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*The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.* ~ Fyodor Dostoevsky

In the earliest days of our Republic, a group of well-meaning Philadelphia Quakers set out to reform the prison system. The idea was to remove convicts from the mayhem and corruption of overcrowded jails to solitary cells where sinners would return to mental and spiritual health through reflection. In the [Walnut Street Jail](#), no windows would distract the prisoners with street life; no conversation would disturb their penitence. Alone with God, they would be rehabilitated.

There was a small problem. Many of the prisoners went insane. The Walnut Street Jail was shut down in 1835.

But the word *penitentiary* became part of the language, and the idea of placing prisoners in solitary confinement did not die. It seemed so reasonable -- so much better than chain gangs or public stocks. New prisons opened to test the theory that solitude might bring salvation to criminals.

Charles Dickens had a keen interest in prison conditions, having witnessed his father's detention in a Victorian debtor's prison. When he heard about the latest American innovation in housing convicts, he came to see for himself. At Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary, the wretches he found in solitary confinement were barely human specters who picked their flesh raw and stared blankly at walls. His on-the-spot conclusion: Solitary confinement is torture. Dickens [wrote](#) :

I believe that very few men are capable of estimating the immense amount of torture and agony which this dreadful punishment, prolonged for years, inflicts upon the sufferers...I hold this slow

and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain, to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body: and because its ghastly signs and tokens are not so palpable to the eye and sense of touch as scars upon the flesh; because its wounds are not upon the surface, and it extorts few cries that human ears can hear; therefore I the more denounce it, as a secret punishment which slumbering humanity is not roused up to stay.

A man who had seen his share of inhumanities, Dickens pronounced solitary confinement to be "rigid, strict, and hopeless...cruel and wrong."

That was 1842. Since then, piles of scientific studies, along with the vivid accounts of victims, have confirmed what was obvious to Dickens. Solitary confinement is worse than smashed bones and torn flesh. When human beings are deprived of social contact for even a few weeks, concentration breaks down, memory fades and disorientation sets in. Eventually, many prisoners experience explosive rages, hallucinations, catatonia, and self-mutilation. Some become irretrievably insane. Far from promoting safety, the most commonly cited justification, solitary confinement often amplifies violent impulses, turning prisoners into ticking time bombs who are far more dangerous to human society upon release than they ever were to begin with (see National Geographic's [documentary](#) on the subject, available on Netflix).

Human beings need social contact for normal brain function. Solitary confinement is thus a method of inflicting traumatic injury upon the human mind. "It's an awful thing, solitary," wrote former Vietnam prisoner John McCain in [Faith of My Fathers](#). "It crushes your spirit and weakens your resistance more effectively than any other form of mistreatment." Among its legion perversities, solitary confinement turns medical doctors into torturers; renders violent criminals more aggressive, and makes prisoners cut off from human society incapable of functioning in it.

In 1890, the United States Supreme Court nearly declared the punishment unconstitutional. It is [banned](#) by the Geneva Convention, [condemned](#) by the United Nations, and either prohibited or restricted in most civilized countries. And yet today, as Atul Gawande [revealed](#) in his gut-wrenching 2009 New Yorker article, tens of thousands of Americans are tortured in this fashion every day, out of sight, in the "Supermax" prisons that have popped up like poisoned mushrooms on the American landscape since the 1980s. Some prisoners are consigned to these Houses of Unholiness for violations - both major and minor -- of prison rules. Some for gang activity. Others for trying to escape. Or for violent behavior. Some are placed there because they are mentally ill and there is nowhere else to put them -- the equivalent of

casting a sufferer of pneumonia onto an Arctic tundra.

Save for the death penalty, solitary confinement is the most extreme sanction allowed by law. Like slavery and every other form of institutionalized inhumanity, it should be banished to the dark annals of American history as an example of what happens when our humanity slumbers.

Instead, it is being used as a method of terror and coercion by the United States government upon a citizen who has not even been convicted of a crime.

As [Glenn Greenwald](#) and several other courageous journalists and bloggers have [documented](#), Bradley Manning, the 22-year-old U.S. Army Private accused of leaking classified documents to WikiLeaks, has been detained in solitary confinement for the last seven months, despite not having been convicted of any crime, having been a model detainee, and having evidenced no signs of violence or even disciplinary misdemeanors. Manning has been kept alone in a cell for 23 hours a day, barred from exercising in that cell, deprived of sleep, and denied even a pillow or sheets for his bed. As Greenwald reports, "the brig's medical personnel now administer regular doses of anti-depressants to Manning to prevent his brain from snapping from the effects of this isolation." No date for a court hearing has been set.

The message of the U.S. government to its citizens in this activity is clear: blow the whistle and your brain will be mutilated before you even have a trial.

But it may be that much to the shame of the U.S. government, our slumbering humanity is awakening. The solitary confinement -- the torture, for we must call it that -- of Bradley Manning is ironically shining a light on this brutality and tipping us off to the danger of authoritarianism. A United Nations probe is now [investigating](#) the Bradley case, and the drumbeat of outrage in the blogosphere grows louder every day. Protesters are [organizing](#)

. Whatever one thinks of Manning and his involvement in the WikiLeaks release of classified information, there can never be any justification for torture. As Greenwald argues, such practices weaken the position of the United States government, both abroad and at home. Other countries will think twice before accepting extradition requests to a place where inhumane treatment of prisoners is sanctioned. Our moral standing in the world suffers, while the American citizenry, already suspicious of post-9/11 governmental abuses of power, grows even more alarmed. What kind of legitimacy adheres to a judicial hearing when the accused has

been subject to sanity-threatening conditions? Trust and faith in American justice will deteriorate as long as such damaging practices continue.

As we spend time and rejoice with our friends and family this New Year's Eve -- enjoying the social interaction that human beings require -- let us pause for a moment to remember the thousands of people being tortured in American prisons, including Bradley Manning, and let us send our own message back to our government: We are Americans. We will not accept the intimidation and coercion of our fellow citizens, even from the Pentagon. Most assuredly, we will not accept torture in our name. Not of the accused. Not of the mentally ill. Not even of convicted criminals. When our civilized society is attacked, no matter what the justification, we will rise up to defend it.

The placement of human beings in solitary confinement is not a measure of their depravity. It is a measure of our own.