

A Review of "Guantanamo Diary" by Mohamedou Slahi

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"Guantanamo Diary" by Mohamedou Slahi
Little, Brown and Company (January 20, 2015)
ISBN-10: 0316328685
ISBN-13: 978-0316328685

This is a blow-by-blow account of the rendition, incarceration, and torture of Mohamedou Slahi by the U.S. government. It was written in captivity in 2005; it is only now, in 2015, available to the public. Many bits and a few long sections have been blacked out by the U.S. military, to prevent the public from knowing certain details. In many cases, the blacked-out bits are female pronouns ("she", "her") or the names of guards and interrogators--ostensibly to protect their identities but one could equally well say to shield them from prosecution. One of the long blacked-out sections apparently recounts a polygraph test Slahi underwent--which exonerated him.

He was tortured. Repeatedly, for hours on end, days on end, years on end. Teams of both men and women 'worked' on him in shifts. When he lost consciousness due to excess of pain and exhaustion, he was revived by having ammonia sprayed into his nose. It is disturbing reading. Even if he were guilty, he would not have deserved such treatment.

After six years of horrendous abuse, he finally broke down and confessed, simply to make his interrogators happy. And happy they were. Until they read the details. Of course, the confession was rubbish; it was merely what the interrogators had wanted to hear all along, not what really happened. Because what really happened was: nothing. Slahi never committed an act of aggression against the U.S. Both a military prosecutor and a federal judge came to that conclusion. Yet he is still in captivity, held without charge and without due process.

Slahi recounts a session of sexual abuse involving two female interrogators who molested him. His wrists are shackled to the floor and he is forced to stoop in a painfully awkward position for hours while two female interrogators, their blouses removed, scrape their bodies against his, mock-seducing him with obscenities and groping his genitals. He mumbles prayers throughout the ordeal. Slahi is a devoutly religious, married man for whom pre-marital sex is a grave sin. We learn how Slahi endured this ordeal, for he tells us so: his faith sustained him. What I want to know is: how did those women go back to bed with their men after having done that to a helpless captive? What sane, self-respecting woman would prostitute herself like that? Did they genuinely believe that by doing so they were protecting their country from some imminent bomb threat? The unspoken background-text leaps right off the page here: not only was Slahi imprisoned in a warped world; his captors were, too.

Slahi suffered innumerable other injuries, indignities, and degradations, which are minutely described, many of which have been confirmed by official reports following governmental investigations into the goings-on at GTMO. Yet he has the distance, objectivity, and wisdom to remark that the shame really reflects not on the victim, but on the perpetrators. Incredibly, he bears them no hatred, nor does he generalize to suppose that all Americans are probably like his tormentors.

It is easy to mis-underestimate Slahi's literary achievement because his writing style is so natural, almost conversational. But precisely that is his achievement. As Primo Levi explains in his writings about life in the Nazi concentration camps, the German language as inflicted by guards on detainees was

debased, permeated with malice and insult. When Slahi quotes the language inflicted upon him by interrogators and guards at GTMO, it is obvious that the same debasement of English occurred there, too: it is saturated with hatred and degradation ("you are our enemy, you are shit", "you motherf***er", etc.). That is the English he learned perforce; he was not fluent when he was captured. Yet when Slahi speaks in his own voice in "Guantanamo Diary", the debasement, the malice and insult, have been expunged and replaced by clear-sighted objectivity, even when he is describing horrendous abuse. Astonishingly, he bears his captors no malice.

We learn several valuable things from Slahi's book.

1. When then-President George W. Bush said (in 2005) that the U.S. does not torture people, he was lying. Dick Cheney has publicly confirmed that President Bush was informed about the program of "enhanced interrogation techniques", approved and authorized it. President Bush also read the intelligence reports about the progress of the interrogation of Slahi. Bush cannot have not known what was going on in GTMO.

What happened in GTMO is not comparable to what happened in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. What happened in Abu Ghraib was an aberration; there was no policy to abuse and sexually humiliate prisoners there. The abuses were committed by a few poorly trained people who were inadequately supervised. What happened in GTMO was policy; it was approved at the highest political level, in the White House, and systematically implemented by the military commander of the U.S. installation at GTMO. Dozens of people were specially trained to carry out and monitor the policy, and the White House was kept informed of its progress. This has been confirmed by official documents already available; the editor, Larry Siems, provides footnoted links to many of them on the Internet.

2. Cooperating with intelligence personnel does not pay. Slahi voluntarily turned himself in to the police in his home country, from which he was then "rendered" to Jordan and finally to GTMO, and he cooperated with his interrogators in all three countries. The story he told was consistent and true (as verified by a polygraph test); the interrogators simply refused to believe his story, and he is still in captivity despite the lack of evidence that he ever committed an act of aggression against the U.S. Other detainees, who did commit acts of aggression and who were less cooperative with interrogators, have since been released.

3. Every few years, the U.S. goes wacky. When the U.S. goes wacky, it starts seeing assassins behind every bush and tree and it starts shooting wildly. It went wacky in the 1950s during the McCarthy era, and it went wacky again after 9/11. A climate of paranoia evolved and a sinister web of suspicion was spun from which there was and is, for a few unfortunate people, no escape. Slahi got caught in this web and is still caught in it now.

Interrogators invariably want to know who the co-conspirators were. Apparently, some terrorist suspect mentioned Slahi's name during interrogation. The question was probably something like, "Who recruited you?" The terrified terrorist suspect blurted out some name; it happened to be Slahi's. The terrorist suspect probably did not know what ramifications the word "recruit" would have, either for himself or for the man whose name he mentioned. He certainly could not have guessed how the U.S. intelligence community would over-interpret that word into a Big Conspiracy. As Slahi tells it, what actually happened was this: Slahi had gone to Afghanistan in the early 1990s to fight the Soviet invaders. He was trained there by a rag-tag organization of mercenaries which had the blessing, financing, surface-to-air missiles, and intelligence reports of the CIA. Remember President Reagan's "Freedom Fighters"? 'Twas they: "Al-Qaida" they called themselves. The U.S.A. supported them then, against the Soviets. Yes, Slahi "swore allegiance" to Al-Qaida--he never denied it. He fought the Soviets in Af-

ghanistan, he never denied it. He left Afghanistan when the fight was over, returned to civilian life as an electrician in Germany, and probably relegated his Afghan adventure to the hot-headed idealism of his youth. Now scroll ahead a few years to the late 1990s: some people who somehow have come to know of him, but whom he does not know, somehow learn of his previous escapades in Afghanistan and ask him how to get there. They too want to go there. He tells them. They go. So, for the U.S. intelligence community, Slahi is now an "Al-Qaida recruiter"! Those other guys go to Afghanistan and get some training by the mercenary organization. Then some of their comrades fly planes into the WTC a couple of years later. So now, for the U.S. intelligence community, Slahi is not just "an Al-Qaida recruiter"--he is "THE Al-Qaida recruiter" for the whole 9/11 plot!! It gets more absurd. The Canadian security forces investigate and find no evidence against Slahi; the German security forces investigate and find no evidence against Slahi; the Jordanian secret police 'interview' him and find no evidence. So now, for the U.S. intelligence community, Slahi is "The 9/11 MASTERMIND"!!! Why? Because only a genius could have so thoroughly erased all the evidence!!!! It all fits, doesn't it? Well, doesn't it? Only if you're totally wacky.

Slahi is well aware of the absurdity of the situation and even mentions "Catch-22". He also quotes Ben Franklin: "They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety." He could just as well have quoted him thus: "We are all born ignorant, but one must work hard to remain stupid." The U.S. intelligence community worked hard.

4. Dick Cheney has publicly stated that "enhanced interrogation techniques" (= torture) saved lives. No life was saved by torturing Slahi. Nothing he revealed to his interrogators helped law enforcement officials to foil any plot because Slahi knew nothing of any plot. It goes without saying that torture cannot be justified by moral arguments; torture is morally abominable. If torture can be justified at all, then only by its results. Specifically, in Slahi's case, it brought no results, therefore it was not justified in his case. Generally, justification by results is vitiated by the weakness that one cannot know in advance whether a proposed course of action will have the desired results. One cannot know in advance whether torturing a given person will in fact yield information relevant to an imminent plot, because, of course, one does not know what he knows--nor, if revealed, whether the law enforcement officials involved will in fact foil the plot (if there is one--and maybe there isn't). Therefore it offers no guide in the moment, whether a given person should be tortured or not; it offers only a retroactive 'justification' when things turn out well, but no excuse when they turn out badly. *That* is why certain types of action--such as torture--should be ruled out a priori in all cases. The risk is unacceptable that innocent people will be tortured, as in fact happened at GTMO.

Justifying torture by claiming that it saved lives is hypothetical, at best. Neither Dick Cheney nor anyone in the intelligence community can name any single person whose life was saved by torturing someone. On the contrary, it can be argued that torturing people actually cost lives, some of them American--and they can be named. People recently captured and gruesomely executed by Islamic State were dressed in orange overalls--the same orange overalls in which GTMO detainees were dressed. This is no coincidence; it is a tit-for-tat response to the barbarism perpetrated at the Guantanamo Bay facility. The message is clear: "you commit atrocities against our people, we commit atrocities against your people." If the West expects Western captives to be treated decently, then the West must be seen to treat suspected Islamist terrorists decently.

5. What has sustained Slahi throughout his ordeal--and it is not over--is an shakable faith in a set of moral/religious principles. He never preaches, yet his faith radiates off the pages, though they are shot through with bullet holes not his own. Thus, the book reveals--as if by stencil: showing, not saying--what his captors lack: they, the faithless, are driven by mere expediency and sheer paranoia. The intrusions of the military censor's black-outs, far from damaging the narrative, instead render it more potent,

for they cast into high relief the humanity of a hapless man still trapped in a diabolical labyrinth of distorting mirrors.

6. There is an old saying that an innocent man has nothing to fear from the police. This must be amended: an innocent man has nothing to fear from innocent police.

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