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MY TURN

■ Marie Lo



Guantánomo Bay in Asian-American history

On January 22, 2009, President Obama issued an executive order declaring he would shut down the detention camp at Guantánomo Bay Naval Base in Cuba within a year. That was more than five years ago, and as a result of the stalemate in Washington, the prison with 155 detainees remains open, quietly receding from the public consciousness. Let this year, as President Obama noted in last month's State of the Union address, be the year the prison at Guantánomo Bay closes.

According to Human Rights Watch, only six of the 155 detainees face formal charges while the rest continue to be held without charge and without trial. Detained indefinitely without due process and without the opportunity to respond to charges against them, the men are essentially held under the discretion of the government with little external judicial review over the legality of the government's actions. According to many legal scholars and human-rights activists, these actions violate U.S. constitutional law as well as international law.

The justification for "indefinite detention" has been the extraordinary events of September 11, 2001, which necessitated extreme measures to preserve national security in the face of the new global terror. But, I would suggest, what appears "extreme" is not so extreme when one thinks about the detention center in Guantánomo Bay in relation to the other "camps" in American history, namely the Japanese-American internment camps during World War II and the Angel Island Immigration Station, which operated between 1910 and 1940 in San Francisco Bay. Set in this context, what may appear to be an anomaly may, in fact, parallel other earlier government responses to "foreign invasions." What connects them is the discourse of Orientalism, in which a homogenized "east" is persistently figured as both a threat to national security and to the foundational values of western civilization.

During World War II, Japanese Americans were forcibly removed from their homes and interned due to the "security threat" they posed to the United States. Despite the fact that many were U.S. citizens, they were perceived as inescapably foreign, unassimilable, and traitorous to the U.S. Though their internment was justified as a military necessity and was upheld by the Supreme Court at the time, legal scholars and historians now note the extent to which Japanese-American civil liberties were violated — a fact the U.S. government also acknowledged in its redress of internment survivors in 1988.

The Angel Island Immigration Station operated during the era of Asian exclusion when many immigrants from Asia (with the exception of immigrants from the Philippines, which had been annexed by the United States) were not allowed to immigrate. Established to enforce exclusion and process immigrants arriving from across the Pacific Ocean, Angel Island was a place where Asian immigrants were detained, interrogated, and deported based on the sole discretion of immigration officials. The harsh treatment they received and the prison-like conditions in which many of them lived not only reflected the extent to which they were treated like criminals upon entering Angel Island, but also how they were stripped of any rights or recourse to protest against their treatment.

I'm not arguing that the experiences of these people are comparable to the detainees at Guantánomo. The detainees may or may not have committed violent acts against the United States, but since no charges have been filed, we cannot know.

Rather, I'm arguing that there is historical precedent for human-rights violations and the suspension of civil liberties based on fears of "foreign invasion." And more often than not, the rights that are suspended belong to "Orientals," whose very presence threatens national security.

Just as early Asian immigrants were perceived as heathens and morally degenerate, incapable of assimilating the ideals of democracy and freedom, so too are these recent detainees, who have been portrayed as so essentially evil and violent that they are beyond the protection of our judicial system; to allow them representation would somehow lead to the destruction of western civilization.

What these camps also share is the language of criminality that gave rise to their construction, linking immigrants, criminals, and terrorists such that that the terms become interchangeable. The result is that Asians are not just "perpetual foreigners," but also potential invaders and criminals or, in more contemporary terms, terrorists.

We need to only recall Capt. James Yee, a Muslim chaplain who visited the detainees and was imprisoned in solitary confinement on suspicion of treason but was later freed and exonerated. By the same token, when we think of a terrorist, we rarely imagine that he or she could be white and American. The terrorist is indelibly a racial other, possibly inhuman, and thus not in need of human-rights

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