

# Albert Woodfox: Heroes You Never Heard Of (But Should Have!)

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Who was the loneliest person in recorded [American] history and why?

Editor's Note: [A Quora question prompted me](#) to look this up, and what I found is both shocking and astonishing, but also deeply admirable. Black Panther militant Woodfox is both Papillon and Jean Valjean wrapped in one. And he also reminds us of the Man in the Iron Mask. The state stole his life, with virtual impunity. Where is his Victor Hugo?—PG

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[By Huyen Nguye](#)

(Professional dabbler, lives in Australia)

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[su\_shadow]

44 years ago, deep in rural Louisiana, three young black men

were silenced for trying to expose continued segregation, systematic corruption, and horrific abuse in the biggest prison in the US, an 18,000 acre former slave plantation called Angola. Peaceful, non-violent protest in the form of hunger and work strikes organized by inmates caught the attention of Louisiana's elected leaders and local media in the early 1970s. They soon called for investigations into a host of unconstitutional and extraordinarily inhumane practices commonplace in what was then the "[bloodiest prison in the South](#)." Eager to put an end to outside scrutiny, prison officials began punishing inmates they saw as troublemakers. At the height of this unprecedented institutional chaos, Albert Woodfox, Herman Wallace, and Robert King were charged with murders they did not commit and thrown into 6x9 foot solitary cells, where they remained for decades. Their struggle for justice continued until [Robert was released in 2001](#), [Herman in 2013](#), and [Albert in 2016](#). Despite a number of reforms achieved in the mid-70s, many officials repeatedly ignored both evidence of misconduct, and of innocence.

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Woodfox: They could not break his spirit. Classic victim of cultural circumstances, mainly institutionalized racism.

It's impossible to answer this question definitively but I'd nominate

this man: Black Panther activist **Albert Woodfox**, who spent nearly 45 years in solitary confinement, the longest in U.S. history. He was imprisoned for a crime he maintains he didn't commit and despite his conviction being overturned four times. He was accused of stabbing a prison guard to death, yet there was much evidence supporting his innocence. In those four decades, he was confined to a cell only 2.7 by 1.8 meters up to 23 hours a day.

In 1971, at the age of 22, he was involved in an armed robbery while on parole. He was convicted and sentenced to 50 years in the Louisiana State Penitentiary, nicknamed "Angola" - a reference to the origin of many of the slaves brought to Louisiana (didn't anyone think this was excessive? Pretty much a life sentence for an armed robbery?)

He escaped to Harlem in New York City where he came into contact with the Black Panther Party. The teachings of the Black Panther Party gave him a new moral meaning and mission. He began to learn about African-American history and the justice system.

He was later recaptured and returned to Angola, where he and fellow inmates formed a Black Panther Party chapter in prison, later called the Angola 3.



A New York Times article [‘Solitary’ Is an Uncommonly Powerful Memoir About Four Decades in Confinement](#) about his

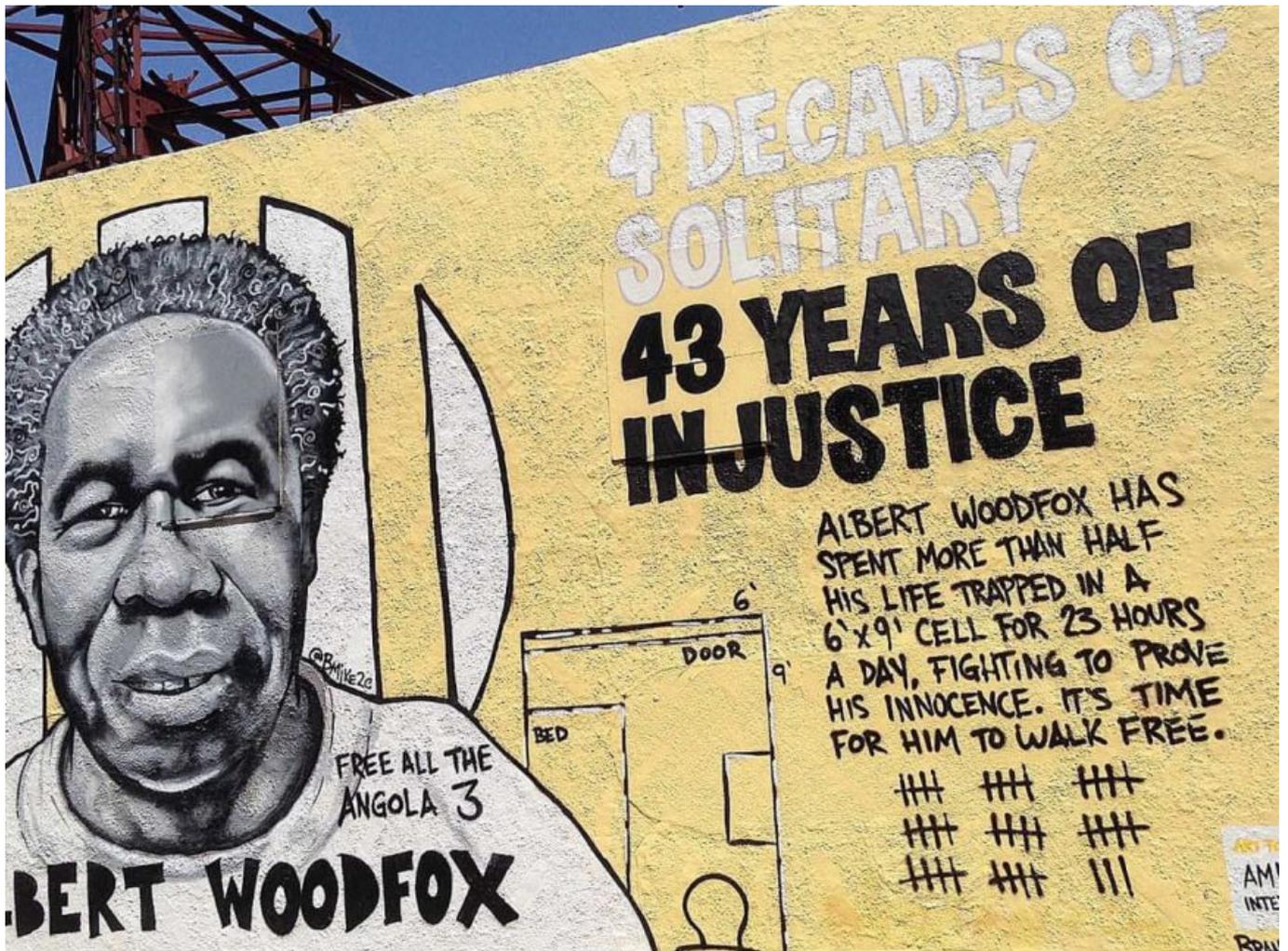
## autobiography mentions:

*The "legacy of slavery" was everywhere at Angola, he writes. When he arrived it was segregated. White prisoners mostly worked indoors while the black prisoners worked the fields, often cutting sugar cane under the supervision of guards with shotguns.*

*The prison had a rape culture. The day new inmates arrived was called "fresh fish day," and sexual predators lined up to view the goods. "If you were raped at Angola, or what was called 'turned out,' your life in prison was virtually over," he writes.*

They began organising education for other inmates, petitions and hunger strikes to protest against the horrendously brutal conditions in prison, segregation, and institutional racism. Their activism wasn't welcome, among guards and prisoners alike, and often met with violent beatings.

In 1972, when a prison guard was stabbed to death, prison authorities wanted to pin it on the Black Panthers troublemakers. A sham trial commenced, and they were found guilty and sentenced to life in solitary.



Amazingly, in his four decades confinement, he refused to let anger, despair and resentment destroy him alive and used his time to gain an education, learning civil and criminal law. He kept fighting against his conviction, which was overturned then reinstated several times. Eventually the cause of the Angola 3 was taken up by human rights activists, legal teams and celebrities and real progress was made. Even the widow of the murdered prison guard became an ardent supporter of the Angola 3's freedom.

In 2015, the state of Louisiana announced it would try Woodfox for murder a third time but, after months of negotiation with his lawyers, offered a plea deal. While Woodfox still wanted to prove his innocence, he also missed his family, the children and grandchildren he had never held and whose whole

lives he had missed. He was released in 2016 and to this day, he insisted that it was a plea for freedom, not a plea for guilt.

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His survival and unbroken spirit was a feat of extraordinary strength. Today he is saddened that after four decades of his prison sentence, in the outside world, not much has changed for the Black people of America. He uses his liberty to campaign against the inhumane practice of solitary confinement, to which currently about 80,000 people, [including children](#), are subjected in the US. His harrowing memoir is a dire indictment of the justice system that tolerates such cruel torture. While some people have a thirst for retribution, I don't see what else solitary confinement can achieve apart from driving prisoners insane and hardening them. How would such a system ever aim to reform a person, except in extraordinary cases such as Albert Woodfox's?

Speaking of his extreme isolation and loneliness in those years, Woodfox said:

*"Don't give up...For 44 years I defied the state of Louisiana and the Department of Corrections. Their main objective was to break my spirit. They did not break me...I did not lose my humanity. I bear the scars of beatings, loneliness, isolation and persecution. I am also marked by every kindness."*

References:

[Angola Three - Wikipedia](#)

[Angry but not broken: How Albert Woodfox survived four decades in solitary confinement](#)

[Summary review of SOLITARY by Albert Woodfox](#)

[Albert Woodfox On Serving More Than 40 Years In Solitary Confinement](#)

[For 45 Years in Prison, Louisiana Man Kept Calm and Held Fast](#)

[to Hope](#)

[How Many People Are in Solitary Confinement Today?](#)

[Race and the Politics of Isolation in U.S. Prisons](#)

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