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WikiLeaks: The Uses of Guantánamo

Posted by Amy Davidson
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Here are some of the reasons we've held people at Guantánamo, according to files obtained by WikiLeaks and, then, by [several news organizations](#): A sharecropper because he was familiar with mountain passes; an Afghan "because of his general knowledge of activities in the areas of Khost and Kabul based as a result of his frequent travels through the region as a taxi driver"; an Uzbek because he could talk about his country's intelligence service, and a Bahraini about his country's royal family (both of those nations are American allies); an eighty-nine year old man, who was suffering from dementia, to explain documents that he said were his son's; an imam, to speculate on what worshippers at his mosque were up to; a cameraman for Al Jazeera, to detail its operations; a British man, who had been a captive of the Taliban, because "he was expected to have knowledge of Taliban treatment of prisoners and interrogation tactics"; Taliban conscripts, so they could explain Taliban conscription techniques; a fourteen-year-old named Naqib Ullah, described in his file as a "kidnap victim," who might know about the Taliban men who kidnapped him. (Ullah spent a year in the prison.) Our reasons, in short, do not always really involve a belief that a prisoner is dangerous to us or has committed some crime; sometimes (and this is more debased) we mostly think we might find him useful.

The new set of files has information on more than seven hundred and fifty of the seven hundred and seventy-nine prisoners who have passed through Guantánamo. (A hundred and seventy-two are still there.) The documents are classified Secret/NOFORN (that is, no distribution to foreign countries), and WikiLeaks shared them with seven news organizations, on the condition that they evaluate them before they were released, when they were leaked to the New York *Times*, which

brought in the Guardian and NPR—breaking the embargo. (How does that fit the complaint that WikiLeaks rushes things out indiscriminately?) These are Guantánamo’s files, and some of the information in them is disputed by the prisoners; some of it the government itself doesn’t believe any more, and some is contradictory. The greatest insight the files may give is into what our government thought it was doing, and why, when it decided to imprison certain people indefinitely and out of the reach of the rule of law—the logic, or illogic, of Guantánamo. [Carol Rosenberg and Tom Lasseter](#), of the Miami *Herald* (representing the McClatchy papers, among those who had the files), write of records of interrogation after interrogation,

Yet there’s not a whiff in the documents that any of the work is leading the U.S. closer to capturing bin Laden. In fact, they suggest a sort of mission creep beyond the post-9/11 goal of using interrogations to hunt down the al Qaeda inner circle and sleeper cells.

And so we sacrificed our values and our moral standing for goals that were increasingly—vanishingly—distant from the ones we had been told were so urgent; or for no real reason at all.

One sees how Guantánamo became a whisper factory: after years of interrogation, the subject many prisoners had left to talk about was other prisoners. Some were doing so after being tortured. The *Times* notes that Mohammed al-Qahtani was “was leashed like a dog, sexually humiliated and forced to urinate on himself” before implicating himself and sixteen other prisoners, and that those claims appear in the others’ files “without any caveat.” (Jane Mayer has [written](#) about the Qahtani case.) Rosenberg and Lasseter note that one prisoner, a Yemeni, gave information about a hundred and thirty-five other prisoners. On the whole, the interrogation system at Guantánamo comes across as a maddening, multi-directional game of telephone. Rosenberg and Lasseter:

Intelligence analysts are at odds with each other over which informants to trust, at times drawing inferences from prisoners’ exercise habits. They ordered DNA tests, tethered Taliban suspects to polygraphs, strung together tidbits at times in ways that seemed to defy common sense.

Some prisoners at Guantánamo, like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, really are high-level Al Qaeda operatives. That doesn’t mean it’s the right place for them, either: being at Guantánamo has served to keep them from facing a jury or judge and answering for their crimes. (We have courts, and Supermax prisons, in this country.) And, in many ways, K.S.M. is more of an outlier than the taxi driver. Here are other signs, according to the files, that a prisoner is dangerous: attitude toward the Star Spangled Banner; having been caught wearing a Casio F91W watch (a common model); perceived support for fellow inmates who committed suicide ([there have been five](#)).

And more: according to the *Guardian*, the “GTMO matrix of threat indicators for enemy combatants,” which runs to seventeen pages, also lists having a connection to Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, or I.S.I.; given how much money we’ve given Pakistan to fight the Taliban and Al Qaeda, that detail alone is enough to make one’s head spin, if the Casio didn’t do it already. (Another, not related to the new files: hundreds of inmates escaped from a prison in Afghanistan yesterday, apparently with the help of their guards.)

Is a Casio watch better than no reason at all? “It is undetermined as to why the detainee was transferred to GTMO,” the base commander wrote in a report on one of “three hapless Tajiks,” as the *Guardian* described them, who had been shipped there after being rounded up with others—not on what supporters of Guantánamo like to call the battlefield, but in the library at the University of Karachi, in Pakistan. They were held for two years.

And the Al Jazeera journalist, a Sudanese cameraman named Sami al-Hajj, was held for six years. There were vague allegations that he was helping Al Qaeda help the Chechens (he denied them and, indeed, he was released by the Bush Administration without charges against him), but his lawyer has said that his interrogators were just interested in Al Jazeera. And, indeed, one of the “reasons for transfer” to Guantánamo in [his file](#) is to “provide information on”

The al-Jazeera News Network’s training program, telecommunications equipment, and newsgathering operations in Chechnya, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, including the network’s acquisition of a video of [Osama bin Laden] and subsequent interview with [bin Laden].

Is that what Guantánamo is for? Every journalist should wonder what information he or she might have that the government could find useful. (The file also says that among the items al-Hajj had on him when he was arrested were “several photos of an infant.”)

Here’s another question: why didn’t Obama declassify these documents himself? His Administration has professed to be frustrated at its inability to convey to the public, early on, why Guantánamo should be closed. (See Eric Holdier’s press conference last month for an example.) Might it have helped if Obama had pointed to close-up pictures of the fourteen-year old, or the taxi driver, and really told their stories? He can be good at that, after all. Maybe it wouldn’t have been enough; maybe, clumsily handled, it could have backfired. But it could have shifted the narrative, and it would have been true. Instead, Obama never effectively challenged the image of Guantánamo as a sort of Phantom Zone of super villains, rather than the humiliating hodgepodge it is. When confronted with scare tactics, his Administration, as the *Washington Post* [recounted](#) in a long piece Saturday, retreated again and again; and then it just gave up. The White House feared the fear itself.

And so, instead, on Sunday the Administration released a statement to “strongly condemn” the leak. It made a point of noting how cautious it had been about the prisoners, and how the Bush Administration had transferred many more of them out of Guantánamo than the Obama Administration had—as if that were a point of pride.