

Guantanamo as a Symbol

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11 January marked the sixth year anniversary of the establishment of the Guantanamo detention camp. Mere months after the start of the 2001 United States invasion of Afghanistan, a large cargo plane landed in a US military base in Cuba's Guantanamo Bay, bringing in a group of hunchbacked, orange-clad, blindfolded, "terrorist" suspects, apparently representing the worst of the worst. They included children and aged men, charity workers, journalists and people who were sold to the US military in exchange for a large bounty.

The debate over this notorious prison has ever since been marred by easy reductionism. The fact is that Guantanamo is neither a warranted compound holding "bad people" — as explained by the ever straightforward President Bush — nor is it a dark spot in the otherwise luminous US record for respecting human rights, rules of war and international treaties. If anything, Guantanamo is a mere extension of a long list of untold violations practiced by the Bush administration, which condenses the camp to being a symbol of widespread policy predicated on nonchalantly undermining international law.

The prison is arguably one of the worst mockeries of international law, which was itself drafted partly by American legal experts. Past US administrations may not have been devoted followers of the Geneva Conventions, but neither have they ever discarded international treaties as openly and as arrogantly as the current one. Former attorney-general Alberto Gonzales, a personal friend of President Bush, mastered this art in a way that allowed his bosses to adorn their gratuitous actions with the air of legitimacy. Guantanamo was his ultimate masterpiece.

Hundreds of Guantanamo prisoners have subsequently been released, some to the custody of their respective governments. Roughly 275 remain in the camp. Out of a total of about 1,000 only 10 have been charged.

The prisoners at Guantanamo are "among the most dangerous, best trained vicious killers on the face of the earth," according to former secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld. If that was the case, why wasn't Rumsfeld prepared to try them in a court of law? After all his self-assured judgment shows that he possessed more evidence than needed by any court to convict and throw them into jail. But, of course, the subject of evidence or lack thereof was irrelevant.

Neither habeas corpus, due process, nor any set of laws, national or international, mattered much to an administration that prided itself on its ability to transcend all of that. Of course, such disregard was justified on the basis of national interests and a whole set of tired pretences. Time, however, showed that Guantanamo, and the overriding militancy it

symbolized, has probably done more damage to US national interest than any other event in US history.

In the early years, prisoners at Guantanamo were held in open air cages, with nothing but a mat and a bucket for a toilet. Anthony D Romero, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union, wrote in Salon.com, "We now know that only a small percentage of the many hundreds of men and boys who have been held at Guantanamo were captured on a battlefield fighting against Americans; far more were sold into captivity by tribal warlords for substantial bounties." Romero cites comments made by a former Guantanamo commander for several years, Brigadier General Jay Hood. The commander told the Wall Street Journal, "Sometimes, we just didn't get the right folks."

Moreover, both former secretary of state Colin Powell and current Secretary Condoleezza Rice called for the shutting down of Guantanamo, along with various international bodies and numerous rights groups in the US and abroad. But the Bush administration still persists in maintaining Guantanamo. The chances are if the Guantanamo prisoners were of any value in Operation Enduring Freedom and in the so-called global war on terror, whatever information some of them might have possessed has already been extracted, violently or otherwise. Moreover, if overwhelming evidence against them was indeed at hand, the Bush administration would have tried them long ago. Neither scenario is convincing.

Leigh Sales, writing for the Sydney Morning Herald made the dubious assessment that the "the problem is what to do with the prisoners [if the detention camp is shutdown]. If they are moved to American jails, they will have to be charged and tried under US law. Evidence gathered through coercive interrogations will not be admissible in regular courts and so Bush would risk watching the likes of Mohamed and Hambali walk free." Such commentary, emulated by others, suggests that the underlying reason behind the preservation of Guantanamo is, more or less, national interests.

However, Guantanamo is staying in business, for the exact same reason that the Iraq war rages on, and for similar reasons to why the Bush administration's failing global policy persists. Shutting down Guantanamo would be an admission of defeat, a declaration of failure, which is something that the patrons of the empire cannot afford, at least not now.

September 11 was an opportune moment to turn a new doctrine into reality, as outlined by the Project for the New American Century, a desperate attempt to sustain an empire that is facing challenges. The tactics, utilized almost immediately after the terrorist attacks, pointed at a foreign and military policy style designed to free itself from accountability to anyone, including the American people, the United Nations and international law. Guantanamo is a grotesque representation of that tactic — and the failure of that tactic.

Indeed, Guantanamo is a dark spot in US history and shall go down in world history as a symbol of injustice and oppression. And it will continue to be a jarring reminder of the inhumanity, the torture, and the extreme violence associated with the Bush administration's so-called war on terror.

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