

Guantánamo Diary: A book that needs to be read

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Guantánamo Diary by Mohamedou Ould Slahi, edited by Larry Siems; Little, Brown & Company, 2015

Guantánamo Diary, written by Mohamedou Ould Slahi and edited by Larry Siems, is a remarkable book that deserves the widest possible audience within the United States and internationally.

The recently published book, written by a current inmate of the infamous torture camp, contains a first-hand account of the author's ghastly mistreatment at the hands of the intelligence agencies of the United States and their foreign accomplices. It is one thing to read about the sadistic methods employed by the Central Intelligence Agency and other agencies in an executive summary of a Senate report. It is another thing to endure them from the standpoint of the eyes, ears, nose, nerves, stomach, and mind of one of the victims.

But the book is much more than a terrifying exposure of the secret US torture program. The book also contains—unexpectedly—wonderful literary passages, devastating portraits of the idiotic personalities and social types Slahi encounters among his torturers, wry humor, self-critical reflections and insights, and a humane, hopeful, and sensitive touch. This is all the more remarkable when one considers that Slahi wrote it by hand in the summer of 2005—in English, his fourth language—from a Guantanamo Bay “segregation cell.”

Slahi (sometimes spelled “Salahi”) was born in Mauritania in 1970. Apparently an exceptional student, he received a scholarship to study engineering in Duisburg, Germany in 1988. In 1991, Slahi traveled from Germany to Afghanistan to join the mujahedin movement, and while in Afghanistan he allegedly swore allegiance to Al Qaeda. However, after the central government fell, he returned to Germany and (by his own account) had no further involvement with Al Qaeda. He later spent time in Montreal, Canada working as an electrical engineer.

He was subsequently detained and interrogated by the authorities of various countries—Canada, Mauritania, the United States, and Senegal—but each time he was released for lack of evidence against him. However, in November 2001, he was asked to voluntarily report to a police station in Nouakchott, Mauritania for questioning, which he did. Then he disappeared.

Slahi was the subject of a secret, illegal “extraordinary rendition” to Jordan (in violation of the Mauritanian constitution) that was organized by the US Central Intelligence Agency. With his family completely unaware of his whereabouts, he was abducted and smuggled through the CIA's network of illegal “black site” torture facilities before arriving in the infamous Guantanamo Bay camp, where he was tortured and where he remains to this day.

In March 2010, on a petition for *habeas corpus* filed by Slahi's pro bono attorneys, US federal district judge James Robertson reviewed Slahi's file and determined that he was innocent of the government's accusations and should be immediately released. However, the Obama administration appealed this ruling and it was vacated by the DC Circuit Court of Appeals—notoriously stacked with right-wing, pro-intelligence

judges.

“I have, I believe, read everything that has been made public about his case, and I do not understand why he was ever in Guantanamo in the first place,” writes the editor Larry Siems in the book's introduction. At this point, as Slahi himself suggests, he is being detained for no reason other than the embarrassment his release would cause to the US intelligence agencies as well as to the Mauritanian and Jordanian governments that facilitated his illegal rendition.

A significant portion of *Guantánamo Diary* has been censored by the American authorities. To the publisher's credit, all of the government's black bars have been reproduced on the printed page, so the reader can get a sense of the extent of the redactions. The censorship is often clumsy and absurd, with names censored in one place appearing without censorship in other places. In one place, the name of former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970) is censored. Interestingly, the words “she” and “her” are always censored when referring to a female torturer, while male torturers are referred to as “he” and “him” without censorship. In many cases, the editor's helpful footnotes reconstruct the missing text from other publicly available sources.

In 2003 and 2004, Slahi's US captors tortured him at Guantanamo Bay pursuant to a “special interrogation plan” personally approved by then Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. The torture included long-term isolation, mock executions, sleep deprivation, and what the editor describes as “a litany of physical, psychological, and sexual humiliations.” Torturers threatened to hurt members of his family, kept him in a freezer and doused him with cold water, blasted his ears with rock music, sexually assaulted him, threatened to kill him, and repeatedly beat him within an inch of his life.

There is not space in this review to give a full account of Slahi's torture—for that, one must read the book—but a few memorable passages can be highlighted.

At Guantanamo Bay, the guards apparently announce the impending interrogation of an inmate by shouting, “Reservation!” Each inmate is assigned a number, so “Reservation 760!” means that the interrogators are coming for Slahi. When Slahi hears the word “reservation,” he remembers, “My heart started to pound heavily because I always expected the worst.”

Suddenly a commando team consisting of three soldiers and a German shepherd broke into our interrogation room. Everything happened quicker than you can think about it. [Redacted] punched me violently, which made me fall face down on the floor.

“Motherf---er, I told you, you're gone!” said [redacted]. His partner kept punching me everywhere, mainly on my face and my ribs. He, too, was masked from head to toe; he punched me the whole time without saying a word, because he didn't want to be recognized. The third man was not masked; he stayed at the door

holding the dog's collar, ready to release it on me...

"Blindfold the Motherf---er, if he tries to look --"

One of them hit me hard across the face, and quickly put the goggles on my eyes, ear muffs on my ears, and a small bag over my head. I couldn't tell who did what. They tightened the chains around my ankles and my wrists: afterwards, I started to bleed. All I could hear was [redacted] cursing, "F-this and F-that!" I didn't say a word. I was overwhelmingly surprised, I thought they were going to execute me.

The torture continues, taking countless forms. In one episode, the guards placed Slahi in a specially prepared freezing cold room "full of pictures showing the glories of the US: weapons arsenals, planes, and pictures of George Bush." The guards told him that he was forbidden to pray. "For the whole night I had to listen to the US anthem. I hate anthems anyway. All I can remember was the beginning, 'Oh say can you see...' over and over."

Throughout the book, Slahi repeatedly asks his torturers, "Why am I here? What have I done?" They reply, "You tell me!"

In one revealing episode, upon learning that Slahi speaks German, an interrogator (context suggests German intelligence) threatens him, "Wahrheit macht frei [truth will set you free]." This is a variation on the infamous slogan erected on signs leading into the Holocaust death camps: "Arbeit macht frei [work will set you free]." In other words, the interrogator was identifying himself in no uncertain terms with the Nazis. Slahi writes, "When I heard him say that I knew the truth wouldn't set me free, because 'Arbeit' didn't set the Jews free."

In the midst of these frightening passages—and this is one of the most incredible features of the book—Slahi manages a humane, delicate, even literary touch. Waiting for the next torture session ("waiting for torture is worse than torture") his mind wanders over his life, the places he has lived, and the people he loves. The morning breeze from the sea displaces the sandy air over the impoverished city of Nouakchott; a muezzin sings twice in the early morning during Ramadan; a traditional Mauritanian wedding features intricate customs and intrigues; he imagines conversations with his mother over a cup of hot tea. (Slahi's mother died on March 27, 2013, while her son was still held at Guantanamo.)

In a recurring dream, Slahi sees members of his family. He asks them, "Am I with you for real, or is it a mere dream?" His family replies, "No, you are really home!" He tells them, "Please hold me, don't let me go back!" But he always wakes back up "to the dark bleak cell, looking around just long enough to fall asleep and experience it all again."

Amidst descriptions of unimaginable suffering, the distinct voice of a writer emerges. Slahi describes the following scene at the conclusion of the illegal rendition flight to Amman, Jordan.

One of the guards silently helped my feet get into the truck that was parked inches away from the last step of the ladder. The guards squeezed me between them in the back seat, and took off in the truck. I felt comforted; it was warm inside the truck, and the motor was quiet. The chauffeur mistakenly turned the radio on. The female DJ voice struck me with her Sham accent and her sleepy voice. The city was awakening from a long, cold night, slowly but surely. The driver kept accelerating and hitting the brakes suddenly. What a bad driver! They must have hired him just because he was stupid. I was moving back and forth like a car crash dummy.

Guantánamo Diary can even be darkly funny in parts, such as those

passages featuring Slahi's contempt for the lazy, hopeless, American-boot-licking secret police in Mauritania and Jordan. "The funny thing about 'Secret Police' in Arab countries is that they are more known to the commoners than the regular police forces. I think the authorities in Arabic countries should think about new nomenclature, something like 'The Most Obvious Police.'"

Slahi's literary sketches of his torturers are simply devastating. "You could see that he had been doing this work for some time: there were no signs of humanity in his face," Slahi writes of one American torturer. "He hated himself more than anybody could hate him."

Guantánamo Diary exposes the American intelligence agencies and their foreign accomplices as sorry collections of sadists, racists, ignoramuses, and incompetents. "Of course he threatened me with all kinds of painful torture should it turn out I was lying," Slahi says of one American interrogator. "'You know we have some black motherf---ers who have no mercy on terrorists like you,' he said, and as he proceeded, racial references kept flying out of his mouth. 'I myself hate the Jews.'"

In another episode, Slahi remembers "one cowboy coming to me with an ugly frown on his face:"

"You speak English?" he asked.

"No English," I replied.

"We don't like you to speak English. We want you to die slowly," he said.

"No English," I kept replying. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction that his message had arrived. "I'm an asshole," a torturer tells Slahi. "That is the way people know me, and I have no problem with it." Slahi reproaches another interrogator who repeatedly uses the N-word. The interrogator explains: "N---- is not black. N---- means stupid."

These are the same charming individuals that President Obama has repeatedly hailed as "heroes" and "patriots."

The depraved and scatological culture of the US military is on display from the moment Slahi arrives at Guantanamo. His torturers' vocabulary consists primarily of the F-word. In scenes reminiscent of the infamous Abu Ghraib photographs, Slahi describes how female torturers molest him, sexually humiliate him and other inmates, and attempt to have sex with him. "Having sex with somebody is not considered torture," one female guard says mockingly. (A future war crimes tribunal may disagree.)

"What many [redacted] don't realize is that men get hurt the same as women if they're forced to have sex," Slahi writes, in a heartbreakingly subtle (and heavily redacted) passage. In the book's introduction, the editor quotes from official records indicating that at a 2005 Administrative Review Board hearing Slahi "became distraught and visibly upset" when he tried to describe his sexual abuse by female guards.

In the book's darkest moments, Slahi struggles to retain his sanity. He frequently finds himself with confused emotions towards his captors, who spare no effort to degrade and manipulate him. Aggressively redacted passages near the end of the book appear to show Slahi connecting with several of the guards—but it is hard to tell whether these guards are sincere or whether it was all part of the "interrogation plan." One looks forward to the day when Slahi is released and he can publish the book free from pressure and censorship.

Guantánamo Diary is also yet another confirmation of the fraud of the so-called "war on terror." At several points in the book, Slahi writes about how his captors "offered to have me work with them." Perhaps even Slahi does not grasp the full and sinister implications of these solicitations, which doubtless were made to other detainees as well. America's dirty

secret is that its intelligence agencies and their foreign accomplices are long-time collaborators with Islamic fundamentalist groups such as Al Qaeda, including from the 1980s in Afghanistan to the present day in Syria, Libya, and elsewhere.

As Slahi himself points out, if he is guilty of the crime of supporting Al Qaeda during the Soviet War in Afghanistan, then the United States and its intelligence agencies are similarly guilty, since at the time they gave fundamentalist militias such as Slahi's their full support. President Ronald Reagan proclaimed that they were "freedom fighters."

As far as Slahi's political ideas can be glimpsed in *Guantánamo Diary*, they are not far from what one would expect from an individual who traveled to Afghanistan in 1991 to attend an Al Qaeda training camp. He describes his desire at the time to fight "communists." In his view, the ongoing US "war on terror" is simply a pretext for a war of extermination against Muslims. (Given his treatment at the hands of the United States, it is hard to blame him for believing the latter.)

Slahi's religious sentiments are a strong presence in the book, and one does not doubt that they are sincerely felt. In times of crisis, Slahi clings to his pocket Koran and prays. "During the whole procedure, the only prayer I could remember was the crisis prayer, *Ya hayyu! Ya kayyum!*" The guards mock him for praying: "Oh, ALLAH help me... Oh, Allah have mercy on me," they say, mimicking his prayers. "There is no Allah. He let you down!"

Above all, Slahi's humane sentiments—in spite of everything—are what endear him to the reader. "Human beings naturally hate to torture other human beings, and Americans are no different," Slahi reflects. He concludes his book with a powerful address to the American people. "What do the American people think? I am eager to know. I would like to believe the majority of Americans want to see Justice done, and they are not interested in financing the detention of innocent people."

Indeed, Slahi's book is further evidence of grave violations of American and international law for which nobody yet has been held accountable. *Guantánamo Diary* deserves to feature as a prominent exhibit in future war crimes prosecutions of all the individuals with whom Slahi comes into contact in the course of the book, together with all the senior officials in the Bush and Obama administrations who presided over Slahi's rendition and continue to block his release from Guantanamo Bay.

In an encouraging sign, the book has already risen to number fourteen on the *New York Times* bestseller list. There are reasons why the American political establishment has fought so hard for so long to suppress *Guantánamo Diary*, and these are the same reasons why the book needs to be read.



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