

CHAPTER 6

A Tour of Guantanamo Prison Shows America at Its Best

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GUANTANAMO BAY—At least two detainees at the holding facility here skipped lunch today because they're on a hunger strike. Which is a pity for them—the food was delicious. By contrast, the steady stream of news about “Gitmo” tends to leave one with a bad taste.

On the day I toured the facility, lawyers for 100 detainees were in court insisting their clients have a right to be heard in American civilian courts. And a recent McClatchy newspaper story claimed that “reports of mistreatment and torture have dogged the facility since it opened,” and added, “critics . . . have described an island gulag of desolation and despair.”

What's missing from the criticism is any sense of perspective. For one thing, the most outspoken critics of American policy haven't bothered to visit Guantanamo. If they did, they'd see that the U.S. military is using the facility to hold roughly 400 enemy combatants. And despite all the criticism, Gitmo's the most transparent facility ever used to house prisoners of war.

Most of the detainees have lawyers. That must be a first in the history of warfare. No government is required under the laws of war to charge enemy combatants with any crime; anyone picked up on a battlefield may be held until hostilities end.

Furthermore, the Geneva Convention does not require that detainees be allowed to speak to lawyers and does not give them the right to challenge their detention in civilian courts. By any measure, the U.S. government has extended our deadly enemies unprecedented legal rights.

In return, we're collecting valuable intelligence. Many detainees are still giving us useful information about the location of al-Qaida training facilities and the terrorist organization's chain of command.

As far as alleged torture goes, consider the hunger strikers mentioned above. To keep them alive, the military has been tube-feeding them the same way a hospital feeds an incapacitated patient. “Medical associations have called it unethical,” Reuters news agency reports. Would letting the detainees die be more ethical? Doctors at Gitmo even adjusted the detainees' feeding schedule so that, during Ramadan, they wouldn't be getting any sustenance during daylight hours. We're not only protecting the lives of detainees, we're respecting their religious traditions as well.

In fact, if there's any abuse going on, it might be that the detainees are eating too much. They get 4,000 calories a day—hardly a starvation diet. Guards say one has gained 150 pounds.

Some Americans seem to have forgotten there's a war going on. Not these detainees: They regularly threaten their guards and vow to have their friends kill the guards' families back home. Our service members take these threats seriously—many remove their nametags before they'll walk past a cell block. One officer's tag identified him as Col. “I don't know.”

At least 10 former Gitmo detainees, once released, returned to the battlefield against coalition forces only to be killed or captured again. One even managed to assassinate an Afghan judge. So it makes sense that our military hold on to dangerous people until we can be certain they're no longer a threat.

Treatment of Detainees and Unlawful Combatants: Selected Writings on Guantanamo Bay

Incidentally, more than a quarter of all current Gitmo detainees are eligible to leave, but they've got no place to go. No country is willing to accept them, so they remain here. One reason we can't simply deport them is that the U.S. military will not, as a matter of policy, send a detainee to a country where he is likely to be tortured. Remember that the next time you're told the United States condones torture.

I've never been prouder of our men and women (many of the guards at Gitmo are women) in uniform than when I saw how professionally they handled themselves and our enemies. Our facility at Guantanamo Bay should be in the news every day—as an example of what we're doing right: Winning the war on terror, while still treating our enemies humanely.

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