

# The Guantánamo suicides and their impact on American political life

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The suicides of three prisoners at the Guantánamo Bay internment camp is a shameful event, and one that will intensify the mounting social and political crisis within the US.

The deepening moral divide in the country cannot be papered over. While US military and Bush administration officials respond with brutal and callous comments, and the media and the Democrats react either with sophistry or silence, a growing portion of the American population is horrified by what is being done in its name. Many now simply choose to avert their eyes. But this revulsion will, sooner rather than later, find political expression.

The war in Iraq will go on and on and the situation will continue to deteriorate. More than three years after the invasion and occupation, and the boastful pronouncement "mission accomplished," more than 70,000 US and Iraqi troops began an operation Wednesday aimed at "securing Baghdad"!

The demoralization and brutalization of the US troops in Iraq, whose presence is almost universally hated, guarantees further and worse Hadithas. The demonized Zarqawi will be replaced by another devil incarnate, whose name will be dutifully broadcast to a bewildered and increasingly alienated American public. Even if the Guantánamo gulag were to be closed down, the illegal detention and abuse would begin anew at some other camp. Meanwhile, the CIA will continue to operate the secret torture prisons it has established around the world.

With each new action, the regime in Washington reveals its gangster-like character. The US is widely viewed around the world as an outlaw state that simply does what it pleases. Recent poll numbers indicate growing international disgust and suspicion of official American conduct, even as US foreign policy appears increasingly disoriented, vindictive and irrational. Behind the evident madness, however, there is a perspective, even if a demented one: the drive of the American corporate and financial elite for global hegemony.

The comments of the administration and its supporters following the Guantánamo deaths are of a piece. The suicides of broken men, who believed after four years of utter isolation they would be condemned to live like caged animals in perpetuity, were greeted with these infamous words by Guantánamo base commander Rear Admiral Harry Harris: "I believe this was not an act of desperation, but an act of asymmetrical warfare waged against us."

Colleen Graffy, the US deputy assistant secretary of state for public diplomacy, sounded the same theme to BBC's "Newshour," "It does sound like this is part of a strategy—in that they don't value their own lives, and they certainly don't value ours; and they use suicide bombings as a tactic. Taking their own lives was not necessary, but it certainly is a good PR move."

Such brutish comments resonate around the world. Massoud

Shadjareh of Britain's Islamic Human Rights Commission commented: "This is the sort of statement that SS officers in Nazi Germany would have been envious of."

Many in the Arab world, in any case, are suspicious of the suicide story. One pan-Arab publication, *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, commented, "The US official report on the suicides of the [two] Saudis and Yemeni prisoners in Guantánamo Bay is being met with skepticism by lawyers and international human rights institutions. The prevalent belief is that they died of torture."

Asked about the deaths of the detainees at their own hands, George Bush, smirking in his usual manner, told a June 14 press conference that "Guantánamo... provides an excuse, for example, to say the United States is not upholding the values that they're trying to encourage other countries to adhere to. And my answer to them is that we are a nation of laws and rule of law." No administration in US history has acted with such contempt for international and Constitutional law.

Bush may have been alluding to the European Parliament, which one day earlier passed a resolution calling for the Guantánamo camp to be shut down by a vote of 597 to 15, with 20 abstentions. The resolution demanded that "each prisoner be treated in conformity with international human rights." The principal opposition to the resolution came from the League of Polish Families (LPR), an anti-Semitic ultranationalist outfit.

The right-wing American media responded with its usual bloodthirstiness. The *Wall Street Journal* observed in an editorial June 13, "The suicide of three prisoners at Guantánamo Bay has elicited another chorus of anti-US rhetoric from the self-styled 'human rights' crowd. Sigh. The dead men were among the most irredeemable jihadists, which is why they were still there this long after the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan."

This is said of men who were locked up, first in cages and then in six- by eight-foot cells, barely large enough for a cot, who have never been charged with any crime, much less given the opportunity to confront their accusers and plead their case.

In a statement on the suicides, the nine Britons released from Guantánamo described the mental and physical conditions at the camp: "One of the tools used by US interrogators—a fact now accepted by several former US personnel who served in Guantánamo—was to remove all notions of hope. We were not only made to believe that we would never see our families again, but also, that we would remain in custody for decades, without charge or trial... All of us had been physically and sexually degraded, beaten, forcibly stripped and shaved, and then abandoned for up to three years by our government. Some of us were placed in isolation cells for years—with no natural

light. We all contemplated suicide at some point.”

Zachary Katzenelson, senior counsel at Reprieve, which represents 36 Guantánamo Bay detainees, wrote in the *Guardian* June 12: “Of these three men, little is known. They were in Camp I, a maximum-security area where prisoners are denied even a roll of toilet paper. But we do not know the dead men’s stories. While most of the men in Guantánamo have lawyers who fight for their right to a fair trial, these men did not... The men who committed suicide found themselves in just this legal black hole. They had no legal recourse, just the prospect of a life in prison, in isolation, with no family, no friends, nothing.”

One of the suicides, detainee Yasser Talal Al Zahrani, 22, imprisoned since he was 17, was described by US military officials as a Taliban fighter. He was picked up after the massacre carried out by US and Afghan forces at Mazar-i-Sharif prison in northern Afghanistan in late 2001. He was thus the victim of two US war crimes.

The subservience of vast portions of the American media to the US military machine is almost absolute. How else to explain this piece on the ABC News web site: “Who are the victims at Gitmo? Pentagon reports detail abuse of guards by detainees.”

The article chronicles the “consistent pattern of harassment and abuse” endured by guards at the internment camp. Reports “describe altercations with inmates using feces, saliva, food utensils, among other things...”

“Col. Michael Bumgarner, who oversees the camp’s guards, told *Fox News* that before the suicides, detainees were driven by hate, not desperation. ‘It’s a strange thing; it’d take me hours to try to explain this to you. They hate us, they hate Americans. I see it every day. I see a look in their eyes that I cannot explain to you. It is a crazy look when you’re dealing with them,’ he said.”

This raises an interesting historical question: Did Nazi concentration camp guards ever lodge complaints against their victims?

Neither the continued existence of Guantánamo nor the miserable deaths of three desperate inmates have aroused serious protest in the American media. A few scattered editorials, a bit of liberal hand-wringing, all done in bad faith by a propaganda apparatus that has transmitted every one of the administration’s lies. In any case, by Wednesday, four days or so after the event, the editorial comments had petered out. No one will call the criminals in Washington to account.

One of the most cynical and revealing pieces on the suicide tragedy appeared in the June 12 *New York Times* under the headline “Prisoners’ Ruse is Inquiry Focus at Guantánamo.” The article centered on the prisoners’ alleged guile in devising a means of ending their own lives. It asserted that the three prisoners “tried to conceal themselves in their cells—behind laundry and through other means—to prevent guards from seeing them commit suicide, a senior military official said Sunday... The deception by the prisoners raises questions about how long it took military guards to discover the bodies.”

The article went on to note that “Reaction around the world seemed muted.” In fact, any voices with a semblance of independence expressed outrage. Even some of the Bush administration’s allies in Europe denounced the conditions in Guantánamo. “Muted” would be far more appropriately applied to the response within the US political establishment, which ranged from sadistic satisfaction to indifference.

The *Times* piece continued, “Democrats in the United States said little, apparently concerned about appearing to be sympathizing with detainees who could turn out to have significant terrorist connections.” Indeed, a search for any comments by New York

Senator Hillary Clinton, Howard Dean or any other leading members of that party proved fruitless.

The Democratic Party, which supported the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, is thoroughly implicated in the Guantánamo tragedy. Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts, the Democrats’ 2004 presidential candidate, in a press release issued Monday, two days after the suicides, began by declaring, “No American leader can remain silent on Iraq.” But Kerry managed to remain entirely silent on the three horrible deaths in a US internment camp.

Above all, the Democrats do not want to be identified with the anti-war sentiments of the population, including a large majority of their own voters. This foreshadows the right-wing character of the party’s 2006 mid-term election campaign, and the reactionary nature of a Democratic-controlled Congress or a Democratic administration, should the Democrats get back into power.

The American media and political elite, Republican and Democratic wing alike, suffer from an extreme case of the “will to believe” ethos, one of the most subjective tenets of pragmatism. They operate on the basis that the facts are whatever they choose them to be, that unpleasant realities will fade away if no one speaks about them in the media, and that the truth is something entirely determined by their social and political interests.

They are seriously mistaken. With all the vast resources and technology at its disposal, something that propaganda ministers of an earlier day could only dream of, the American media cannot make the conditions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantánamo or the US go away. Nor will the lies and stonewalling of the Pentagon and White House succeed any better.

A tipping point is being reached. A great deal of political and ideological confusion exists in the US population, but the relentless social reaction, economic attacks, imperialist violence and official degradation have a cumulative effect.

Bush officials, the Democrats and the *Times* are convinced, or convince themselves, that no one notices the lonely deaths in Cuba. But these events are by no means lost on everyone. There is a constituency for blood and filth, as there always is, but a far larger proportion of the population is revolted. The revulsion will turn to anger.

Tragic processes, which may seem overwhelming or unalterable at first, are already radicalizing broad layers of the population. By force of circumstances, the mass movement that emerges will do so outside the discredited existing political channels. It will be propelled to draw deep-going political conclusions. The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* will continue to prepare this movement politically and ideologically and arm it with a conscious socialist perspective.



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