



**Abuse, racism, torture, and savagery.** The pictures show it all. The photographs taken at Abu Ghraib Prison are difficult to view. U.S. soldiers compelling nude Iraqi prisoners into sexually degrading poses. Clusters of sexually explicit photos depicting naked Iraqis crowded together, piled up, as if to form an Egyptian pyramid. Shots of inmates apparently forced to perform oral sex and homosexual acts. Male prisoners lined up naked, genitalia exposed, some compelled to masturbate as a grinning female soldier gives the thumbs up. For the most part the prisoners' faces are hidden from us, their human characteristics masked by hoods. Only one photo puts a human likeness on the cruelty inflicted: the blood-soaked, battered body of a dead Iraqi encased in cellophane wrapping and packed in ice. The leering soldiers have taken the pictures from angles that tend to magnify the torment, the sexual degradation, and the humiliation they wanted to mete out.

Whereas these shocking photographs portray real life prisoner abuse in Iraq, over the years Hollywood has revealed the "reel" life experience on the big screen. We have seen far worse cinematic images than the Iraqi photos: the sickening sight of the warden holding a sharp gleaming straight razor in *Murder in the First*, slicing through the ankle of a young

convict dangling from the ceiling, driven mad from having spent three unrelenting years in a dark, spider- and rat-infested cell buried deep inside Alcatraz. We have viewed with horror the brutality of the chain gang system, the barbaric floggings and the harsh living conditions in the startling true story of Robert E. Burns' merciless treatment at the hands of the Georgia criminal justice system in *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*. And we could hardly even watch the humiliating sexual exploitation by the prison guards (sworn to protect them) of four young delinquents that takes place at the Wilkerson Home for Boys in *Sleepers*. Throughout cinema's history Americans have watched these prison portraits from the comfort of local movie theaters and their own homes. Yes, the shocking photographs from Abu Ghraib portray real life prisoner abuse in Iraq. But Hollywood's pictures, though fictionalized, accurately reflect the "real" conditions faced by American inmates in U.S. prisons

### **The Reel Development of the Penitentiary—The Big House Movies**

American public interest in prison movies has remained unabated from the time when Robert

Montgomery in *The Big House* portrayed a fearful playboy sentenced to ten years in prison for a death caused by his drunk driving. In the congested penitentiary we gradually discover the difficulties of survival there. The picture was an incredible success, and the title of the movie entered the American vocabulary as the gangsters of the 1930s were sent up the river to the "Big House."

Ever since that film a large number of major movie stars have wanted to play prisoner parts, ideally the romantic convict cast as the consummate outsider challenging the depraved prison system. The tradition started by Montgomery was carried on in 1932 by its most renowned actor of the period, Paul Muni, in *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* and Spencer Tracy in *20,000 Years in Sing Sing*. It was continued twice by legendary star Burt Lancaster, first in *Brute Force*, the 1947 brutal exposé of mistreatment of prisoners, and then in *Birdman of Alcatraz*, his 1962 Oscar-nominated performance as the prisoner Robert Stroud, transformed from violent offender into the pensive expert on canary life. And acclaimed actor Paul Newman portrayed Luke, a handsome, lovable misfit sent to a despotic prison work camp for two years for his destruction of public parking meters. This was the 1967 classic *Cool Hand Luke*.

In 1979 award-winning actor-director Clint Eastwood depicted convict Frank Morris in the true account of Morris' *Escape from Alcatraz*. In 1994 Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman portrayed prison comrades in Hollywood's inspirational prison film, the best picture Oscar-nominated *Shawshank Redemption*. Adding in 1995 to the sagas about Alcatraz, Kevin Bacon played a convict gone crazy by years of solitary confinement in *Murder in the First*, the real-life tale of Henry Young's brutal treatment at the nation's most notorious penitentiary. Actors' passion for such roles as quixotic convicts has endured into the new century, as we find Robert Redford as a three-star general sentenced to a maximum-security military prison run by a warden with an iron fist playing in *The Last Castle* (2001).

Naturally, prison films are concerned with showing the brutal treatment that convicts endure as they question the worth of incarceration. A crusading passion marks their genre, as a similar theme recurs in film after film: the injustice and cruelty imposed on the convicts as they try to retain a semblance of

human dignity under difficult circumstances, together with the concept of redemption through physical and spiritual suffering. *The Shawshank Redemption*, as Big House cinema goes, is Hollywood's finest example. No other prison movie has depicted as brilliantly and completely what it is like to spend years, perhaps a lifetime, as an inmate. *Shawshank's* convicts endure prison hardship magnificently. The small triumphs they accomplish fire the human spirit.

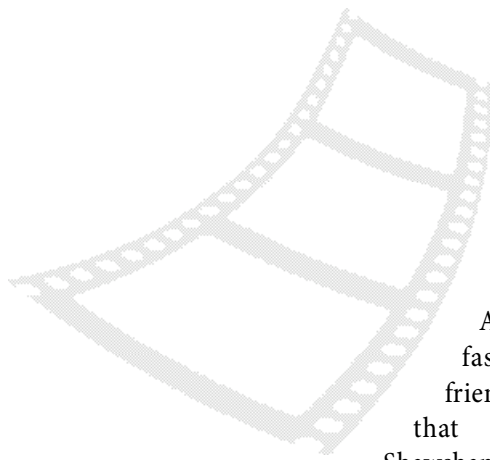
Bob Gunton portrays Samuel Norton, one of the most immoral wardens in film history. Throughout *The Shawshank Redemption* the warden poses as a man who has faith in the words of the Bible but in truth is a corrupt hypocrite who accepts bribes and kickbacks for not using the convicts as laborers to underbid building contractors. As the self-righteous warden he is a bundle of contradictions, bellowing to the new arrivals that the first rule in his prison is no blasphemy.

I'll not have the Lord's name taken in vain in my prison. . . . I believe in two things: discipline and the Bible. Here, you'll receive both. Put your trust in the Lord. Your ass belongs to me.

But right in front of the warden, during this pompous introduction, the sadistic captain of the guards (played by Clancy Brown) shouts profanities at a disrespectful prisoner and forcefully jams his baton into the convict's stomach. And so we are welcomed into the incongruity of Maine's Shawshank State Prison.

Tim Robbins plays Andy Du Fresne, a mild-mannered Boston banker charged with the double murder of his unfaithful wife and her paramour. Although Andy is clearly revealed as innocent, he is convicted on circumstantial evidence and is sentenced to two consecutive life sentences at Shawshank. Andy eventually befriends another lifer, Ellis Boy Redding (Morgan Freeman), the prison's entrepreneur, the convict who can get anything from the outside for a price. The veteran convict immediately recognizes that there is

**Convicts endure  
injustice and  
cruelty as they try  
to retain a  
semblance of  
human dignity.**



something special in Andy. “The new kid is aloof. He lacks that edge, that gallows humor and swagger.”

The story of Andy’s prison life is fashioned by the friendship with “Red” that emerges behind Shawshank’s walls. Together they share the anguish of detention and become bound together through hope and guile.

Overall, *The Shawshank Redemption* has serious intentions as it takes a candid look at the warehouse approach to incarceration. The film brings a sense of dignity, strength, and compassion to the convicts locked behind prison walls. There are memorable moments of amusement, as well as deep pain. *Shawshank* evinces a sophisticated understanding of prison living, as the horrors of penitentiary existence are visually projected in a variety of ways. We are witness to Andy continually being sodomized by Bogs Diamond and two other men (the Sisters) who unmercifully taunt and beat him senseless. We no longer need Red to convince us that “prison is no fairytale world.”

### **The Heritage of the State Prison Farm System: Brubaker**

*Brubaker*, nominated in 1980 for an Academy Award for best screenplay, is the true story of Warden Tom Murton, who became entangled in the Arkansas prison farm scandals of the late 1960s. At the turn of the twentieth century prison investigative commissions, labor unions, and pressure from all political parties led Arkansas to abolish convict leasing. Arkansas bought old plantations and turned them into prison farms. On these lands, the lawbreakers built their own housing, cultivated the soil, and produced their own food. As in other southern states, the prison farm became the ideal successor to convict leasing. Arkansas was emblematic of most southern states. Throughout its history it had experienced numerous prison scandals that had exposed mismanagement, corruption, and cruelty.

Robert Redford, as Henry Brubaker, portrays the idealistic reform warden commissioned by Arkansas Governor Winthrop Rockefeller to clean up the violence and corruption at the Arkansas prison farms. It is Brubaker’s season as warden that lies at the epicenter of the movie. His personal experiences give expression to the human conflicts that emerge in the film. The prison is a hell-hole of sadness where no free world guards are needed, as trusty convict prisoners are armed to keep order, receiving time off their sentences for shooting any convict who tries to escape.

## **From Attica to Abu Ghraib— and a Prison Near You**

by Norman Solomon

A recent obituary in the *New York Times* told about Frank Smith, “who as an inmate leader at Attica prison was tortured by officers in the aftermath of the prisoner uprising of 1971 and then spent a quarter century successfully fighting for legal damages.” Working as a paralegal after his release, Smith was a pivotal force behind a twenty-six-year civil action lawsuit that won a \$12 million settlement.

Smith’s life changed forever on September 13, 1971—the day New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller ordered 500 state troopers to storm the Attica Correctional Facility, resulting in the deaths of thirty-two inmates and eleven prison employees. The raid wounded at least eighty-six other people.

The media coverage was atrocious. Outright lies were front-page news, “informing” the public that prisoners had slit the throats of hostages when the troopers’ assault began. Corrective facts came later, with much smaller headlines, after autopsies revealed that no throats had been cut. Only when their claims

*Brubaker* exposes the prison farm structure as the absolute in slave labor, enforced by trustees' floggings with leather straps and the extreme in torture devices: the "Tucker telephone," an instrument that sends electric currents throughout the prisoner's body. Beatings and sexual assaults are shown to be common occurrences in the "dark and evil world" of the prison farm, a place "completely alien to the free world." Prisoner trustees, with government approval, sell favors, easy jobs, and coveted positions, and extort money from inmates, on any and all pretexts.

*Brubaker* depicts the real inhumanity of convicts caught in the nightmare of this penal system. The movie convincingly captures the actual events that occurred on Arkansas' abhorrent prison farms. When a new inmate arrives at the farm, the first person who interviews him is a trustee who takes away all his property. The convicts are faced with the threat of death, forced to work all day, six days a week, sometimes in inclement weather and without adequate clothing. We are eyewitness to A braham (an institutionalized convict) being subjected to electrical shocks by a Tucker telephone and then brutally beaten to death by the trustees when he dares to try to reveal to the warden the location where prisoner bodies are buried.

As *Brubaker* dramatizes, the farm convicts had free access to each other. The weaker inmates would "cling to the bars" all night in their attempt to escape sexual assault in the bunkhouse. Other prisoners fre-

quently raped inmates in the barracks. No one came to their assistance; the floorwalkers didn't interfere, the trustees looked on with indifference, even satisfaction; and the free world people on duty appeared to be helpless. *Brubaker's* depiction of the convicts' experiences on these prison farms exploded the myth that prisoners were being treated humanely and they could, if they only wanted to, just peacefully do their time. The prisons, it turned out, were nothing less than brutal "farms with slaves."

### **Failure to Communicate: *Cool Hand Luke***

*Cool Hand Luke* is a memorable, moving story of the harsh penal punishments on a southern prison road chain gang. The chain gang was born in Georgia in 1908 and dev eloped into the "good roads movement." The chain gangs flourished throughout the South as they began to build the roads the country needed for its growing industrialization and blossoming fascination with the automobile. Chained prisoners, mostly black, became a common sight along southern roadways. The prisoners were chained together in a line and worked, ate, and even slept with chains fastened around their ankles. Their food was bug-infested and rotten. Brutalities, corporal punishment (whipping with a leather strap, blows from rifle butts and clubs), and outright torture were commonplace. The classic Muni film, *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, so poignantly dramatized its

were exposed as deceptions did top state officials admit the truth.

Smith, known as "Big Black," figures prominently in a full-length documentary that debuted on national television four years ago. *The Ghosts of Attica* includes grim footage and grisly photos that had been kept under wraps by the state government for decades. The movie also features interviews with people on all sides of the tragic conflict.

After previewing the ninety-minute film, I wrote that it "packs a powerful wallop because of its deep respect for historical accuracy. Horrendous prison conditions prompted the Attica uprising, which began as an undisciplined riot and grew into a well-focused articulation of rage from men who chose to take a fateful step, fighting for human dignity."

The timing of the national premiere for *The Ghosts of Attica* on *Court TV* was unlucky—it aired just two days before 9/11—and media follow-up was sparse.

Lighting up the film, Smith's clarity and humanism seem especially notable because of what he went through. As the documentary explains, guards "tortured him for hours with cigarettes, hot shell casings, threats of castration and death, a glass-strewn gauntlet and Russian roulette."

While the uprising was multiracial, most of the 1,281 prisoners involved were black, reflecting the prison population as a whole. In the film Smith said: "Attica was about wants and needs. Attica was a lot about

horrors that Georgia began to eliminate the system.

*Cool Hand Luke* is the direct descendent of this film and stars Paul Newman, in an Oscar-nominated performance, as Luke—an attractive nonconformist sentenced to two years in a prison work camp for a minor transgression. The brutal conditions portrayed on the screen challenge the wisdom and effectiveness of the camp’s harsh penal measures. The convicts are worked like animals without any pretense at rehabilitation. Luke and other camp workers’ legs are chained together for their attempts to escape. The captain-convict relationship is drawn by calculation of raw power, unconcerned with abstractions like human rights and justice. Luke steadfastly refuses to bend to the demands of the captain (played by Strother Martin) to give up his humanity. But it isn’t enough for the captain to have his way with him; he wants to break Luke’s (as well as all the other convicts’) spirit. The film pinpoints the pointless authoritarianism designed to bring Luke and the other camp workers to their knees. Every essential necessity—to put on glasses, to take off a shirt, to go to the bathroom—requires permission from the boss.

Captured after his second failed flight, Luke’s broken and beaten body is deposited at the bunkhouse. The captain, towering over Luke lying on the floor, threatens: “You run one time; you got yourself a set o’ chains. You run twice, you got yourself two sets. You ain’t gonna need no third set ‘cause you’re gonna get

your mind right. And I mean *right*.” In the most celebrated colloquy of all prison movie genres, the captain stands over the defiant convict Luke and in a high-pitched screeching southern drawl vehemently proclaims, “What we got here is failure to communicate,” meaning Luke hasn’t completely capitulated to the contemptible prison farm system the captain embodies.

Fearful that his behavior may encourage other prisoners’ defiance, the captain is aware he must put an end to Luke’s independent nature. The bosses, encouraged by the captain, start a deliberate crusade to crush Luke’s spirit through all variations of prison cruelty. They savagely club him, deposit him in “the box,” and force him to repeatedly dig a ditch and fill it up again. But their heartless behavior doesn’t deter Luke from one last try for freedom. After this last attempt to escape, Luke is eventually surrounded by the camp authorities and takes shelter in a church. When told to surrender, Luke contemptuously mimics the captain with his own words: “What we’ve got here is failure to communicate.” Sadly, he is then forever silenced, shot in the throat by the boss in the mirror-lens sunglasses (the man with no eyes).

#### **A Parallel Universe: Abu Ghraib Prison**

Ownership of the prison at Abu Ghraib has changed but not the dreadful conditions there. Life at Iraq’s prison was “hell on Earth” and would have

class and a lot about race.”

Although U.S. media outlets have rarely dropped a hint along this line, the prison abuse at Abu Ghraib was also about class and race. From a global perspective, U.S. troops—sent to Iraq by the richest nation in the world—serve elite interests in the United States. And anti-Arab racism made it easier for Americans to torture prisoners at Abu Ghraib.

Meanwhile, back in the United States, a third of a century after the Attica uprising, just about every jail and prison continues to be “a lot about class and a lot about race.” With more than two million people now behind bars—63 percent black or Latino—the incarcerated population is vastly skewed toward low income and dark skin.

Journalists shouldn’t automatically view events from the perspective of prison management. Yet they routinely do.

Four years ago the Attica documentary caused me to write: “Reflexively assuming that the powerful white guys in positions of authority would be truthful, reporters on the story got it backwards.” When covering Attica, this media bias meant badly misinforming the American public. But that was hardly an isolated incident.

Every day, brutality is a common reality for prisoners in every region of this country. But what goes on

made the fiercest quake. U.S. government documents provide compelling evidence of “sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuse”: forced sodomy with “chemical light and perhaps a broom handle,” dogs encouraged to intimidate prisoners, guards who wrote insulting epithets on prisoners’ bodies as they were being forced into sexually explicit positions for photographing and video taping—in addition to allegations of detained women being subjected to rape behind bars. Released male prisoners have claimed guards forced them to wear women’s underwear and eat food that—containing bugs, rats, and dirt—made them vomit.

Although there is genuine alarm over the abuse at Abu Ghraib, neither the U.S. government nor many Americans seem particularly concerned about the degradation that occurs daily in U.S. correctional facilities. As political leaders begin to assess the blame, the Abu Ghraib scandal has broadened into a global outcry. The shocking scenes caught by the digital camera have played over and over again on the international stage. What the images display is unacceptable in any civilized society. The use of abuse or torture by U.S. military personnel has brought national disgrace and worldwide hatred upon our country—even as George W. Bush went on Arab television to proclaim: “This does not represent the America I know.”

One perplexing question still needs to be addressed: why is it that American citizens and lead-

ers, sickened by the dehumanizing pictures from Abu Ghraib, aren’t as incensed over the abuse that befalls people locked up in U.S. prison facilities? The incarcerated are our fathers, mothers, children, siblings, relatives, and friends. No doubt, people go to jail because there is a social need for consequences to crime. But activists for fair treatment in U.S. prisons continue to struggle with an apathetic public seemingly convinced that no matter how brutal the treatment, the convict is only getting what he or she deserves.

Yet all too frequently we are made aware by our media—especially Hollywood’s films—that the exposed mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners is regrettably reminiscent of our country’s own prison history and reflects events that still occur daily to some American prisoners. Much of the military report on the Abu Ghraib episode has language reminiscent of prison stories exposed by our movies. One particularly gruesome photo (exhibited on the cover of *Time* magazine) has become the symbol of the scandals. It shows the figure of a masked Iraqi in pointed headgear, forced to stand, hands outstretched, on a box wired to an electrical mechanism. For Americans, the snapshot encapsulates the horror of Abu Ghraib and reminds us of the weakness and fear traditionally connected with black Americans throughout the Ku Klux Klan reign of terror. But haven’t we seen almost this exact same image before? Of course—it could be Abraham, the institutionalized

behind closed cell doors and thick walls rarely gets exposed to media sunlight. As Terry Kupers, a psychiatrist who has often testified about human rights abuses in U.S. prisons, points out:

I do not view the sexual abuse, torture and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers as an isolated event. The plight of prisoners in the USA is strikingly similar to the plight of the Iraqis who were abused by American GIs. Prisoners are maced, raped, beaten, starved, left naked in freezing cold cells and otherwise abused in too many American prisons, as substantiated by findings in many courts that prisoners’ constitutional rights to remain free of cruel and unusual punishment are being violated. . . . In order for the abuses to continue, one group has total control over another; the victims feel they have no recourse and the perpetrators are confident they can get away with it; and the entire ordeal has to remain secret.

That’s where the news media should come in and dispel such secrecy.

When the public finally learned about abuses at Abu Ghraib, there was outrage. But what’s going on today behind bars in U.S. prisons still doesn’t stand the light of media day.

---

Norman Solomon is the author of the new book *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*. For information, go to: [www.WarMadeEasy.com](http://www.WarMadeEasy.com).

black convict in *Brubaker*, tortured by the Tucker tele phone device in Hollywood's depiction of life on the prison farm.

Almost as if routine, obviously pleased (not bothering to hide their faces), the smirking tormentors huddle together the naked, suffering prisoners to inaugurate them into the dehumanizing ritual of Abu Ghraib. These photos of smiling American soldiers "softening up" the helpless detainees make a discussion of the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* particularly apropos, especially for the the latter's portrayal of the brutal treatment of the new convicts welcomed into Shawshank prison. To complete the introductory humiliation, to psychologically and sexually demean them, Shawshank's new convicts are forced to undress as they are hosed down with a high-pressure water spray and dusted with white delousing powder. Supplied with a new prison outfit and a Bible to carry, they are paraded naked by the prison guards past the more veteran convicts to their new residence in the cellblock of a three-story structure of cement and dark steel. When a "new fish" bawls and pleads desperately to the captain that he doesn't belong there and wants to go home, he is unmercifully smacked with a baton and kicked in the face until he lies still on the floor of the prison catwalk. "Call the trustees. Take that tub of shit down to the infirmary," Captain Byron Hadley tells his officers. The callously battered Shawshank convict (shockingly similar to the dead, brutally beaten, cellophane-wrapped Iraqi prisoner), derogatorily nicknamed "Fat-Ass," is left without medical

treatment in the infirmary and succumbs to the effects of the captain's savage beating.

Why do our hearts shatter at the sight of the dead body of Abraham hanging from the pole in *Brubaker*, become outraged at Andy being attacked by the Sisters in *The Shawshank Redemption*, sickened by Luke's useless digging of ditches and forced placement in the sweat box in *Cool Hand Luke*? Perhaps it is because we have come to *know* them—Hollywood has allowed us to take this arduous prison journey with them. We can only hope that Bush was right—that when we see these movies, when we are forced to view the horrific images of the tortured Iraqi prisoners, instinctively we know this is *not* the American way. ❏

Mel Guttmann is a law professor at Emory University School of Law. He teaches seminars in Criminal Justice and Film and Americans Behind Bars. He has written extensively on conditions in American prisons.

*Humanistic Judaism*

<p><b>One Year Subscriptions.</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> \$21 US</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> \$31 (US) Canada</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> \$43 (US) Overseas</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Visa <input type="checkbox"/> Mastercard <input type="checkbox"/> Check <input type="checkbox"/> Money Order</p> <p>Card# _____ Exp. _____</p> <p>Signature (required) _____</p> <p>Name _____</p> <p>Address _____</p> <p>City _____ ST _____ Zip _____</p> <p>Daytime Phone _____</p>
---	---

**Society for Humanistic Judaism**  
 28611 West Twelve Mile Road  
 Dept. TH  
 Farmington Hills, MI 48334