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George W. Bush 'knew Guantánamo prisoners were innocent'

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George W. Bush, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld covered up that hundreds of innocent men were sent to the Guantánamo Bay prison camp because they feared that releasing them would harm the push for war in Iraq and the broader War on Terror, according to a new document obtained by *The Times*.

The accusations were made by Lawrence Wilkerson, a top aide to Colin Powell, the former Republican Secretary of State, in a signed declaration to support a lawsuit filed by a Guantánamo detainee. It is the first time that such allegations have been made by a senior member of the Bush Administration.

Colonel Wilkerson, who was General Powell's chief of staff when he ran the State Department, was most critical of Mr Cheney and Mr Rumsfeld. He claimed that the former Vice-President and Defence Secretary knew that the majority of the initial 742 detainees sent to Guantánamo in 2002 were innocent but believed that it was "politically impossible to release them".

General Powell, who left the Bush Administration in 2005, angry about the misinformation that he unwittingly gave the world when he made the case for the invasion of Iraq at the UN, is understood to have backed Colonel Wilkerson's declaration.

Colonel Wilkerson, a long-time critic of the Bush Administration's approach to counter-terrorism and the war in Iraq, claimed that the majority of detainees — children as young as 12 and men as old as 93, he said — never saw a US soldier when they were captured. He said that many were turned over by Afghans and Pakistanis for up to \$5,000. Little or no evidence was produced as to why they had been taken.

He also claimed that one reason Mr Cheney and Mr Rumsfeld did not want the innocent detainees released was because “the detention efforts would be revealed as the incredibly confused operation that they were”. This was “not acceptable to the Administration and would have been severely detrimental to the leadership at DoD [Mr Rumsfeld at the Defence Department]”.

Referring to Mr Cheney, Colonel Wilkerson, who served 31 years in the US Army, asserted: “He had absolutely no concern that the vast majority of Guantánamo detainees were innocent ... If hundreds of innocent individuals had to suffer in order to detain a handful of hardcore terrorists, so be it.”

He alleged that for Mr Cheney and Mr Rumsfeld “innocent people languishing in Guantánamo for years was justified by the broader War on Terror and the small number of terrorists who were responsible for the September 11 attacks”.

He added: “I discussed the issue of the Guantánamo detainees with Secretary Powell. I learnt that it was his view that it was not just Vice-President Cheney and Secretary Rumsfeld, but also President Bush who was involved in all of the Guantánamo decision making.”

Mr Cheney and Mr Rumsfeld, Colonel Wilkerson said, deemed the incarceration of innocent men acceptable if some genuine militants were captured, leading to a better intelligence picture of Iraq at a time when the Bush Administration was desperate to find a link between Saddam Hussein and 9/11, “thus justifying the Administration’s plans for war with that country”.

He signed the declaration in support of Adel Hassan Hamad, a Sudanese man who was held at Guantánamo Bay from March 2003 until December 2007. Mr Hamad claims that he was tortured by US agents while in custody and yesterday filed a damages action against a list of American officials.

Defenders of Guantánamo said that detainees began to be released as early as September 2002, nine months after the first prisoners were sent to the jail at the US naval base in Cuba. By the time Mr Bush left office more than 530 detainees had been freed.

A spokesman for Mr Bush said of Colonel Wilkerson’s allegations: “We are not going to have any comment on that.” A former associate to Mr Rumsfeld said that Mr Wilkerson's assertions were completely untrue.

The associate said the former Defence Secretary had worked harder than anyone to get detainees released and worked assiduously to keep the prison population as small as possible. Mr Cheney’s office did not respond.

There are currently about 180 detainees left in the facility.