

Why has the US government imprisoned Captain Yee?

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The Bush administration's arrest and jailing of Captain Youseff Yee, who served as the Muslim chaplain at the Guantanamo Bay concentration camp in Cuba, raises a number of disturbing questions.

Yee, a Chinese American from New Jersey, has been held in the Charleston, South Carolina US Navy brig for the past two weeks.

This is the same detention facility where the US government has locked up two US citizen "enemy combatants," Yaser Esam Hamdi, a US-born Saudi, who allegedly fought with the Taliban in Afghanistan; and Jose Padilla, a US citizen from Chicago, who was arrested at O'Hare Airport and accused of conspiring to build a "dirty bomb." Both men have been denied all legal rights, including access to lawyers or being presented with any charges, and are being held incommunicado on the orders of the US president.

Federal authorities have leaked reports claiming that Yee was carrying "classified documents," including drawings of the prison and lists of detainees and their interrogators when he returned to the US on September 10. Others, speaking on condition of anonymity, have used the words "sedition" and "espionage" in describing his activities. Yee was searched and arrested immediately after arriving on a military plane at the Naval Air Station in Jacksonville, Florida. FBI agents, meanwhile, searched his apartment in Miami.

In a further indication that the army captain is being treated as a "terrorist" or "enemy combatant," a spokesman for the US military's Southern Command in Miami said that Yee "is the first US soldier that I know of to be detained and held since the war on terrorism began."

Yee, a 1990 graduate of the US Military Academy at West Point, served in Saudi Arabia during the first Persian Gulf war with a Patriot missile battery and reportedly converted to Islam at that time. The officer left the army and lived in Syria for four years, learning Arabic

and studying Islam. He rejoined and was appointed as the prison camp's chaplain last November.

Yee's duties included ministering to the 660 detainees—including three youth aged 13-15—who were rounded up by the US military in Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere and thrown into cages at the US base in Cuba. Nearly all of the detainees are Muslims.

He had been interviewed by several media outlets on his work as a Muslim chaplain. "I like to think that whatever I can do, whether in their personal situation or help with them being here in any way, that I have a positive effect on their life," he told the BBC in January, two months after he had been sent to the Guantanamo Bay naval base.

In an interview during the same period with the Associated Press, the army officer remained silent when asked if he sympathized with the plight of the detainees, most of them farmers and laborers who have been held without charges for nearly two years.

Captain Yee was quoted in an October 2001 interview with the *Los Angeles Times* as saying, "When I go into the field, I have a copy of the Koran and next to it a copy of the US Constitution."

A previous commander of the Camp Delta prison camp, Brig. Gen. Rick Baccus, was relieved of his post, reportedly for attempting to mandate humane treatment of the detainees and posting International Committee of the Red Cross posters spelling out the rights of prisoners of war under the Geneva Conventions.

The Bush administration has maintained—in defiance of international law—that as "enemy combatants" the detainees are entitled to none of the rights afforded to POWs. At the same time, by imprisoning them at the US base in Cuba, it has denied them any rights under the US Constitution.

Why has the government thrown Yee into the navy brig reserved for those US citizens alleged by the Bush administration to be "terrorists"?

Certainly many hundreds of Muslim and Arab immigrants have been rounded up and imprisoned in the US for lengthy periods without charges and subjected to physical and psychological abuse over the past two years as part of the “global war on terrorism.” People visiting the country, including a recent incident involving a Yemeni delegation of officials and businessmen carrying personal invitations from the US ambassador, have been detained and put in manacles for the sole crime of coming from one or another Muslim country.

But Yee is a professional army officer and a West Point graduate. It hardly seems credible that he is a secret collaborator of Al Qaeda. That such an individual can be given this treatment is a measure of the sweeping repressive powers the current administration has arrogated to itself since September 11, 2001. It may also suggest the level of anti-Muslim hysteria gripping official circles in America.

It seems certain, however, that there is something else going on in the case of Captain Yee. One US police official, again speaking not for attribution, told the *Washington Post* that the “fear and suspicion” guiding the persecution of Yee is that he was too sympathetic to the Guantanamo detainees and may have been planning to help them in some way.

In what way could he have helped these men and youth who have been held behind razor wire without charges, lawyers, visits from their families or indeed any contact with the outside world for nearly two years? It hardly seems likely that he was plotting a jail break or was preparing to hand over secret information to Al Qaeda or the Taliban.

The more likely threat was that he was intimately familiar with the illegal and brutal treatment that is being meted out to these prisoners and was not trusted to keep quiet about it. There have already been 31 suicide attempts among the detainees—an astronomically high rate for that number of prisoners. US military personnel at Camp Delta outnumber the prisoners by a ratio of 4-to-1 and conduct constant interrogations in an attempt to “break” them with psychological stress techniques that are defined under international law as torture.

The media has reported recently that these interrogations have been stepped up as Washington prepares to conduct drum-head military trials of at least some of the detainees. It has also been reported that a death chamber is already being prepared at Guantanamo.

It is possible that Yee knows more about the illegal and appalling treatment of the prisoners at the US

concentration camp in Cuba and was prepared to make it public. Have prisoners been subjected to outright physical torture? Have some already suffered extra-judicial executions? Yee, held incommunicado at the navy brig in Charleston, cannot say; and the public, having no constitutional oversight over the extraterritorial prison in Cuba, does not know.

The major media outlets have treated Yee’s arrest largely as a one-day story, dutifully publishing the unsubstantiated allegations by unnamed authorities branding him as a spy and saboteur—charges that could lead to the captain’s execution.

Working people, students and intellectuals who are concerned with democratic rights must reject the preposterous charges of the government, echoed by the media, and demand that Captain Yee be released and allowed to speak to the public.

They must likewise demand the shutting down of the illegal and shameful US concentration camp in Cuba and that all those held there be granted their full rights as prisoners of war under the Geneva Conventions. These include a fair trial in a US court with full legal rights in those cases—and there is no evidence that any such cases exist—where there are grounds for criminal prosecution. Moreover, it demands that those captured on the battlefield be repatriated to their own countries. Likewise, other secret detention centers such as the ones at the Bagram air base in Afghanistan, in Diego Garcia and other places where torture is even more common must be closed down as well.

Finally, the demand must be raised for a full investigation into who made the decision to violate international law by creating such torture camps and that all those responsible be held accountable, including criminally.



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