# Baseness: On Guantánamo

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***Guantánamo An American History*. By Jonathan M. Hansen.**

With every year, the US naval base at Cuba's Guantánamo Bay becomes less of a place and more of a concept, one that seems to have sprung from a vacuum on January 11, 2002, when twenty of the earliest detainees in the "war on terror" arrived there in orange jumpsuits, blackened goggles, shackles and earmuffs. Americans announce themselves for or against Gitmo, proud or ashamed, or perhaps resigned to it. Mitt Romney declares himself willing to double the size of the base. Academics incorporate it into their theories about X, Y or Z, and pundits cite it as evidence of whatever they want. Meanwhile, outside a small handful of books and articles, essential facts about Gitmo are hard to come by: what is there, and who, and why, and how it all works. This leaves us acutely ill-disposed to form meaningful opinions about the base, let alone speculate coherently about its meaning as a 108-year-old fixture of American policy.

One of the most persistent tropes of our impoverished Gitmo conversation is the notion that the base represents a fall from grace for the United States—a radical and shameful break, post-9/11, with the nation's legal and political tradition. As Jonathan Hansen reminds us in his valuable but frustrating book about Guantánamo Bay, which traces Spanish, French and US involvement there from the late fifteenth century through the present, history indicates the opposite. Gitmo in the present millennium is no departure at all—not even from the American tradition in Guantánamo Bay. The book begins with a whirlwind tour of US–Cuba relations—and, by extension, Europe–Cuba and US–Europe relations—from primarily the mid-eighteenth to the late nineteenth century. Spain took control of the island in 1494 and concerned itself mostly with the port at Havana. But from its earliest days, the United States cast hungry eyes toward the island's natural bounty and proximity to key shipping routes. In 1741 a group of American colonists came ashore at Guantánamo Bay as part of a British expeditionary force and attempted to establish a settlement there. Most were killed, many by tropical disease, but the failure made the colony no less attractive. On one point Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, John Quincy Adams, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, Jefferson Davis and James Polk were in accord: Cuba—by 1840 the most valuable colony in the world, flush with sugar and African slaves—was the perfect, perhaps even existentially necessary, addition to the union. Between them, these politicians and their boosters in the fourth estate produced no shortage of eloquent, highly abstract justifications for takeover on the grounds of peace, liberty and natural law.

Annexation fever waned somewhat after the Civil War, in large part because the island turned out to serve US interests just fine as a Spanish colony open for American business. So long as Cuban Creoles failed in their occasional insurgencies, all comers—Spanish aristocrats, French planters expelled from Haiti by the slave rebellion, former Southern plantation owners—were free to shape the economic landscape as they saw fit. More than ever, cash crops came to dominate the island's economy; old estates merged; ever more sugar fields were planted; profits flowed north and east. This lucrative state of affairs was not seriously jeopardized until the last years of the nineteenth century, when a bid for independence by the Cuban Revolutionary Party threatened to succeed, and US officials became keen to join the winning side. In February 1898 the USS Maine was sunk in

Havana Harbor. The US public roared for retaliation, and on April 25 the Cuban War of Independence became the Spanish-American War. US soldiers landed at Guantánamo Bay on June 10; Spain capitulated five weeks later.

Not one Cuban was invited to the surrender ceremony. That Creoles might have played an invaluable role in the military victory, or might be capable of governing themselves, did not enter many American minds. Delegates to the first Cuban Constitutional Convention were presented by the United States with a list of items that would form the basis of the Platt Amendment and, in the words of US Secretary of War Elihu Root, "the people of Cuba should desire" to include. Together they amounted to an almost complete ceding of sovereignty to the United States. The provision that most humiliated many Cubans was Clause VII, which codified the right of the United States to establish naval bases on the island. But the deal was, in Hansen's words, "Platt as originally worded or continued US military occupation." And so Cuba came into being as a nation almost completely under foreign thumbs. Four years after the occupation technically ended, only 15 percent of Cuban land was owned by Cubans; just as much was owned by Spaniards. All major industries were still almost entirely foreign-run, and profits still traveled out of the country, except now they passed first through the pockets of the local political elite.

In 1903 the United States invoked Clause VII to demand a lease on forty-five square miles of land in Guantánamo Bay's outer harbor, to be used as a coaling station. Thirty years later, the Roosevelt administration took advantage of an acute round of Cuban political turmoil to install Sgt. Fulgencio Batista as the country's strongman. Shortly thereafter, Roosevelt nullified the locally unpopular Platt Amendment, essentially as a PR move. But he simultaneously renegotiated the Guantánamo agreement; not surprisingly, Batista agreed with his benefactors not only that the lease should be renewed but also that it should be made binding in perpetuity, and breakable only with American consent.

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For the first three decades of its existence, America's first overseas military base was a relatively dingy place, known primarily for its tropical weather and, during Prohibition, the selection of cheap bars in the nearby towns of Caimanera and Guantánamo. But as US involvement in World War II became increasingly likely, the nation's investment in its overseas outposts soared. So, too, the role of private contractors in the military. In 1940 the Navy granted the Frederick Snare Corporation (a Halliburton of yesteryear) a $37 million contract to transform the base into a large hub in a Caribbean network of defense against German U-boats. Frederick Snare hired some 10,000 Cubans, Jamaicans and West Indians, and within three years they'd built a marine barracks, two airstrips, a school, a chapel and all manner of lodgings and recreation facilities—the majority of the base's current footprint.

During the cold war, Gitmo acquired a new raison d'être: outpost in America's fight against world communism, thought to be creeping north from Latin America. From a PR standpoint, the base could hardly have been a less enticing advertisement for truth, justice and the American way. US soldiers regularly visited Caimanera and the town of Guantánamo on "liberty parties," which variously involved getting drunk, acting rowdy and visiting prostitutes with stunning regularity, armed with free condoms and penicillin pills they often neglected to use. On base, Cubans not only felt the sting of white American racism but also came under regular suspicion as potential communist agents, especially if they voiced any desire for labor reforms, however mild. US soldiers who killed Cuban workers went unpunished by both nations' courts. If the Navy told Frederick Snare not to hire "suspicious" workers, the company obliged. When soldiers saw fit to subject a Cuban man suspected of stealing cigarettes from the Navy Exchange to two weeks of detention and torture—including beatings and fourteen-hour stretches of forced standing—they did so with impunity.

Jana Lipman, in her excellent *Guantánamo: A Working-Class History Between Empire and Revolution* (2009), considers the years between the Snare contract and Fidel Castro's rise through fine-grained examinations of the many international transactions and collisions the base made possible. She tallies average guest-worker wages; documents shifts in the cost and length of workers' commutes from nearby towns to the base; and discusses the base union's radio broadcasts. She digs up the Navy's database of local prostitutes (who were identified through soldiers' reports of venereal disease) and the Guantánamo civil registry of intermarriages. She quotes heavily from the Cuban newspapers of the time, parsing a wide variety of responses to the base from newspapers of different political affiliations. She also traveled to Guantánamo town, where she tracked down former base workers and recorded their memories of everything from racial tension between Cuban and West Indian base employees to how it felt to oppose Batista while tending the fortress of his greatest ally. Her book is an uncommonly evocative portrait of American empire and its complications, masterfully rendered in both quotidian and broadly historic terms.

Hansen, who cites Lipman's book extensively, doesn't neglect the fine grain altogether, but he often seems so excited by his subject's conceptual potential—such momentous History, converging on such a small space!—that he neglects to be sufficiently attentive to the convergence. And unfortunately, when specifics are lacking, it is usually on the Cuban side of the equation. As the book progresses, the emphasis on US actors and sources threatens to undermine Hansen's stated aim of writing a truly American history.

This is not to say that *Guantánamo* doesn't relate all manner of fascinating and telling incidents, especially as Castro moves closer to ousting Batista and the United States once again scrambles to maintain Cuba as an offshore profit center for its business interests. Throughout El Jefe's insurgency, it was not clear to the United States—or, probably, to the protean Castro—whether the man or his movement was truly communist, fervently nationalist or somewhere in between. Indeed, some US citizens stationed at Gitmo not only viewed Castro as a freedom fighter but also helped Cubans funnel guns and other supplies off base. Three officers' teenaged sons joined Castro in the mountains for several months. But this was before the summer of 1958, when Fidel's brother Raúl kidnapped fifty US soldiers and civilians and kept them hostage, releasing them in small batches for maximum publicity. Anti-Batista sentiment, whatever its ideological foundations, could mean little but antipathy toward the dictator's puppet masters. Within a few years Fidel would be definitively branded as a general of the international red menace. Never again would there be a liberty party on Cuban soil.

It wasn't long after Batista fled that US officials started wondering aloud how Gitmo might be used to invade Cuba. If Castro could somehow be provoked into attacking the base, the United States would have the perfect pretext for retaliation. This was at least part of the thinking behind the Bay of Pigs invasion. But if Cuba could not be tricked into providing provocation, perhaps provocation could be fabricated. Such was the rationale for a handful of foiled and unimplemented US plots hatched in Castro's first three years, most of which had the same script: dress up some Cuban exiles like Castro's militiamen, have them "attack" the base, then "respond" in full force. During the Cuban missile crisis, with Soviet missiles aimed at the base, Robert Kennedy asked "whether there is some other way we can get involved in through, uh, Guantánamo Bay, or something, or whether there's some ship that, you know, sink the Maine again or something."

Castro, too, seemed at times more concerned with using the base as a publicity prop than with the base itself. For him, Gitmo and its employment practices were a useful rallying cry: evidence and reminder of the whole system he claimed to stand against. In 1961 he forbade Cubans from accepting new jobs on the base, forcing the United States to ask the Jamaican government to send more workers. But he didn't force current employees to quit; the economic repercussions would have been too unpopular.

After Castro cut off the base's water supply in February 1964, President Johnson ordered the firing of some 80 percent of the Cuban employees who commuted to work on the base. In Hansen's account, when presented with the choice between Cuba and the base, "many commuters" chose to sever all ties with Cuba and defect. "To this day there remain aging Cubans on the base." This cursory account obscures several fascinating specifics. As Lipman points out, over six waves of layoffs, 448 Cubans chose to come live on the base; 750 others, however, were allowed to continue commuting. As of last March all but two of the commuters had retired, and those two have only one significant responsibility: to hand-deliver pensions to their former co-workers (only those who were not fired, of course).

As for the defectors, most did not stay in Gitmo but instead became US citizens. Some returned to Cuba. As of March, when I stopped by their community center on the base, only thirty-two remained, ensconced in what amounts to an assisted-living community of single-story homes a short drive from Camp X-Ray, an open-air, bare-bones detention center built in the 1990s to house Cuban asylum seekers. Camp X-Ray reopened in 2002 to house alleged terrorists, and now it sits vacant and overgrown with plant life. The remaining Cuban defectors are, in my experience, happy to see visitors and eager to talk about their decades of life in Gitmo. What their existence means I can't say, but surely they warrant more than a single parenthetical reference in Hansen's book, which is keen to depict Guantánamo Bay as a palimpsest marked by international history, and contains many scenes of bored Americans getting drunk. (Lipman doesn't appear to have interviewed any remaining permanent residents either. And none of her many academic reviewers noted this oversight, even though several criticized her for overrelying on her handful of Cuban interviewees.)

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Inattention of this sort affects the last two chapters of Hansen's book in ways perhaps more obviously vexing. The penultimate chapter details the Gitmo-linked fate of Haitian refugees. It's an amazing story, and for the most part Hansen tells it well. Though the full saga begins in the 1970s, the most relevant episode involved the detention of Haitian refugees—more than 34,000––on the base between 1991 and 1992. The goal of the George H.W. Bush administration was to deny immigration to as many of the Haitians as possible. And so in numerous courtrooms the argument was advanced that the US Constitution did not extend to Cuban soil, Gitmo included, or to the high seas on which the Haitians were picked up. The vast majority of the Haitians detained at Gitmo were repatriated to the land of their persecutors, where many were murdered by François Duvalier's militiamen.

After most Haitians had been cleared out, 233 remained. These were the refugees who, despite having managed against the odds to establish a credible fear of persecution in their home country, had also tested positive for HIV, making them ineligible to enter the United States under the terms of a 1986 law sponsored by Senator Jesse Helms. These men, women and children spent their days in extremely primitive, unhealthy and humiliating conditions. Several were given birth control injections without their consent. For many, Gitmo was the first place they'd learned they had HIV; several didn't believe their diagnosis, and so refused all medication. Many went on prolonged hunger strikes; at least four attempted suicide. Those who "misbehaved" or refused to confess wrongdoing in impromptu, unregulated courts-martial risked beatings and solitary confinement. Throughout his first presidential campaign, Bill Clinton expressed strong opposition to Bush's policies toward Haitian migrants, but once in office he made no effort to reverse them. Hansen ends the chapter with two overlapping court cases. In one, advocates for the Haitians went before the Supreme Court to argue that the United States was violating international and domestic laws governing the handling of asylum seekers. Six days later, they argued the more specific case of the HIV-positive detainees in a Brooklyn District Court. The district judge ordered the government to let the detainees go. The Supreme Court, however, sided 8 to 1 with the government: the US laws in

question had no bearing outside the United States.

Two pages later the chapter is over, the eerie precedent well established—and the reader has no idea what happened to the HIV-positive Haitians. Hansen never mentions they were released in New York and Miami; a 2003 investigation in this magazine [see "The Legacy of Guantánamo," July 21, 2003] found that many were still waiting for their asylum applications to be processed. Others had died from AIDS. Some suffered from persistent psychological problems caused by base trauma. Children born in Gitmo were living as stateless people: neither the United States nor Haiti would grant them birth certificates. In *Guantánamo* these Haitians, like the base's permanent residents, drop right off the page.

The book's final chapter, in which Hansen considers Gitmo's most recent use—as a center for the indefinite detention and torture of foreign Muslims—is the one most flawed. Hansen leans heavily on well-known Gitmo investigations and analyses by Jane Mayer, Philippe Sands, Karen Greenberg, David Cole, Joseph Marguiles and Clive Stafford Smith. Jumping between their books, and a few interviews of his own, Hansen summarizes the sad, familiar story of how hundreds of men—the alleged "worst of the worst"—made their way through the United States' global network of gulags to Guantánamo Bay. He also retraces the trail of memos in which the Bush administration justified torture.

Hansen does not make use of the books by or interviews with post-9/11 detainees. Had he focused more on the experiences of Gitmo's victims, he might have written a slightly different ending. "Closing Guantánamo," he notes in his epilogue, "might inadvertently allow both the administration itself and the American public to sidestep the bigger question of how Guantánamo fits into the nation's larger detention archipelago.…What is happening at Bagram? Where else is the United States detaining people? Under what conditions and for how long?" Good questions all, and ones Hansen might have pushed a little further with regard to Guantánamo Bay, whose geography of detention is not as well understood as he seems to think. Readers of his book will not learn that since 9/11, in addition to the military prisons at Gitmo he discusses, the base has also hosted secret CIA prisons—black sites within the base—about which almost nothing is known. Nor does he mention Camp Seven, a prison used to hold "high value" detainees previously held in black sites around the world. Much about this camp is shrouded in mystery, including its location on the base; what conditions and rules prevail there; and the makeup of Task Force Platinum, the team that runs it. On my visit in March, I asked one of my handlers why Camp Seven wasn't included in my tour or the information pack I'd been given. "As you know," I was told, "Camp Seven is a secret. No one knows about it."

Later that day, I was taken on a tour of the detainee hospital. There it was explained to me that each day some classified number of hunger-striking detainees—about eleven, though in the past it has been well over a 100—are each day forced to consume Ensure nutrition shakes, often through enteral tubes. My guide cracked jokes about the variety of flavors on offer—vanilla, chocolate, butter pecan and strawberries and cream—and how they influenced the flavor of detainees' belches. President Obama has ordered Gitmo to operate in accordance with Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions. That article prohibits force-feeding, because by almost all definitions except for the one adopted in the past decade by the US government, force-feeding is torture. Perhaps it is not "as bad" as waterboarding—or "what happened before," as it was more than once euphemized by soldiers I met—but it is torture. And yet in the closing pages of Guantánamo we learn that "by all appearances, the torture and systematic abuse of detainees ended at Guantánamo long before Barack Obama took office." And later on the same page: "A place that has come to symbolize America's fall from grace post-9/11 now demonstrates the power of symbols themselves to inhibit clear thinking." Indeed.

Not long after I finished reading Hansen's book, I checked the online Federal Business Opportunities

database to see if the government was seeking bids on new Gitmo-related contracts. Just posted: a call for “two (2) sanitation and decontamination systems for sanitizing equipment such as riot gear.”

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