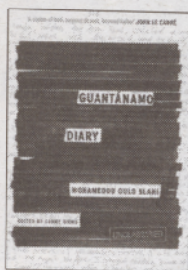


Diary of the damned



Guantanamo Diary by Mohamedou Ould Slahi

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CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

It is one thing for the news media to tell us the U.S. government mistreats prisoners at the benignly named Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp. It is entirely another to read a first-person description of the brutal and inhumane treatment endured by someone still imprisoned there.

"Guantanamo Diary" confirms the reasons many Americans have been skeptical about the intentions behind the incarceration of what was originally almost 800 "enemy combatants" at Gitmo.

Mohamedou Ould Slahi has been in custody at the insistence of the U.S. government since 2001. He wrote this diary in 2005, but it took seven years for his lawyers to obtain permission to see it. Although a federal judge ordered his release in 2010, he remains at Gitmo.

Despite almost 2,600 redactions, "Guantanamo Diary" makes clear that Slahi's treatment has been arbitrary and brutal. It has also been inefficient and pointless, if the intention is to extract useful intelligence.

The evidence presented by the U.S. to justify Slahi's incarceration is exceedingly slim: He swore an oath to al-Qaeda in 1991 and fought with them in Afghanistan against the Soviet-supported government at a time when al-Qaeda was effectively an ally of the U.S. After the government fell, Slahi explicitly severed his ties with al-Qaeda. The leader of the Sept. 11 attack, Ramzi bin Al-Shibh, stayed at his house one night. That's all the evidence against him.

Slahi is originally from Mauritania. Before and after his involvement with al-Qaeda, he studied and worked abroad as an electrical engineer, in Germany and Canada. During his time in Canada he was detained and questioned briefly. Returning home to live, he was detained and questioned twice en route at the request of the U.S. — once in Senegal and then in Mauritania. Almost two years later, in September 2001, Mauritanian authorities detained him and the FBI questioned him about his possible involvement in the "Millennium Plot" to bomb the L.A. airport. On every occasion, Slahi was released due to insufficient evidence.

His real troubles began November 2001, when he was picked up again at the behest of the U.S. the day after consulting at the Mauritanian presidential palace about upgrading the internet and phone systems. The vicious intelligence service in Jordan interrogated him for more than seven months before he was transferred to Gitmo, arriving



U.S. Army Military Police escort a detainee to his cell in Camp X-Ray at Naval Base Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, 2002, during in-processing to the temporary detention facility.

REUTERS/SHANE T. MCCOY

in August 2002.

What followed would be reminiscent of the Keystone Cops if the stakes were not so great. For the first nine months, the FBI interrogated Slahi extensively but did not torture him. Eventually, the agents left for the U.S., telling Slahi they were wasting their time because he had nothing useful to say. Amazingly, he had established a rapport such that his interrogators threw him a goodbye party. The chief investigator, a woman, even gave him a hug. Ominously, she warned that military interrogators would take over and future sessions would "not be as friendly."

Slahi describes the treatment that followed at the hands of the Army's Criminal Investigative Task Force: "I was living literally in terror. For the next 70 days I wouldn't know the sweetness of sleeping: interrogation 24 hours a day, three and sometimes four shifts a day."

For more than seven months his torturers used cold water, stress positions, cold meals to be eaten in only a minute, deprivation of medication, frequent searches, sexual humiliation by both male and female interrogators, months without a shower, and threats to his family.

At first, Slahi refused to talk under torture. Then he refused to eat or drink. His treatment improved when he decided to invent information. "I tried my best to make myself look as bad as I could, which is exactly the way you can make your interrogator happy. I made my mind up to spend the rest of my life in jail. You see most people can put up with being imprisoned unjustly, but nobody can bear agony day in and day out for

the rest of his life." When asked whether he was telling the truth, he said, "I don't care as long as you are pleased. So if you want to buy, I am selling."

In a lengthy introduction, the editor assesses the evidence against Slahi. It hardly justifies his confinement. No "charge sheet"

has ever been filed against Slahi at Gitmo. In March 2010, federal judge James Robertson granted his habeas corpus petition, finding there was insufficient evidence to hold him. The government made no effort to show he was a major figure in al-Qaeda or involved with the Millennium Plot. The judge found there was no credible evidence that Slahi was a member of al-Qaeda more recently than the early 1990s or that he recruited two of the Sept. 11 hijackers. When the government appealed, a higher court redefined what

constitutes membership in al-Qaeda and sent the case back to the original judge, where it remains.

Despite everything he has been through, Slahi displays remarkable equanimity. He forms genuine friendships with some of his captors, at least those who have treated him decently. He says, "I'm not going to judge anybody; I'm leaving that part to Allah," and, "I think prison is one of the oldest and greatest schools in the world: you learn about God and you learn patience. A few years in prison are equivalent to decades of experience outside it." It is hard to imagine that other prisoners at Guantanamo would have such a generous reaction.

The hard-to-stomach details in this diary are impossible to ignore. In condoning the torture of prisoners at Guantanamo, our political and military leaders have diminished the humanity of all Americans.

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