

The General, the New York Times and the Gitmo Suicides: The Evil of Banality

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

There are moments that require us to stop everything and take stock of the time in which we are living. This is one such moment. Listen:

"They are smart, they are creative, they are committed," Admiral Harris said. "They have no regard for life, neither ours nor their own. I believe this was not an act of desperation, but an act of asymmetrical warfare waged against us."

This is Rear Admiral Harry B. Harris, commander of the Guantanamo Bay prison. His words appeared, without comment, in the first news reports about three men, detained indefinitely and subjected to systematic torture at the prison, who committed suicide on Saturday by hanging themselves in their cells.

Take a moment to dwell on the admiral's words. Look especially at the first sentence, at the adjectives used to describe the dead men: "smart, creative, committed." There is a perverse compliment being paid by the torturer to the tortured.

This attitude is also implicit in the follow-up article printed by the New York Times the next day, with the headline: "Prisoners' Ruse Is Suspected at Guantanamo." This, we learn from the article, should be the focus of inquiry: not the circumstances that drove three men to their deaths, but the question of how, given the fact that one of the elements of their confinement was constant monitoring by their captors, these men could have managed their "ruse."

The point of systematic torture, of course, is to force the tortured to acknowledge, every minute of every day, that his life is in the hands of his torturer. No wonder, then, that the prison's commanders and their willing mouthpieces in the press are alarmed. In the most macabre and tragic sense, these are the first escapees from Guantanamo.

Of course these were acts of despair, no matter what the torturers may claim. Of course the many attempts by prisoners at Guantanamo to use their bodies—all that is left to them—to protest against their systematic and agonizing dehumanization have been acts of desperation. Many of their ongoing efforts—for example, the hunger strikes that have been violently broken through force-feedings—have been the tactics of resistance used by other political prisoners: Irish prisoners held by the British in Northern Ireland, South Africans in apartheid jails, Palestinians in Israeli prisons.

These are acts of desperation, but in their tragic way, they are also attempts to claim back some shred of humanity from the grasp of the torturers. And so even the capacity to feel despair has to be denied them by the torturers, at the very moment of their deaths. "I believe this was not an act of desperation," the admiral assures us, "but an act of

asymmetrical warfare waged against us.”

Leave aside “asymmetrical” for the moment, although under different circumstances a sustained meditation on the abuse of language inherent in the use of this term would be in order. Go right to this phrase: “an act of warfare waged against us.”

For this is the lynchpin of it all. “They” are being held in Guantanamo, according to this version of the story, for having waged, or tried to wage, or plotted to wage, or thought about waging, war against “us” (thus the invention of the wholly unprecedented but vaguely legal-sounding term “enemy combatants”). The subsequent charge of “terrorism” is itself potent enough to preclude any further inquiry, and, more important, to eliminate any concern for the treatment of the human beings—human no longer, since they are now of the species known as “terrorist”—during their confinement. The dehumanization carried out through the physical acts of torture at Guantanamo (and, it should be added, at prisons subsidized and run by the U.S. government throughout the world) is thus both enabled and completed through this linguistic torture.

When the flesh-and-blood human beings being held captive assert their humanity through their bodies, whether through hunger strikes or through suicide attempts, the linguistic torturers have to work overtime. But they are able to do their work without much worry about systematic opposition in this country. The White House dutifully described the three men as “committed terrorists,” and in response, Democrats said nothing, since, as the *Times* reported, they are “concerned about appearing to be sympathizing with detainees who could turn out to have significant terrorist connections.”

Here we should pause again. Three men at Guantanamo were, in essence, tortured to death. Their names were Mani bin Shaman bin Turki al-Habardi, Yasser Talal Abdulah Yahya al-Zahrani, and Ali Abdullah Ahmedwho.

What is most appalling about the discourse surrounding their suicides is the banality of the language used to address their deaths. It is as though nothing out of the ordinary has happened. This is what should startle us out of our complacency: the thought that a situation in which three men were literally driven to their deaths by the inhumanity of their treatment is in fact all in a day’s work for our government.

There are of course groups and individuals who have tried to break this sense of complacency and to place Guantanamo, and the U.S. government’s policies of detainment, extraordinary rendition, secret prisons, and systematic torture more generally, before the eyes of Americans. But the fact that these men’s suicides can be reported as “ruses” and “acts of war” without provoking outrage reminds us of how much remains to be done.

One important part of this effort is to combat the specifically dehumanizing work being done by the word “terrorist.” It is not necessary to prove the innocence of those being held prisoner at Guantanamo in order to demand an end to their torture. Of course, a cursory glance at the insane methods used to capture those who are now detained there suggests that no legal case could be made against the vast majority of the prisoners.

But the fundamental insistence should be that it simply does not matter. Allowing the focus to be shifted to the question of innocence versus guilt, of good and evil, of terrorism and acts of war, avoids addressing the heart of the matter. Worse, it allows a shift into the banal language that allows for generalizations about “us” and “them,” the very language that

underwrites the abuses of humanity carried out by this government through its terroristic "war on terror."

The real focus must be on a place whose sole purpose is to torture people until the only recourse that remains available to them is to somehow bring about their own deaths. The focus must be on the fact that Guantanamo is not simply an anomaly, not just an embarrassing example of this government's zeal after September 2001 whose closure will also close that distressing chapter. The focus must be on the larger set of processes set in motion by this government, of which Guantanamo is simply the most visible manifestation.

Appeals to the government to close down Guantanamo are not nearly enough right now. We have to do more to make known the full extent of the horror. Guantanamo Bay is not simply a place where men are dressed in orange jumpsuits and placed in cages. It is a place where humanity is being systematically destroyed. This is no metaphor. Perhaps it is time to see that the responsibility for closing down Guantanamo belongs, not to George W. Bush, but to us.

Listening to the admiral, to the most recent _expression of the banality of evil flowing from his lips, only one conclusion can be drawn: the United States has absented itself from humanity. Until those living in this country can find a way to stop this government, the admiral's phrase should be applied to us: "They have no regard for life."

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