

JOHN KIRIAKOU: Drone Whistleblower Thrown in Pen With Terrorists

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Is society safer with Daniel Hale, who exposed U.S. drone civilian killings, being housed with some of the most dangerous prisoners in America?

By [John Kiriakou](#)
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Drone whistleblower Daniel Hale was sent on Sunday to the notorious Communications Management Unit (CMU) at the maximum-security U.S. Penitentiary (USP) at Marion, Illinois to serve a 45-month sentence, rather than to the low-security prison at Butner, North Carolina, where federal Judge Liam O’Grady had [recommended](#) he go.

Butner is a prison hospital complex, and O’Grady was cognizant of Daniel’s need for psychological therapy to deal with post traumatic stress disorder from his time as a U.S. Air Force drone operator.

[USP Marion](#), on the other hand, is a former “Supermax” prison that was built in the early 1960s as a replacement for Alcatraz. It was converted into a CMU to keep terrorists from being in contact with the media. The Bureau of Prisons, which apparently knows better than a federal judge, decided that the American public must be protected from Daniel Hale’s dangerous ideas, like the [notion](#) that we shouldn’t murder innocent civilians with drones.

Hale today should be sitting in the TV room of a low-security housing unit in a prison in North Carolina awaiting drug and alcohol counseling or speaking with a therapist. That’s what the judge’s order was. Hale is emotionally fragile. He’s occasionally suicidal. He needs some help and support through this experience. Instead, he’s on 24-hour-a-day lockdown. He will likely spend his entire nearly 4-year sentence in solitary confinement with almost no human contact at great risk to his mental health.

What is Daniel Hale’s day like? He is alone in a six-by-ten-foot concrete and steel cell. It has a steel bunk, a paper-thin mattress, a small steel sink, and a

steel toilet. On the days that he's allowed to exercise, which is two or three times per week, he is led into a six-by-ten-foot outdoor cage, where he can walk in circles for an hour.

He is permitted two showers per week and one phone call per month, but only to his attorney. Visitors are carefully screened (NSA whistleblower Tom Drake and I, for example, are banned from visiting him because we have criminal convictions for blowing the whistle on warrantless wiretapping and CIA torture, respectively.)

Even then, the few visitors he will have will be able to see him only through reinforced glass and with the use of an intercom. When Hale receives a letter, it will be scanned and then put on a monitor screen installed along the ceiling of his cell, where it will remain for five minutes while he reads it. At the end of five minutes, it will disappear permanently.

His Fellow Prisoners

Daniel Hale at a peace protest at the White House in undated photo. (DIY Roots Action website)

There are only two full-fledged CMUs in America. One is at USP Marion and the other at USP Terre Haute, Indiana. Again, the purpose of a CMU is to keep the closest possible watch on a dangerous prisoner's communication with the outside world. So who are some of the other prisoners in Marion's CMU along with Hale?

They include convicted al-Qaeda terrorist Muhammad Saleh, a follower of the late "blind sheikh" Omar Abdul Rahman; Muhammad Rashed al-Owhali, convicted of terrorism in the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya; Omar Rezaq, a member of the notorious Abu Nidal Organization and the last surviving hijacker of Egypt Air flight 648 in which 58 people were killed in 1985; and Victor Bout, the Russian arms dealer convicted of selling surface-to-air missiles to terrorist groups.

Does Daniel Hale belong with these people? Is society safer with him being housed with some of the most dangerous prisoners in America? Is solitary confinement in one of the most restrictive maximum-security penitentiaries in America what Judge O'Grady believed was "justice?" Is solitary confinement supposed to somehow "rehabilitate" Hale?

The obvious answer is no.

This is what the BOP does, however. The bureau's leaders don't care one whit what judges say at sentencing. I was supposed to be sentenced to a minimum-security work camp and instead was sent to a low-security prison—not an impossible situation, but still an honest-to-God prison. When I filed an internal appeal, I was told that the judge's order was a “recommendation” that the BOP had chosen to ignore.

The situation is more serious with Hale, though. This isn't just a case of the BOP ignoring a recommendation. There's a huge difference between a low-security prison and a Supermax CMU. There's a huge difference between a low-security prison and solitary confinement. And there's a huge difference between a low-security prison and a complete lack of the medical and psychological support necessary to keep a prisoner alive.

What happens if, God forbid, Daniel can't make it through the sentence and he harms himself? A BOP apology isn't going to cut it. A letter to Congress attributing the disaster to “human error” won't help him. This issue has to be fixed right now. Daniel Hale must be transferred to Butner and he has to get the help he needs.

John Kiriakou is a former CIA counterterrorism officer and a former senior investigator with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. John became the sixth whistleblower indicted by the Obama administration under the Espionage Act—a law designed to punish spies. He served 23 months in prison as a result of his attempts to oppose the Bush administration's torture program.