



Written by [Becky Akers](#) on December 8, 2008

Report Confirms Torture at Guantanamo

Because a notoriously left-wing university sponsored the report, apologists for the Bush administration may dismiss it. They do so unjustly. Studies of human beings and an event's "impact" on them can never be purely objective, but this investigation comes as close as possible to pursuing and distilling the truth. For that we can thank its rigorous methodology, scrupulous reporting, and a style "devoid of rhetoric," as "the Honorable Patricia M. Wald" says in her forward.



From July 2007 to July 2008, researchers interviewed 112 people "using semi-structured questionnaires." Among respondents were 62 of Gitmo's former prisoners as well as 50 "key informants, including former and current U.S. government officials, representatives of nongovernmental organizations, attorneys representing detainees," and prison personnel. The report frequently quotes their anonymous but persuasive testimonies. Researchers then "compared" this "data to 1,215 coded media reports about former Guantanamo detainees, relevant documents released by the Department of Defense, and reports by the U.S. government, independent organizations, and the media." The writers are fair enough to warn that their small sample of interviews can't be "generalized" to the entire Gitmo experience; at the same time, the "patterns and trends" that emerged from their discussions are "consistent" with those from other "governmental and independent investigations," making it likely that what they sifted and present is factual.

Since January 2002, the Bush administration has imprisoned over 770 men at Guantanamo; authorities have so far released more than 500 of these victims without charging or trying them. That leaves in excess of 200 still languishing in Gitmo's purgatory — only 23 of whom the government has accused of a crime.



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This denial of habeas corpus and its protection against arbitrary imprisonment is even more outrageous given how most of these folks wound up in Cuba. When the United States began bombing Afghanistan in the weeks after 9/11, refugees raced for the Pakistani border. But bombs weren't the only things dropping from the sky: there were also leaflets advertising big rewards for "al-Qaeda and Taliban murderers." Teen-aged boys, a butcher, a man who accepted shelter from scheming strangers, feuding enemies, and people who refused to bribe local politicians or to hand over their cars, satellite phones, and binoculars were some of the "terrorists" our taxes bought. "[Pakistanis] sold us for money," one prisoner recalled, "and the next thing we knew we were in American custody.... Nobody had any evidence on us, nobody checked to see if we had weapons or if we were fighting or dangerous." Another "hooded and shackled" suspect, who was "wait[ing] to be loaded onto a plane," said, "We could hear [the Americans] counting money and saying to the Pakistanis: 'Each person is \$5,000. Five persons, \$25,000. Seven persons, \$35,000.'" Needless to say, \$5,000 in Pakistan probably buys immortality, eternal youth, and a diamond mine, let alone a scurvy refugee nobody wants.

Such an "indiscriminate and unscrupulous dragnet" was bound to snag many innocent men. Depending on the bureau and the -crat who's estimating, the U.S. government guesses that anywhere from two-thirds to "only 50 detainees" of Gitmo's hundreds are "worth holding."

That makes their abuse all the more tragic — and senseless. The officials who designed Gitmo, including then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, based its severity on the premise that inmates were terrorists with valuable information about upcoming attacks on the United States. Such vicious criminals would naturally withhold knowledge during interrogations. The camp's inhumanity was supposed to pry that information loose, despite torture's illegality according to both American and international law, its violation of martial ethics, and its inability to extract accurate data since victims will say anything to stop the pain. Gitmo confirms torture's futility: "Stalwart defenders of the detention program claim vital information has been elicited," Judge Wald acidly notes in her forward, "they just can't tell us what it is."

The report documents beyond any doubt the physical cruelties inflicted on these men: "short-shackling, stress positions," (which the paper elsewhere describes as "sitting alone in a chair or on the floor for hours, hunched over with their hands and feet short shackled to a metal ring in the floor") "prolonged isolation, and exposure to extreme temperatures for extended periods — often simultaneously. On some occasions, these tactics were used in conjunction with sensory bombardment, including extremely loud rock music and strobe lights."

The psychological brutality was equally excruciating. Interrogators told their victims they would never be released, inducing deepest despair. Researchers wrote, "Many of the former detainees we interviewed went through periods when they believed they would spend the rest of their lives in Guantanamo, a view encouraged by some interrogators. 'According to the U.S. court, I would be a prisoner for 95 years,' one respondent said he had been told." The Koran vehemently denounces suicide, but such hopelessness tempted some prisoners to try it anyway.

Guards often desecrated the Koran to enrage and humiliate helpless believers. And American personnel frequently played on the book's strict prohibitions against lewd behavior to sexually shame prisoners. Female interrogators stripped off their own clothes, then taunted their subjects. One man tried to protect himself by "ke[eping] my head down, I did not know what was going on.... This lasted for a long time. I was still looking down, I was not looking at her, I did not know if she was completely naked or still in her underwear. But she started to touch me.... And I could hear the laughter of the people who



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were watching this from behind the mirror, the glass, the one-way window.”

Forced nudity was another favorite tactic, though guards seem to have used that more in Bagram and Khandahar, the holding-pens in Afghanistan for “terrorists” on their way to Gitmo. It was an especially horrific torture for modest Moslem men: “Many respondents said the humiliation of strip searches and the disgrace of collective showers,” which laughing female guards sometimes watched, “defecation in public, and other forced exposures offended both their personal dignity and their identity as Muslims.” One of the very few witnesses that the report identifies by name is Moazzam Begg; it quotes his memoir, *Enemy Combatant: My Imprisonment at Guantanamo, Bagram, and Kandahar*, to illustrate how agonizing the nudity was: “These were men who would never have appeared naked in front of anyone, except their wives; ... who never used vulgarity, nor were likely to have had it used against them. I felt that everything I held sacred was being violated.”

Some Americans contend that psychological savagery may hurt but does not meet the definition of torture. Not only does the dictionary disagree, so do victims. One “former detainee” said, “The greatest violence I suffered was nudity.... After that, if they killed us, it wouldn’t have been any sorrow for me.” Another recalled, “The worst experience for me was being forced to take off my clothes and then having my picture taken.... I would rather be killed than to be treated in that way.”

Such inhumanity was “normal” treatment, i.e., it was not intended as punishment but to elicit confessions of terrorist ties. Recalcitrant prisoners, including those who didn’t cooperate because they were ill or injured, could expect to lose such “comfort items” as their Korans, beds and blankets, soap, toilet paper. They were also exiled to frigid isolation cells for up to a month — or more, if “military necessity justifies continued detention.”

But this catalog of cruelty is only a prelude to the report’s main purpose: following the lives of 62 of Gitmo’s freed survivors, chronicling the physical and mental aftermath of their abuse and the overwhelming problems they encounter on returning home. We might suppose that release from their American hell would be a panacea, but “many former detainees would discover that the ‘Guantánamo’ chapter of their lives was not entirely over: it had simply moved into a ‘post-Guantánamo phase’ in a different land.”

This specifically refers to the fact that the United States doesn’t ship these men back to their homes upon release; it sends them to their governments, most of which continue imprisoning them. Such states as Russia and Tunisia take the opportunity to continue torturing them as well. Other countries accuse the men of being American spies, which elicits — you guessed it — more torture. A few have freed inmates after determining that there’s no evidence against them.

But “the ‘post-Guantanamo phase’ in a different land” could describe their lives in general. Some victims enjoy sympathy and a hero’s welcome after what they’ve survived, but too many find themselves objects of suspicion and embarrassment. Their wives and children are often destitute after the breadwinners’ years of absence; sometimes, they’ve disappeared without leaving word for the returning prisoner. Nor do jobs await these men. The report notes that “two respondents, interviewed several years after their release from Guantanamo, still bore visible scars caused by their handcuffs or leg shackles.” The invisible scars are doubtless even more painful. Yet American politicians and personnel have yet to apologize, let alone pay any sort of penalty or restitution to these innocent, ruined men.

The human-rights groups that commissioned the report offer the usual suggestion: a bipartisan panel to investigate and, “if applicable, ... make recommendations for further criminal investigation of those



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responsible for any crimes at all levels of the chains of command.” This accords with the report’s even-handed tone. But any decent person who’s wept and raged over these horrifying pages will demand far greater retribution. Judge Wald’s forward draws a parallel that damns every American, politician, bureaucrat, soldier, guard, or voter, who furthered Gitmo’s evil: “I was struck,” she writes, “by the similarity between the abuse they suffered and the abuse we found inflicted upon Bosnian Muslim prisoners in Serbian camps when I sat as a judge on the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague, a U.N. court fully supported by the United States. The officials and guards in charge of those prison camps and the civilian leaders who sanctioned their establishment were prosecuted — often by former U.S. government and military lawyers serving with the tribunal — for war crimes.”

Let the trials begin.

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