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Nightmare of Guantanamo

U.S. prison camp in Cuba has become legal black hole, reporter says

John Freeman
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They talked about the war in Iraq and prescription-drug benefits, debated gay marriage and discussed our efforts to capture Osama Bin Laden, but one word you rarely heard President Bush or Sen. John Kerry utter throughout the 2004 presidential campaign was "Guantanamo."

Indeed, it was as if the \$155 million prison facility in Cuba - built, David Rose reminds us in "Guantánamo," by a construction arm of Vice President Dick Cheney's former company, Halliburton - didn't exist. And that is exactly as the government wanted things to be.

How did America's most secretive, highly guarded and internationally offensive prison facility become such a nonissue? The answer, Rose asserts, is that the Bush administration has conducted a campaign to make it so. From the beginning, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and the president asserted Guantanamo was where we held the really bad guys. As Cheney said, "They are devoted to killing millions of Americans, innocent Americans, if they can, and they are perfectly prepared to die in the effort."

In the wake of 9/11, Rose argues, the U.S. government used the terrorist threat as an excuse to free itself of the Geneva Accords. On Nov. 13, 2001, President Bush issued a Presidential Military Order "declaring that captured al Qaeda terrorists could be tried by special military commissions, free of the restrictions imposed by the civilian courts." On this day, Guantanamo was born.

The definition of who could be declared an "unlawful combatant" stretched beyond al Qaeda to include, Rose writes, "not just someone thought to have engaged directly in terrorism against America, but anyone captured in Afghanistan suspected of fighting with the Taliban - a very different thing." The prison's population swelled to 600, against whom no charges were filed for more than 2 1/2 years. They came from all over the world, in shackles and hoods, to sweat in the Cuban sun and submit to questioning.

Rose is one of the first writers to publish a book on this unorthodox prison, and it's not hard to understand why. Even though reporters are allowed there, they will have their lifelong visitation rights revoked if they attempt to speak to a detainee - or even if they reply to one who has spoken. In spite of these limitations, Rose does a good job of making this faraway legal black hole come to life. He visited the prison in October 2003, after the initial cages known as Camp X-Ray were replaced with newly constructed facilities dubbed Camp Delta. He describes an institutional nightmare.

Most of the prisoners - some 550 or so - are kept in "maximum security" conditions. If they cooperate, they can be led in cuffs and leg irons to a covered yard for 20 minutes of exercises with one other detainee, followed by a five-minute shower. The standard cell is a prefabricated metal box a little larger than a king-size bed. Guards are required to pass each cell every 30 seconds. There is no air conditioning, and the lights stay on all night.

This is just the beginning of the hardship for most prisoners, says Rose. Failure to follow the rules of the camp brings swift punishment, which often means being attacked by something called the Extreme Reaction Force. One inmate, eventually released, described the experience of being "ERF'd" for refusing to have his cell searched for a third time in one day:

"They pepper sprayed me in the face, and I started vomiting; in all I must have brought up five cupfuls. They pinned me down and attacked me, poking their fingers in my eyes, and forced my head into the toilet pan and flushed. They tied me up like a beast and then they were kneeling on me, kicking and punching. Finally they dragged me out of my cell in chains ... and shaved my beard, my hair, my eyebrows."

So who exactly are these people who are being held under such severe conditions? Rose says none of the highest-profile al Qaeda captures have wound up at Gitmo, as it is called. The CIA concluded in a report that "many of the accused terrorists appeared to be low-level recruits who went to Afghanistan to support the Taliban or even innocent men swept up in the chaos of the war." One senior Pentagon official told Rose that "at least two-thirds" of the detainees held as of May 2004 could be released "without hesitation immediately."

And earlier this year, that process finally began. In March, the government released five British men from Guantanamo after nearly three years. They had been captured in Afghanistan, where they had gone to offer humanitarian aid. Rose interviewed them that same month, two months before the allegations of Abu Ghraib first surfaced, and yet they described a period of captivity eerily similar to that of the Iraqis in Abu Ghraib.

They were punched, slapped, denied sleep, had seen other prisoners sexually humiliated, hooded and forced to watch copies of the Koran being flushed down toilets. Eventually the pressure proved too much - they gave false confessions that the British intelligence service, MI5, later showed to be untrue. Upon their return to the United Kingdom they were released without being charged.

The similarity of interrogation methods in Iraq and Cuba is not an accident, Rose says. Rather, they were the brainchild of the same man: Gen. Geoffrey Miller, who arrived in Iraq in August 2003 to show American forces how to extract intelligence from prisoners - as he had done in Cuba. The Bush administration authorized fewer restrictions on interrogation, Rose points out, but officials still haven't received good intelligence. The reason? So much of the information they get is a result of coercion. As Rose relates: "(Miller) had met an inquisitor who boasted that he could wring a confession to devil-worship out of the pope himself."

Drawing on dozens of interviews with guards, released prisoners and highly placed intelligence officials at Guantanamo, Rose argues that the legal purgatory to which America consigned enemy combatants has - much like the war in Iraq - actually increased the likelihood of terrorism.

Why? Because the spectacle of Americans trampling on the rights of humiliated Muslims has given al Qaeda yet another recruiting tool. In fact, it's so potent a symbol that many of the Western hostages in Iraq whose decapitations have been videotaped were made to wear orange jumpsuits - just like the prisoners at Guantanamo.