus went off the road.) Lewisburg was certainly very dangerous, but that is not necessarily synonomous with terrible. Probably 95% of the violence had reasons behind it; not always reasonable reasons, but reasons nonetheless; so if you knew how to navigate through the maze you could stay untouched by it all. Menard, by comparison, has very little significant violence but is very terrible.

If you're of the opinion that prisons should be awful and designed to crush and obliterate the prisoner's sense of humanity then Menard is your ideal prison. If, on the other hand, you believe it might be a good idea to provide prisoners a chance to make themselves better; to seriously contemplate giving life another go when they are released with an improved conception of what life can be, be assured, prisons like Menard achieve the very opposite. To do time in Menard means a great likelihood of being broken, and if not broken at least damaged, perhaps slowly, perhaps subtley, but inevitably the damage is done.

Unlike Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary, which was certainly maximum security, and unlike most maximum security prisons in America, here in Menard, even when things operate normally, we are locked in our cells 157 hours a week (there are 168 hours in a week). Two recreation yards a week, 4 1/2 hours each on yards with zero shelter, only doorless porta-potties and no running water. Besides the 2 yards there is gym once a week for 90 minutes. That's it; the rest of your living hours are spent in your cell, except for a 15-minute trip to the chow-hall and that's only for dinner. Breakfast comes to our cells at 4:00 a.m., for some insane reason and then lunch at 9:15 in the morning. Showers are 3 times a week.

Now, even though I am a big believer in love and feel that it gives life a fuller, richer sense of enjoyment, I would find it difficult to spend 157 hours a week out of 168 hours locked in a cell the size of a closet with a woman I genuinely loved and cared for; sharing that space with another man day in and day out is a constant difficulty.

Adrian Bejan, professor at Duke University, said, "When movement does not have the freedom to change and find greater access, life ends." To be this stationary, this immobile and this confined is demoralizing and dehumanizing. I live and exist only in this cell, and to share it with someone you may or may not have much in common with is a source of near constant friction and stress and ends in violence frequently.

But the overall tension of the joint and the challenge of being here is exacerbated - even cultivated - by the administration here and how they run the joint. Deprivation and antagonism seem to be part of the agenda; certainly deprivation of movement is first and foremost and the antagonism comes from the petty and vindictive mentality and policies of the prison staff, (not all of them, of course). In all honesty it seems at the moment that we are in a trend towards improvement here but that being said, Menard is still a very hard place to live.

The extreme confinement we are subjected to, in combination with the heavy-handedness of the powers that be, breeds a very high degree of frustration, anger, animosity and depression that is never alleviated but instead is always churning. I could write so many pages describing what life is like here and give example after example of why Menard is undoubtedly one of America's worst prisons. I'll just say a few things.

The tendency of the administration is to drastically over-react to incidents which in reality require very little response at all. Here is an example: When they run recreation the lines go out one floor at a time. My housing unit, the East House, has 2 sides, 5 floors

per side with a total population of 500. About 2 months ago while lines were going outside to the Rec yards 2 guys got into a fight. I saw the whole thing. The C/O's, of which there are many, yelled and ordered them to stop, which they did. The fight itself was lame, not one drop of blood and no bystanders interferred. All us inmates were made to sit on the ground (as we always are when something happens) and we sat there waiting to see what the decision makers would decree. Their decision: lockdown.
Every inmate was handcuffed and escorted by a C/O back into the unit, back into our cells. We were locked in our cells for 2 weeks. The morning we came off lockdown we went back on lockdown because someone got caught with a knife. How about this, if 2 guys get into a fight - especially one that only lasts 10 seconds and no one is hurt - why not take those 2 guys to the hole (segregation) and leave the other 498 guys to go on with their day? What exactly does locking in their cells the 498 guys who did nothing accomplish? And if one guy decides to carry a knife in a Maximum Security prison and gets caught with it why not put him in the hole and be done with it?
The collective frustration at repeatedly going on lockdowns for really insignificant incidents never abates because the cycle of lockdowns never slows. What does the administration here want, an incident free prison? That's impossible and absurd. This is a Maximum Security prison, after all; and the East House is the worst housing unit in Menard, after all. There are hundreds of men just in East House doing sentences that are so long they will never get out or at best they will be old men.

We are locked in our cells for over 150-hours a week when things operate normally; there are zero programs to speak of- at all; the food is horendous; there is a degree of gang activity and the administration says, "Behave, don't cause any problems". And when an incident happens, even a small one, the the tendency is to over-react and resort to collective punishment. In the history of mankind there has never been a utopian society, and there never will be. Violence in prison, especially a max joint is as normal as hotdogs at the ballpark.

Here is what the powers in the federal penitentiary, and the Federal Bureau of Prisons as a whole understood and that the powers here don't seem to want to consider: you absolutely cannot de-weaponize a maximum security prison, violence is absolutely inevitable, and collective punishment is stupid. The best thing to do is try to keep things moving; you keep things isolated by keeping things moving, not by pressing the lockdown button at every opportunity. That only exacerbates tensions and gives frustrated men more opportunity to fixate on their frustration.

Menard cannot be talked about without talking about the "tac-team", (tactical team). When incidents happen that the powers that be characterize as serious (they rarely are truly serious), they call in the tac-team, which convicts have nicknamed "orange crush" because of the orange jumpsuits tac-team members wear.

Here's how it goes: Some incident happen, usually minor but which the administration can use as an excuse to bring in the tac-team.

The tac-team doesn't show up for a couple days because the team is made up of hundreds of C/O's, so a majority of the team is bussed in from other prisons. The tac-team operation usually begins around 7:30 in the morning and we know a few minutes ahead of time that they're coming because they shut off all the water right before they come into the unit. They do this presumably to prevent anyone from flushing anything down the toilet but this is useless because we can just through shit out from the bars rather than get caught with it. (God forbid you happen to be sitting on the toilet at the moment!) Moments after the water goes off hundreds of C/O's march into cell house, all wearing orange jumpsuits, black boots, plexi-glass riot helmets with the face mask and they all carry a wooden stick, 1 1/4 inch in diameter and about 3 1/2 feet long. They bang on the bars of each cell as they walk down each gallery and one of these guys stops at each cell. Everyone has to get naked and be searched, including of course the good old bend over and spread 'em routine. We put on our pants, shirts and shoes (no socks, t-shirts or underwear allowed); we are handcuffed behind the back, tightly, marched out of the cell, out of the cell house and to the chapel, which is about a 300-yard walk. There are enough C/O's (with their sticks) to stand shoulder to shoulder on either side of us convicts for the entire 300 yards. If you bring your head up or even your eyes someone will say immediately, "Head down! Eyes down!" If you're told a second time you better listen; the sticks are not just for show.

In the chapel we sit, handcuffed behind the back, heads down, no talking for about 2 hours while all our cells are searched.

"Searched" is putting it nicely; it is a ransacking. It is a totally miserable experience and all it accomplishes is a dramatic demonstration of power, and an extra dose of misery for us. It's very analogious of a group of peasants being supressed by the heavy-handed arm of the nobility in the Middle Ages. In 20 months in Menard I've gone through this at least 8 times, almost always because of what a couple or a few did and only once or twice was for something serious, like a multi-man fight between C/O's and inmates. In 10 years in the federal penitentiary I went through one similar mass-shakedown - one, in 10 years - and that was the result of a double-murder (and they didn't leave us handcuffed for hours)! Apparently, before I came to Menard the whole "orange crush" experience used to be much worse; lawsuits brought changes. (By the way, there are no double murders in Menard, not even single murders).

For myself life in the custody of the Illinois Department of Corrections is made even worse by my designation as a Level E inmate, (the "E" is for Extreme Escape Risk). Out of approximately 40,000 inmates in Illinois prisons there are less than 200 Level E inmates. Life for us is much worse, for several reasons, but the major misery of Level E designation is that we are the only inmates in Illinois that cannot have ANY contact visits. Before I came into Illinois state custody I was in federal custody in Chicago for 7 years and during those years my Mom visited me on average twice a month. In 38 months in Illinois custody I have seen her only once, through glass. It's very hard not to be able to see her; she is the ONLY family member I have in the world. My Mom turns 74 next week; I have

been told multiple times by multiple prison officials that I have zero chance of having my Level E designation rescinded, so my prospects for EVER seeing my mom again in this life are maybe 50/50, since I have to be in Illinois custody for another 10 years, (then I go back to federal custody for my final 7 years).
It is a surreal and agonizing reality to exchange one's freedom for the confinement of prison; to trade the largeness of freedom and its immense possibilities for the smallness and meaninglessness of prison. You don't have to be a sociologist to understand that every stable society has rules and laws; if we break the rules we get in trouble, and if we commit felonies we go to prison. Why do some of us disregard these rules? Why did I chose to play beyond the rules? The complex answer to that question is now mainly incidental since the damage is already done and cannot be undone. But I think about it a lot. I had good and multiple chances in life but because of my choices and catastrophic mistakes I exist now in this cell. It is a daunting challenge to orient yourself in prison, and then to calibrate that orientation day in and day out, week after week, until months blend into years with a dull hum. The routine in prison is easy enough to learn; you learn it quickly even if you hardly pay attention. But Routine is one thing, equilibrium is another thing entirely; the motions of the day - the routine - is eclipsed by the inescapable and relentless struggle to withstand the pressure of demoralization, anguish and the effects of living life every day at an extreme level of superficiality. A prisoner has to contend daily with a myriad of colliding forces, all of which are profoundly ugly. Deep regret, sometimes excruciating loneliness; persistent sorrow at

a life lost but vividly remembered. These are some of the forces, combined with the terrible deprivations of American prisons which break men and in many cases separates them from who they were. This process of separation certainly does its work when an inmate is confined to his cell for 160 out of 168 hours a week. The most haunting of it all is the terrible realization that I inflicted this very unnecessary self-doom on myself, squandering all my opportunities to enjoy a fullfilling and promising life! But as a prisoner I wish to still exist, or strive to exist, as a human being, but locked in a cell for 160 a week its hard not to feel more like an animal. My crimes were serious but not brutal or heinous; I didn't hurt anyone. And in the years that I've been in Illinois custody I haven't been written up for anything, yet I'm confined to this cell except for 3 ~~per~~ recreation periods a week. I can't have contact visits, I can't have a work assignment, there are zero classes or programs of any kind at Menard. I hope the trend of prison reform reaches this far, before the damage is done.

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