

I met the Florida governor years ago. My 14 Years Detention at Guantanamo

Americans, Beware What Belies the Smile of Ron DeSantis

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So many military staffers and guards passed through Guantanamo during my 14-year detention that I remember only the kindest, and the cruellest - the ones who seemed to take joy in our misery.

In 2021, just as my [memoir](#) - Don't Forget Us Here, Lost and Found at Guantanamo - was about to be published, I was on Twitter and saw a photo of a handsome man in a white navy uniform. It was Ron DeSantis, the governor of Florida. I do not remember what the post was about - probably something about him clashing with President Joe Biden over COVID policies. But I remembered his face. It was a face I could never forget. I had seen that face for the first time in Guantanamo, in 2006 - one of the camp's darkest years when the authorities started violently breaking hunger strikes and three of my brothers were found dead in their cages.

After finding a Miami Herald [article](#) in which DeSantis bragged about his service at Guantanamo and confirming that my memory is correct, I sent his photo to a group chat of former detainees. Several replied that they too remembered his face from Guantanamo. Some said seeing his face again triggered painful memories of the trauma they suffered during their imprisonment. I understood. Even after spending the previous few years working on my memoir, which meant reliving everything I had been through at Guantanamo, seeing his face again triggered a lot of pain in me too.

When I first saw DeSantis, I was on a hunger strike.

In 2005, almost all prisoners in the camp started participating in a hunger strike to protest against torture, inhumane treatment, and being held indefinitely without even being charged with a crime. By 2006, news about our hunger strike was finally getting out. We

were feeling hopeful.

One day, as we continued our strike with the hope that change is just around the corner, a naval judge advocate general (JAG), whom I later learned to be DeSantis, walked the blocks with other new arrivals. He stopped and talked to us, explaining that his job was to ensure that the camp was abiding by the Geneva Conventions and that we were being treated humanely.

I remember him asking why we were still on hunger strike. We told him to look around. Camp Delta was constructed from metal shipping containers, divided into cages with wire mesh. In the summer, the cages were like ovens. In the winter, they were cold and wet. They were loud with huge fans and the echoes of all the men's voices. Then there was the persistent harassment by guards, desecration of Qurans, non-existent medical care, systematic torture, and being completely cut off from the outside world.

We told DeSantis we were on hunger strike because we wanted to know why we were being imprisoned. Because we wanted a fair judicial process to prove our innocence. He took notes. He promised to register our complaints.

A few days later, guards retrieved me from the cage I was in and took me to the recreation yard of the November Block. There, we were greeted by a group of nurses and corpsmen standing next to a metal restraint chair and several cases of liquid nutrient "Ensure". A group of JAG officers and other observers, including Zak, the camp's cultural adviser, were watching the scene through the yard's chain link fence.

I was informed that the US government was determined to break the hunger strike. The doctor in charge, a colonel, told me he did not care if I said I was innocent or protesting mistreatment. He was there for one thing: to make me eat. I refused and was immediately and violently strapped into the chair so tightly that I could not move. A nurse forced a thick tube into my nose and down my throat. My nose bled and the pain was so great that I thought my head would explode. The nurse would not stop. Instead, he began pouring Ensure into a feeder bag attached to the tube.

"Eat!" the nurse yelled. "Eat!"

They poured can after can in the feeder bag until my stomach and throat were so full that Ensure poured back out of my mouth and nose. I thought I was going to drown.

"If you throw up," a corpsman said, "we'll start from the beginning with a new case and fill you up again."

As I tried to break free, I noticed DeSantis's handsome face among the crowd at the other side of the chain link. He was watching me struggle. He was smiling and laughing with other officers as I screamed in pain.

I threw up in their direction. They jumped back, disgusted. I did not care. I was the only one there who had the right to be disgusted.

That force-feeding was inhumane. It was meant to break me and teach me a lesson. It was meant to show me that I was just an animal with no human rights. There is no other way to call it, it was torture.

Because I had thrown up, they fed me another case. This time, they mixed [laxatives](#) into the bag. The mixture of Ensure and laxatives completely wrecked my intestines after having no solid foods for more than nine months. They left me restrained in that chair all night, soiled with my own waste and vomit.

The next day they started again. The message was clear: they were not going to stop force-feeding me like that, torturing me, until I ended my hunger strike.

So, I ended my hunger strike. All but a few of us did. A brother who saw me brought back to my cage said I was as swollen as a dead body found in the water.

Still, we kept protesting, especially against guards desecrating the Quran. We started planning for another hunger strike. In June, three men on my block, Yassir, Mana'a, and Ali, were found hanging in their cages, their hands and feet tied, pieces of cloth shoved down their throats. The camp administration called the deaths "suicides" and "asymmetrical warfare". No one believed it.

I was eventually sent to solitary confinement, permitted to wear only shorts or a suicide smock – a heavy, disgusting-smelling tube of cloth too thick to roll into a noose. Along with the others in the solitary block, I was regularly pepper-sprayed, beaten during cell searches, and subjected to cavity searches worse than rape.

I wrote about all this in my memoir. I did not mention DeSantis was there, witnessing the torture, because I did not know who he was when I was writing.

As far as I know, DeSantis did not order my hunger strike to be violently broken or wrote the policies that allowed it to happen. He was just a guy who claimed he was there to help us and then just watched while we were being tortured. He did not torture me, but he sure seemed to take joy from it.

Today, the violence my brothers and I endured in 2006, and its connection to DeSantis, are in the news again, not because the Florida governor belatedly decided to do the right thing and talk against it, but because he might run for president in 2024.

In fact, DeSantis still calls Guantanamo a "terrorist detention facility", even though back in 2006, the year he was there, an analysis of official documents found that the great majority of the Guantanamo prisoners were innocent men, imprisoned only because of mistaken identity or because they had been sold to the US for bounty money. Regardless of these facts, DeSantis advocated keeping Guantanamo open in his 2016 testimony before the Subcommittee on National Security, in which he claimed that all detainees were "hardened and unrepentant terrorist[s]", whose release "risks harming America's national security".

At the time of DeSantis's speech, 80 prisoners remained at Guantanamo. I was one of them. Of the 779 men held at Guantanamo since it opened in 2002, only 12 have been charged with crimes. Only two have been convicted. I wonder who DeSantis was talking about. He was there. He saw who we were.

I was born in Yemen. In my culture, a man is only as good as his word. DeSantis is clearly bending the truth to fit his preferred narrative. Maybe he is not a man worthy of leading Florida, let alone the United States.

My advice to Americans: watch out. Do you want as president someone who tries to

consolidate his power by creating an environment of fear? Someone who profits from the misery and pain of others? Someone who does not hesitate to bend to truth to further his political goals?

Americans beware of DeSantis, and what belies his handsome smile.

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