

10 years later, Guantanamo represents Obama's failed promise

By **Baher Azmy** / McClatchy Newspapers

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Photo by AP

In this Dec. 6, 2006 file photo, reviewed by a U.S. Department of Defense official, a shackled detainee is transported away from his annual Administrative Review Board hearing with U.S. officials, in Camp Delta detention center at the Guantanamo Bay U.S.

During his presidential campaign and the earliest days of his administration, President Obama stressed, in eloquent and sophisticated ways, the urgency of ending so many of the outrages of the Bush administration's "war on terror." He specifically put to writing his promise to shutter its most symbolic component - the Guantanamo Bay prison, which opened 10 years ago on Jan. 11, 2002.

To the Arab world, where Guantanamo retains particularly ugly resonance, he promised in a well-received 2009 speech in Cairo that: "We are taking concrete actions to change course. I have unequivocally prohibited the use of torture by the United States, and I have ordered the prison at Guantanamo Bay closed by early next year."

Obama recognized the symbolic grotesqueness of Guantanamo - a penal complex beyond the law, a breeding ground for torture and humiliation, an island encampment shackling none but Muslim men thousands of miles from their homes. He understood the need to abide by the human rights values we often preach to others. And, as he told American audiences, closing Guantanamo was vital "because living our values doesn't make us weaker, it makes us safer and stronger."

His message got through. At the time, a majority of the American people supported the idea of closing Guantanamo.

Yet 10 years after the prison camp opened, and three years after he pledged to close it, Guantanamo goes on, and 171 men languish there, uncharged with any crime. They have had no contact with children who have grown or parents who have died.

To be sure, this is not all Obama's fault. After granting President Bush all the authority to do whatever he wished there, Congress has turned Guantanamo into a cynical political tool and obstructed Obama's attempts to release or try detainees. It has imposed unnecessary, counterproductive restrictions on what the commander in chief can do with those held there. As a result, more than half of the detainees - 89 men - have been cleared for release by the military, but can't be transferred.

The aura of forever hangs heavier than ever at Guantanamo.

And here at home, Guantanamo's stain has spread into other aspects of federal policymaking _ from the continuation of hypersecrecy to the codification of indefinite detention; from the persistent denial of justice to victims of torture to the authorization of targeted assassinations of U.S. citizens.

When he ran for president, Obama understood the cost that Guantanamo was exacting on our role in the world. Yet, while today thousands of brave men and women, including those who stood rapt by Obama's proclamations in Cairo, risk their lives to throw off the repression of their militaristic regimes _ a thrilling, modern tribute to the irresistible pull of freedom and human rights _ America has moved further away than ever from this universal cause. By making his idea of America irrelevant in this age, Obama has broken his biggest promise of all.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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