

Review: Guantánamo - Diary of Prison and Torture

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***Guantánamo Diary.* By Mohamedou Ould Slahi. Edited by Larry Siems. Little, Brown and Company, 2015, 379 pages, \$29 hardcover.**

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THIS IS A book I initially did not want to read. I don't think of myself as hypersensitive, but the recent official U.S. Senate report admitting and detailing CIA torture practices nauseated me to the point that I felt incapable of further outrage.

Nonetheless, the more I heard about Mohamedou Ould Slahi's *Guantánamo Diary*, the more I wanted to read it. Glenn Greenwald said, "Every American with a shred of conscience" should read it now, and I agree. The ongoing crime against humanity it exposes — representative of so many others like it — is being carried out in the name of the American people.

I first learned of the book's existence from an Op-Ed article in the January 19 *New York Times*. Then it was featured on the front page of the following *Sunday's New York Times Book Review*. They both suggested that *Guantánamo Diary* is far more than a victim's horror story about unspeakable abuse, because the author's own undiminished humanity offsets the inhumanity of his captors.

Against all odds, he has even managed to preserve a sense of humor that often shines through in his narrative. That is not to say that what he has to say is not deeply disturbing. My advice is that you not read it just before going to bed, because it may cause nightmares.

While the remarkable equanimity with which Slahi describes his ordeal makes it somewhat easier to digest, what he has gone through has been at least as Kafkaesque as anything Franz Kafka could have imagined. (John le Carré has described the book as "a vision of hell, beyond Orwell, beyond Kafka.")

Here is Mohamedou Ould Slahi's story in a nutshell, with euphemisms in quotation marks: In November 2001 he left his home in Mauritania and voluntarily submitted to questioning by Mauritanian police acting at the behest of U.S. security authorities. He never saw his home or family again.

The Mauritians interrogated him for a few weeks before turning him over to American agents for "extraordinary rendition" to a "black site" in Jordan, where he began to experience Donald Rumsfeld's "enhanced interrogation methods." That lasted eight months.

From there he was flown to the notorious torture prison at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan for two

more weeks of “softening up” before finally being flown to Guantánamo, where he has been held ever since — 13 years and counting.

What made Slahi a terrorist suspect in American eyes was the fact that he had spent time in Afghanistan where he trained with al-Qaeda. He admits to that, but points out that it was in 1991-92, when the mujahedin were fighting the Soviet Union with the blessing and support of the United States.

None of the other scattershot accusations against him have been supported by credible evidence. (In fact, much of the “evidence” against him was produced by torturing other captives into implicating him in whatever they were accused of doing.)

The Techniques of Torture

Over the years covered in the Diary, Slahi was subjected to alternating periods of intense torture and less intense forms of interrogation, but the latter also involved a great deal of isolation, physical abuse, and constant terror in the form of never knowing what was coming next.

“There is nothing more terrorizing,” he writes, “than making somebody expect a smash every single heartbeat.”

The litany of torture techniques Slahi describes is mind-numbingly familiar: beatings, threats, religious humiliation, sexual abuse, sleep deprivation, painful stress positions, extremes of temperature, and much more. But Slahi’s first-person account adds new levels of meaning to lists of this sort.

His distress is palpable as he explains how he felt when his captors (falsely) told him his mother had been kidnapped to a secret prison and would be gang raped if he didn’t confess his guilt. And he reveals that there is more to the bland phrase “sleep deprivation” than meets the eye:

“No sleep was allowed. In order to enforce this, I was given 25-ounce water bottles in intervals of one to two hours, depending on the mood of the guards, 24 hours a day. The consequences were devastating. I couldn’t close my eyes for ten minutes because I was sitting most of the time on the bathroom.”

Later he asked one of the guards, “Why the water diet? Why don’t you just make me stay awake by standing up?” He was told, “Psychologically it’s devastating to make somebody stay awake on his own, without ordering him.”

The allusion to psychology also reveals that there was more behind the abuse Slahi was suffering than simply the arbitrary whims of sadistic guards. It has become a matter of public record that professional psychologists disgraced their profession by designing programs of torture for Guantánamo detainees.

Medical doctors likewise prostituted themselves by collaborating in torture procedures. And they, like the guards, interrogators, barbers, and other prison personnel, routinely wore what Slahi calls “Halloween-like masks,” apparently to prevent him from being able to identify them.

This seemed to him to be a tacit admission that they knew they were committing crimes against humanity for which they could possibly some day be held accountable.

A noteworthy aspect of Slahi’s book is that it is written in English, a language he did not know

before he arrived as a captive at the Guantánamo Bay prison. He made an effort to learn it — his fourth language — so he could interact directly with his interrogators without having to rely on untrustworthy translators.

The English he picked up bears the marks of those from whom he learned it. He uses “was like” to mean “said,” as young Americans frequently do (as in, “I was like ‘how are you?’ and he was like ‘I’m OK’.”). Furthermore, he says,

“I learned that there was no way to speak colloquial English without F---ing this and F---ing that. English accepts more curses than any other language and I soon learned to curse with the commoners I had a problem when it comes to blasphemy, but everything else was tolerable. The curses are just so much more harmless when everybody uses them recklessly.”

Slahi produced his handwritten narrative in an isolation cell during the summer of 2005. He then tried for six years to get it published, but as a “War on Terror” prisoner with few legal rights or protections, he could not have accomplished that without outside help.

Instrumental in bringing the memoir into the light of day was author and human rights activist Larry Siems, who has brilliantly edited Slahi’s document. Siems has also produced the best account of the aforementioned Senate report, *The Torture Report: What the Documents Say About America’s Post-9/11 Torture Program* (OR Books, 2012. Siems produced this book, based on Freedom of Information Act documents, well before the official report was released.)

Censorship

One salient feature of Slahi’s text is how much of it is missing, and how obvious its absence is. On almost every page there are blacked-out words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. Sometimes there are even multipage runs entirely blacked out. The current euphemism for this practice is “redaction,” a word that used to be a simple synonym for editing, but which now has taken on the connotation of censorship.

The book’s more than 2500 black-bar redactions were the work of U.S. military and espionage agency censors, all in the name of “national security.” Slahi himself suspected that the censorship was designed less to protect Americans from terrorism than to protect interrogators and their bosses from prosecution for war crimes, and he is surely correct in that supposition.

Among Siems’ editorial contributions to the book are footnotes he added to fill in at least some of the blanks with information gleaned from Freedom of Information Act documents obtained by the ACLU.

The censors tried to eliminate any words that would indicate the gender of female interrogators, including the personal pronouns “she” and “her.” But it seems not to have occurred to them that if they didn’t also black out the masculine pronouns referring to male interrogators it would be obvious when women were being talked about.

In passages discussing sexual abuse, the attempts at blacking out female gender references are particularly absurd: “As soon as I stood up, the two [redacted] took off their blouses and started to talk all kind of dirty stuff you can imagine.”

Sexual abuse and religious humiliation went hand in hand. Slahi says, “What hurt me most was them forcing me to take part in a sexual threesome in the most degrading manner.”

Both [redacted] stuck on me, literally one on the front and the other older [redacted] stuck on my back rubbing [redacted] whole body on mine. At the same time they were talking dirty to me, and playing with my sexual parts. I am saving you here from quoting the disgusting and degrading talk I had to listen to from noon or before until 10 p.m. when they turned me over to [redacted]. . . . I kept praying all the time. “Stop the fuck praying! You’re having sex with American [redacted] and you’re praying? What a hypocrite you are!” said [redacted] angrily.

Facing Irrationality

I have mentioned Slahi’s sense of humor. How could he possibly have found anything funny in what he was subjected to? The whole experience was filled with so many irrational absurdities perpetrated by so many dimwits that it would be hilarious . . . if only it were not so horrifying.

Didn’t someone once say that “military intelligence” is an oxymoron? In one farcical interrogation, Slahi was grilled about what he knew about something that had occurred in Iraq in 2003. Slahi pointed out that he had been in detention since 2001 and asked, “How am I supposed to know what went on in 2003? It doesn’t make sense, does it?”

But the interrogators simply plowed ahead along the same line of questioning despite the chronological impossibility. (Perhaps they thought he might have learned some useful information from prisoners who arrived later? No, because they had gone to extreme lengths to prevent him from communicating with other captives.)

Guantánamo Diary reminded me of books and movies like *Twelve Years a Slave*, which can outrage and depress you by putting extreme injustices “in your face,” so to speak.

But there’s one important difference: *Twelve Years a Slave* is about atrocities that occurred more than a century ago. The victims and the perpetrators are long dead. But Mohamedou Ould Slahi is still imprisoned at Guantánamo Bay to this very day.

In 2010 U.S. District Court Judge James Robertson ordered his release, but the Obama administration appealed the ruling, and so Slahi’s seemingly endless ordeal continues. Yes, that’s the same Obama administration that gained office on a promise to shut down the Guantánamo prison.

Slahi’s judgment of the Americans he encountered, despite the fact that most of them brutalized him, is remarkably charitable. That stems from his perceptive understanding of the difference between the American people and their government:

“Many young men and women join the U.S. forces under the misleading propaganda of the U.S. government, which makes people believe that the Armed Forces are nothing but a big Battle of Honor: if you join the Army, you are a living martyr; you’re defending not only your family, your country, and American democracy but also freedom and oppressed people all around the world But the reality of the U.S. forces is a little tiny bit different. To go directly to the bottom line: the rest of the world thinks of Americans as a bunch of revengeful barbarians. That may be harsh, and I don’t believe the [average] American is a revengeful barbarian. But the U.S. government bets its last penny on violence as the magic solution for every problem, and so the country is losing friends every day and doesn’t seem to give a damn about it.”

Guantánamo Diary presents us with yet another indication of how far the rule of law has eroded in the post-9/11 United States. Due process? Rules of evidence? Innocent until proven guilty? Geneva

Conventions?

Prohibitions against cruel and unusual treatment? Forget about it!

No matter how much you think you know about the moral depravity and crimes against humanity at places like Guantánamo Bay and the black sites, you can still learn a great deal from Mohamedou Ould Slahi. And then you should use that knowledge as motivation for organizing to demand the unconditional release of all who are held captive there.

Cliff Conner

P.S.

* “Diary of Prison and Torture”. From Against the Current n°176, May/June 2015.

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