

Alcatraz and The Criminally Insane

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Period 6th US History

4/30/2012

Mass murderers, drug lords, and thieves aren't the sort of people you normally talk about with your morning coffee and eggs. In fact, most people would rather forget about these types of people completely. When an infamous criminal is caught, and their face is broadcasted all over the news, it would be quite a surprise to hear anyone wonder "I wonder if he might be innocent?". Usually the normal reaction to a criminal case is that of joy; the criminal deserves it and has no other option than to be put away for a long time. Criminals need to be locked away and forgotten; because no one wants to know what goes on behind closed prison doors. Well, no one did, until Alcatraz. Alcatraz Island caused many people to rethink their views on the criminally insane through its high profile criminals, tight security, and harsh privilege policies. "The Rock", as Alcatraz is called, was first established as a fortress for the U.S. Army in 1858. Alcatraz Island is a small island located roughly 1.5 miles from San Francisco; and because of the strong currents surrounding the island, frigid waters, and overall isolation of the island, Alcatraz was used as a prison for war criminals as early as the Civil War. It wasn't until 1868 that Alcatraz officially became a place designed for military prisoners. Throughout the early nineteenth hundreds the Island was continually renovated and changed to become the colossal fortress it became in order to hold its prisoners.

Although Alcatraz's location and facilities helped add to its ghastly reputation; what made most Americans pay attention to the small island were the prisoners housed inside. Alcatraz was designed to take in the highest profile criminals and men who couldn't be handled by any other prison. The faces inside Alcatraz were household names, dangerous men that most everyone in America knew about and feared, such as Al Capone, Alvin Karpis, and Lloyd Barkdoll.

Criminals such as Robert Stroud grew infamous through Alcatraz; as his nickname "the birdman of Alcatraz" suggests. These men were dangerous and inside Alcatraz for everything, from bank

heists to gang wars. They had been public figures and everyone was watching them. These notorious villains were heinous characters that everyone was interested in. The fact that all these men were housed inside one facility captivated the American Public. People literally couldn't tear their eyes off of Alcatraz. Images of maniacs and murderers alike, trapped on an island located offshore from San Francisco, captivated people. Not that any mild-mannered citizen would admit it, but they all secretly wondered what sort of things transpired on that desolate fortress. For the first time in centuries, people were paying attention to the sentences of the criminally insane. Americans were looking at the justice system with new eyes as they watched men being swallowed up by Alcatraz's fearsome jaws. Not a single person wished to swap places with these criminals because there was something terrifying about Alcatraz. It emanated fear, and was seen as the lowest point for a prisoner. Alcatraz was something new and bizarre, never before had the public taken such an interest in the inner-workings of prison. The men in charge of Alcatraz were all well aware of this fact too; they intended Alcatraz to be an example. Crime rates in America were at a high, and Alcatraz was out to show everyone what could be done with criminals. Because of the attention being drawn towards the prison by the high-profile criminals, for the first time Americans were faced with what being in prison looked like. The officers of Alcatraz wanted to show America how they treated these criminals, and that such dangerous men could be contained under harsh rules and conditions. For the first time, Americans had to ask themselves if that's what they thought was right? Even if these men were criminals, men and women alike still asked themselves "But do they deserve that?". Alcatraz forced a new perspective on the American public whether they wanted it or not. There was no way the public could simply forget names such as Al Capone; no one could forget the image of the prisoners on the rock. It was because these prisoners were so infamous that caused the American public to

question the cruelty of their containment. Alcatraz was as far as one could sink and as more and more of the island's cruelties were revealed; Americans were disturbed even further.

Alcatraz made no room for comfort or ease; the fortress was well-known for its harsh policies and strict regulations. It took confinement to the next level when it came to being in a prison. It was the prison to beat all other ones before it; and was worse in every way imaginable. The only things prisoners were entitled to was food, clothing, shelter, and medical attention; anything else was a privilege and a privilege that needed to be earned at that. Good behavior was required if a prisoner wanted to experience any sort of comfort. Almost all of Alcatraz's commodities had to be earned by the individual prisoners. The correctional officers were ruthless, and punishments were doled out for even the most minor of misdemeanors. Alcatraz prisoners were forced to work eight hours a day, five days a week; and they were to work on whatever they were asked to, no questions asked. New arrivals to "the Rock" were kept in Quarantine Status for thirty days and were not allowed any kind of recreational activities or interactions with other prisoners. They wanted these criminals to realize from the beginning that all misconduct was behind them; and that Alcatraz was a whole different ball-game. One of the harshest rules of Alcatraz was its strict silence law; which required that the inmates refrain from any sort of sound or talking while in their cells. Not even a whisper was allowed between inmates and violators were heavily punished. The only times inmates were allowed to speak within Alcatraz was during meals and the rare recreation period. This rule bothered some prisoners so badly, that they were driven to empty out the water of their small toilets to make crud communication devices out of the sewage system. Inmates stays in Alcatraz were far from pleasant or enjoyable; one inmate summarized Alcatraz by saying "There is so much suffering here...so much agony." (Roy Gardner, *Letters from Alcatraz*). For all the prisoners of Alcatraz, this prison was like no other. The heavily

suppressive atmosphere drove most prisoners insane and caused fear throughout all of them. When the inner-workings of Alcatraz came to light to the American public, they too were filled with fear. They had never seen such rules and restrictions; they seemed beyond harsh and borderline inhumane. It was once again a moral crisis for the American Public; an inner fight of images of fierce criminals and horrible conditions within Alcatraz. For the first time people began to question just what these men deserved, and if their crimes were really warranting this kind of treatment. Alcatraz's rules were numerous and each was more ruthless than the last, and all of its officers were more than willing to deliver punishment to any inmate straying out of line. Alcatraz was set apart from other prisons because of these rules and its notorious inmates; but that isn't all of the reasons people were forced to change their views on the criminally insane.

One huge aspect of Alcatraz that set it apart from other prisons, was the sheer amount of escapes that were attempted by its prisoners. Never before had the public seen such fantastical feats in attempt to escape a prison. Throughout the time Alcatraz was in use, there were 14 separate escape attempts by 36 prisoners. Each escape attempt was more complicated than the last and most ended in violence. Several men were shot and killed while trying to escape from the icy jaws of Alcatraz (whether it was by the officers pursuing them or by their fellow frustrated inmates). Two men also drowned in the frigid waters surrounding Alcatraz as they attempted to swim to the opposite shore in escape. The many escape attempts drew the attention of the public, just by of ludicrous some of their techniques were. One prisoner filed away the iron bars of his cell, little by little, for days on end, until he could escape through the window and attempt to make a break for shore. Another prisoner while working on laundry duty, stole a different article of clothing every single day. Eventually he had enough pieces to make a complete guard uniform and was able to stroll onto a ship leaving the island (although he was quickly discovered and

returned to his cell). Other men simply resorted to violence and assaulted correctional officers, and in one instance an officer, Royal Cline, died from the injuries he received from three men attempting to escape Alcatraz. One of the men was then shot by another officer and the other two were later put to death via gas chamber, for the death of Cline. Each attempt was more desperate than the last, and the general public could not believe the stunts that were being pulled. Never before had America seen such fervent escapes being tried, and each man seemed more desperate than the last to get out of Alcatraz. It became impossible to not question the severity of the Alcatraz sentence. With so many men trying to escape its walls, there was no way Americans could fool themselves into thinking that Alcatraz was nothing less than the horror it was. These men were willing to drown or be shot and killed, rather than stay another minute inside Alcatraz. Alcatraz had pushed so many criminals to their limit and many people began to argue if that was really what was necessary. A criminal is still a criminal, but a human nonetheless; was it really right to do what Alcatraz had been doing to these men?

For all these reasons and more, America was enraptured with Alcatraz. It was an impressive fortress, looming fiercely from its perch atop its island. Americans couldn't help but watch the fates of the famous criminals that went inside. They weren't the types of faces the public could easily forget, and so their eyes were glued to Alcatraz. That and Alcatraz itself was a place not soon to be forgotten. With its harsh rules and cramped cells; it was a new type of horrific prison. No one in their right mind wanted to go to Alcatraz, it was true rock bottom. And for many who made it there, they refused to stay. The sheer amount of escapes attempted was the final piece of the puzzle that completely changed Americans views on the treatment of the criminally insane. . Alcatraz Island caused many people to rethink their views on the criminally insane through its high profile criminals, tight security, and harsh privilege policies.

Alcatraz will be forever immortalized in the hearts of the nation of America. No one will soon forget that horrible fortress on the rocks, and the screams of the inmates trapped inside. It was the first prison to make us rethink the punishment end of the justice system and for many was the last thing they ever saw. Alcatraz will forever and always be the prison of all prisons.

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