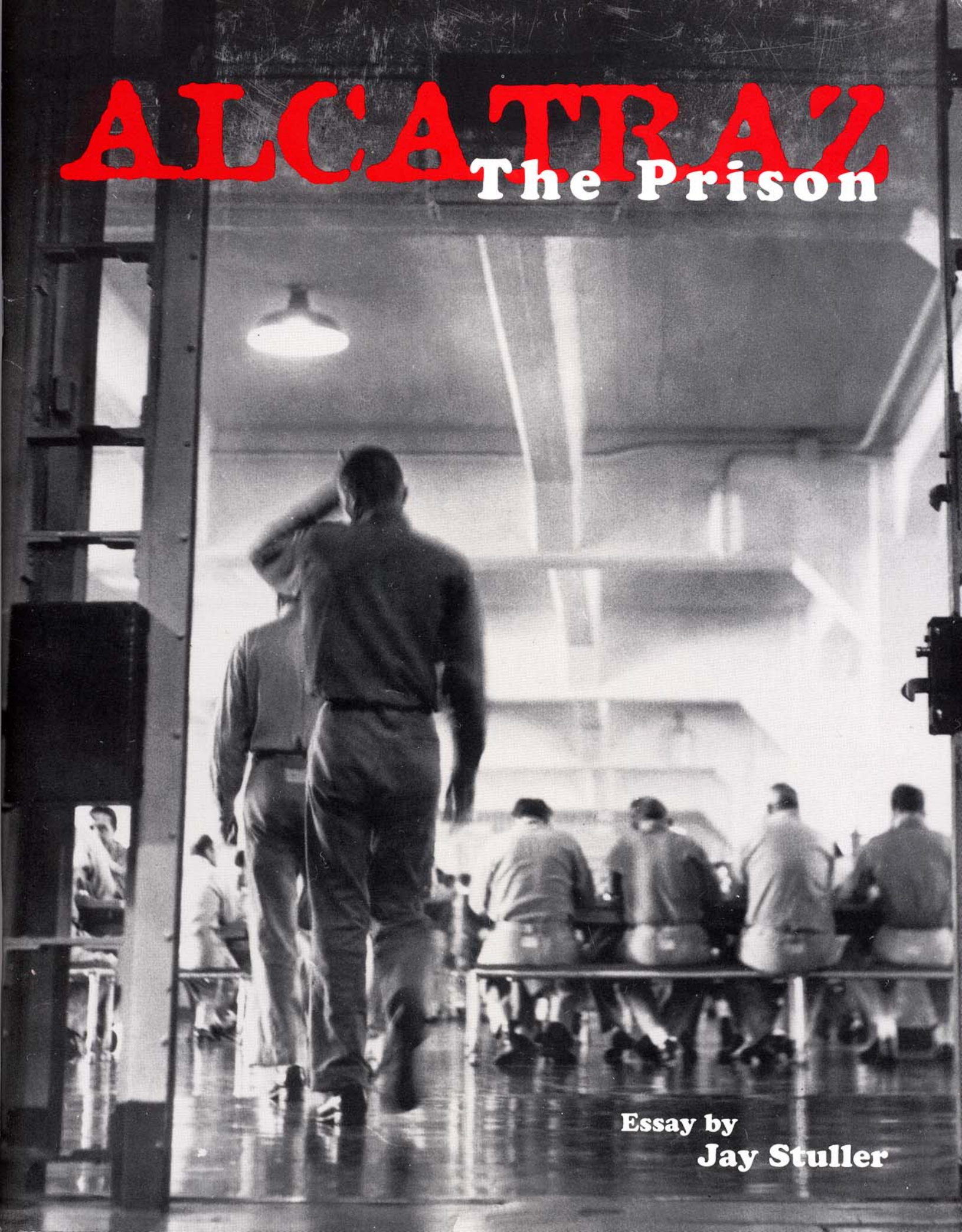


# ALCATRAZ

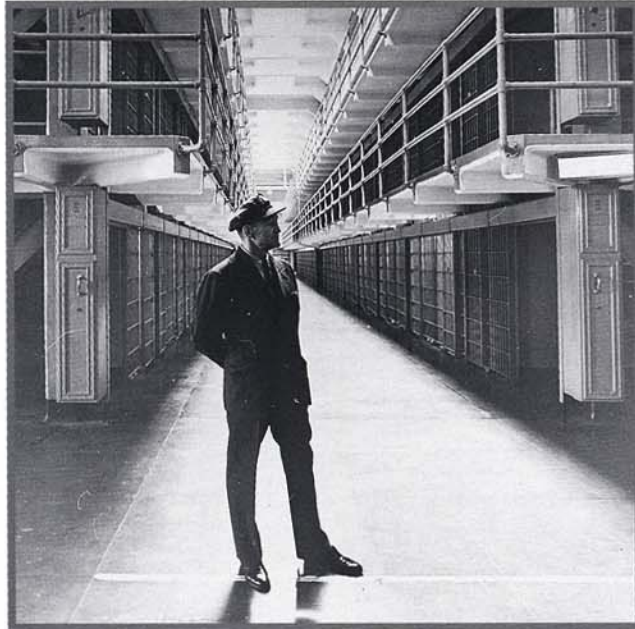
The Prison



Essay by  
**Jay Stuller**

# The Rock

ESSAY BY JAY STULLER



A firm pull on a lever closes fourteen of the prison's cells at a single time. In a mere three seconds, each 250-pound, hardened-steel-barred door shuts and locks with an explosive crack of metal thunder. Perhaps the most intimidating sound in the history of American justice, the very definition of "slammer," it's a signature of the United States Penitentiary, Alcatraz.



The hills, lights, and sounds of San Francisco, one of the nation's most beautiful cities, were a constant reminder of freedom to the men in prison on the island.

(GGNRA/PARC 77-C-424)

Previous (left page): The inmates called this area "Times Square"; three times each day, the men gathered under the clock here at the end of the corridor called Broadway and waited to be counted before entering the dining hall.

(GGNPA Photograph Collection, Tom Paiva, photographer)

Previous (right page): The correctional officer is standing on "Broadway," the main corridor between B and C blocks. Note that this officer is not armed; only the guards in the gun galleries had weapons. Cells were stacked in three tiers here and held what were known as the general population prisoners.

(GGNRA/PARC 87-C-19)

**F**rom 1934 to 1963, Alcatraz housed bankrobbers, gangsters, kidnappers, and killers, reputedly some of the toughest and most incorrigible federal convicts in America. The island's roster of felons included Al "Scarface" Capone, Alvin "Creepy" Karpis, George "Machine Gun" Kelly and the murderous Joe Cretzer. Used as a threat against convicts in other federal penitentiaries, Alcatraz took only criminals who couldn't follow rules elsewhere and subjected them to a regimen meant to control their rebellious ways and crush their resistance.

While promoting Alcatraz as a national symbol of punishment, the federal Bureau of Prisons struggled mightily to shield it from public scrutiny. Such policies vested it with menace, shrouding Alcatraz with a mystique as thick as the summer fog that often engulfs the island. Ostensibly escape-proof, it was known as "Uncle Sam's Devil's Island," or "Hellcatraz." Ironically, Alcatraz sits in scenic heaven, although the sublime views of San Francisco and a bay full of ships and colorful sailboats only added to inmate despair.

**M**ore than three decades have passed since the last convicts shuffled off the island in shackles. And despite spooky stories, there's not a single tangible terror. But while sitting in a cell, on a thin, narrow mattress that rests atop the bed frame's interwoven steel slats, one is given serious pause. At five by nine feet, less room than animal shelters allow captive dogs, the cell seems smaller. Painted in white and two shades of putrid green, the concrete feels cold against one's back. A bare bulb saturates the space with harsh light.

It's obvious that a man would come to know every bump on these horribly intimate walls; patterns in the ceiling would remain in the mind's eye long after the lights went out. In the darkness of an Alcatraz cell, an inmate was alone, imprisoned with—and perhaps by—his own thoughts. Yet the night was not still.



Most of the inmates were housed in B and C blocks, in narrow general-population cells similar to this one, which was reconstructed as an exhibit for the modern-day cellhouse tour. Depending on weather and work assignments, inmates spent a great deal of time in these cramped quarters.

*(GGNPA Photograph Collection, Tom Paiva, photographer)*