

American Prison Planet: The Bush Administration as Global Jailer

By [Nick Turse](#)

Global Research, November 05, 2006

[Tom Dispatch](#) 5 November 2006

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Today, the United States presides over a burgeoning empire — not only the “empire of bases” first described by Chalmers Johnson, but a far-flung new network of maximum security penitentiaries, detention centers, jail cells, cages, and razor wire-topped pens. From supermax-type isolation prisons in 40 of the 50 states to shadowy ghost jails at remote sites across the globe, this new network of detention facilities is quite unlike the gulags, concentration-camps, or prison nations of the past.

Even with a couple million prisoners under its control, the U.S. prison network lacks the infrastructure or manpower of the Soviet gulag or the orderly planning of the Nazi concentration-camp system. However, where it bests both, and breaks new incarceration ground, is in its planet-ranging scope, with sites scattered the world over — from Europe to Asia, the Middle East to the Caribbean. Unlike colonial prison systems of the past, the new U.S. prison network seems to have floated almost free of surrounding colonies. Right now, it has only four major centers — the “homeland,” Afghanistan, Iraq, and a postage-stamp-sized parcel of Cuba. As such, it already hovers at the edge of its own imperial existence, bringing to mind the unprecedented possibility of a prison planet. In a remarkably few years, the Bush administration has been able to construct a global detention system, already of near epic proportions, both on the fly and on the cheap.

Sizing Up a Prison Planet

Soon after the attacks of September 11th, 2001, the U.S. began the process of creating what has been termed “an offshore archipelago of injustice.” In addition to using “the Charleston Navy Brig” and locking up “one prisoner of war in Miami, Florida,” according to the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Bush administration detained people from around the world in sweeps, imprisoned them without charges and kept them incommunicado at U.S. detention facilities at a CIA prison outside Kabul, Afghanistan (code-named the “Salt Pit”), at Bagram military airbase in Afghanistan, and at Guantanamo Bay Naval Station, Cuba, among other sites.

Since it was set up in 2002, the detainment complex at Guantanamo Bay has been the public face of the Bush administration’s semi-secret foreign prison network — a collection of camps, cells, and cages that today holds 437 prisoners. But “Gitmo” has always been the tiny showpiece, the jewel in a very dark crown, for a much larger, less visible foreign network of military detention facilities, CIA “black” sites, and outsourced foreign prisons. It is a prison camp that rightly attracts opprobrium, but it also serves to focus attention away from shadowy ghost jails, borrowed third-nation facilities, much larger prisons holding thousands in Iraq, and a full-scale network of detention centers and prisons in Afghanistan.

We may never know how many secret prisons exist (or, for a time, existed) in the shape-shifting American mini-gulag, but according to the Washington Post, some locations for these black sites include itinerant CIA detention centers “on ships at sea,” a site in Thailand, and another on “Britain’s Diego Garcia island in the Indian Ocean.” Uzbekistan has been reported as one possible location, Algeria another. Denials were issued about ghost jails being located in Russia and Bulgaria. The British Guardian named “a US airbase in the Gulf state of Qatar” as another suspected site. And while proposed prisons on “virtually unvisited islands in Lake Kariba in Zambia” were evidently nixed, various black sites located in “several democracies in Eastern Europe” apparently did come into being.

ABC News reported that the “CIA established secret prisons in Romania and Poland in 2002-2003” before shutting them down in early 2006 and moving the disappeared prisoners on to “a facility in North Africa.” Following this report, Tomdispatch contacted Major General Timothy Ghormley, then the commander of the Combined Task Force Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) for U.S. Central Command, to inquire about the prisoner transfer. Ghormley stated: “There are no other U.S. bases in the Horn of Africa besides Camp Lemonier [in Djibouti].” He went on to assert, “There are no prisons under CJTF-HOA’s command, and Camp Lemonier does not do prisoner transfers.” When asked about CIA operations at the camp, he said he was barred from talking about “any security operations worldwide” and could not speak for the CIA. It is, however, worth noting that Amnesty International reported earlier this year on a Yemeni man who was “disappeared” and “flown on a small US plane to a site probably in Djibouti, where he was questioned by officials who told him they were from the FBI.”

While these illegal sites, mainly run by the CIA, were intermittently identified in the U.S. or foreign press, it was only this September that President George W. Bush finally acknowledged the existence of the CIA’s secret prisons. Still, it’s unknown how many CIA black sites are still active and how many clandestine military prisons are still in operation.

What little we do know, however, indicates that the “archipelago of injustice” has grown to world-spanning proportions. For example, in an investigative article in the British Guardian in March 2005, Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark reported that a network of over 20 U.S. prisons was believed to exist in Afghanistan, including “an official US detention centre in Kandahar, where the tough regime has been nicknamed ‘Camp Slappy’ by former prisoners.” Just recently, Trevor Paglen and A.C. Thompson, authors of *Torture Taxi: On the Trail of the CIA’s Rendition Flights*, confirmed this, reporting that “the U.S. military has erected some 20 detention centers [in Afghanistan]... which all operate in near total secrecy. These are facilities that the U.N., the Afghan government, journalists, and human rights groups can’t get into.”

We know as well that suspects, swept up around the world, have been outsourced to the prisons and torture chambers of third countries in “extraordinary rendition” operations. The number of prisons operated by other countries is shadowy, but certainly geographically wide-ranging. Foreign facilities available for Bush administration use evidently have included the al-Tamara interrogation center, located in “a forest five miles outside [Morocco’s] capital, Rabat”; sites in Jordan including “prisons in the capital, Amman, and in desert locations in the east of the country”; facilities in Saudi Arabia; “a series of jails in Damascus,” Syria; “the interrogation centre in the general intelligence directorate in Lazoughli and in Mulhaq al-Mazra prison” in Egypt; “facilities in Baku, Azerbaijan”; and “unidentified locations in Thailand,” among others.

The treatment given in 2002 to Canadian Maher Arar, recently the recipient of the Letelier-Moffitt International Human Rights Award, offers a glimpse into the American prison planet in action in its early stages of formation. Arar has described how he was detained and then held incommunicado — shackled and chained — in a terminal in New York’s JFK Airport before being transported to Brooklyn’s Metropolitan Detention Center. At that Federal prison, Arar recalls an Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) agent telling him, “The INS is not the body or the agency that signed the Geneva Convention... against torture.”

“For me,” said Arar, a Canadian citizen born in Syria, “what that really meant is we will send you to torture and we don’t care.” He was, in fact, soon flown to Jordan, where he was beaten, and then driven to Syria. There, he was locked in a filthy, dark cell “about three feet wide, six feet deep and about seven feet high” where he was kept in isolation for 10 months and 10 days when not being physically assaulted. Despite being tortured into a false confession, Arar was found to have no links to terrorism and was never charged with crimes of any sort by the United States, Canada, Jordan, or Syria. Instead, he was sent back to Canada without so much as an apology or explanation by the Bush administration. His is the archetypal tale of the American prison planet that has been under construction these last years — a torture tour of the globe’s most dismal hell holes. How many others have suffered variations of this treatment remains unknown. The few useful figures we do have, such as the European parliament’s April 2006 findings of over 1,000 secret CIA flights over European Union territory alone since 2001, suggest a large number of “extraordinary renditions” have been carried out.

When President Bush finally came (somewhat) clean about the CIA’s illegal prisons (even turning them, along with his torture policies, into a proud election issue), a senior State Department official also asserted that there were “no detainees” still in them. Within days, however, newspapers began to point to evidence that people presumed to have been disappeared by the U.S. were still unaccounted for. In mid-October, a specific case hit the press when it was disclosed that “a Syrian with Spanish citizenship, was captured in Pakistan in October 2005 and is held in a prison operated by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.”

Operation Iraqi Freedom?

The war in Iraq boosted the profile of the American prison planet immeasurably, especially after the Abu Ghraib prison revelations burst into public view in the spring of 2004. At that time, approximately 20,000 Iraqis were imprisoned by U.S. forces, including — a report that year disclosed — more than 100 children as young as 10 years of age.

Over two years later, there are still many thousands of Iraqis held by U.S. forces in that country — including about 3,550 in a brand new “\$60-million state-of-the-art detention center” at Camp Cropper near Baghdad’s airport and another almost 9,500 in somewhat more primitive prison conditions at Camp Bucca in the south and Fort Suse in the Kurdish north.

Meanwhile, the number of prisoners and detainees held by the U.S.-backed Iraqi government and allied militias and death squads is murky at best, but probably sizeable. Secret prisons — where the grimmest kinds of torture are performed, often with power drills — are reputed to be scattered around Baghdad, the capital. In November 2005, then-Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari admitted receiving word on conditions in just one of these. According to the BBC, “173 detainees had been held [in an Interior Ministry building], that

they appeared malnourished, and may have been ‘subjected to some kind of torture.’” The next month, the Washington Post reported the discovery of a “second Interior Ministry detention center where cases of prisoner abuse have been confirmed by U.S. and Iraqi officials.”

By June of this year, it was reported that the Iraqi Interior Ministry was still holding 1,797 prisoners; the Defense Ministry a smaller undisclosed number; and the Justice Ministry, at least 7,426.

Lockdown, USA

The offshore archipelago of injustice garners the headlines, but it’s the homeland prison network that locks up far more people and provides at least one possible model for what the foreign network could morph into given the time and funds to expand and harden into a permanent supermax system. Comprised of federal and state prisons, territorial prisons, local jails, “facilities operated by or exclusively for the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement,” military prisons, “jails in Indian country,” and juvenile detention facilities, the homeland prison system is a truly massive apparatus.

Just as the global network has expanded in the years since 9/11, so has incarceration in the U.S. In fact, it has climbed steadily in recent years. Today, the U.S. stands preeminent among all nations in treating people like caged animals. According to statistics provided to the BBC by the International Centre for Prison Studies, 724 people per 100,000 are imprisoned in the U.S., overwhelmingly trumping even increasingly authoritarian Russia, the world’s second-ranked prison power, who’s rate of caging humans is only 581 per 100,000.

All told, the U.S. now has 2,135,901 prisoners in domestic detention facilities, alone — several hundred thousand more than are imprisoned in both China and India, the world’s two most populous countries, combined. Of these people, 192,198 are imprisoned in federal facilities — though just 5.3% of them for the violent crimes of most people’s nightmares: homicide, aggravated assault, kidnapping, and sex offenses. Instead, most — 53.6 % — are locked up on (often small-time) drug charges.

Of the federal prison population, the government classifies about 0.1 % (100 people) as having committed “national security” offenses. There’s no category in the U.S. system for political prisoners, which doesn’t mean they don’t exist. According to a 2002 Harvard BlackLetter Law Journal article by J. Soffiyah Elijah, there were, prior to September 11, 2001, “nearly 100 political prisoners and prisoners of war incarcerated in the United States” — many of them the surviving victims of Vietnam-era government campaigns against activists.

There is also another group of political prisoners of indeterminate number not listed on the rolls — war resisters. Just recently Iraq War veteran turned resister Kevin Benderman was released from a military prison where he had been held for over a year for refusing to redeploy to Iraq due to his conscientious objection to the war. While Army Lieutenant Ehren Watada is currently facing an eight-year prison sentence, if convicted, for similar opposition to Iraq. One website lists 27 war resisters “presently in legal jeopardy, or currently incarcerated” who have gone public with their stories.

Additionally, in the immediate wake of 9/11, the government conducted sweeps of Muslim immigrants (and Muslim-Americans) reminiscent of the detentions of Japanese and Japanese-Americans during World War II, “locking up large numbers of Middle Eastern men,

using whatever legal tools they can.” There was never any full accounting of these mass roundups, codenamed PENTTBOM, or what happened to all the people who were rousted from beds or yanked out of places of work by federal agents. What little is known suggests that “762 of the 1,200 PENTTBOM arrestees were charged with immigration violations at the behest of the FBI because agents thought they might be associated with terrorism... [but] almost every one was either deported or released within a few months.” Only a small percentage of the 1,200 are thought to have even been processed through the federal criminal justice system.

This summer the Washington Post announced that, after 5 years of captivity, Benamar Benatta, “believed to be the last remaining domestic detainee from the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, was released.” In mid-October, however, word surfaced that Ali Partovi, also caught in the dragnet, was still being held captive although he “is not charged with a crime, not suspected of a crime, [and] not considered a danger to society.”

Preemptive Incarceration

From time to time, certain people in the U.S. also find themselves tossed into special kinds of detention facilities. For example, during the 2004 Republican National Convention (RNC) in New York City, protesters (and also bystanders) swept up in indiscriminate mass arrests or illegal acts of preemptive incarceration were temporarily locked up in “Marine and Aviation Pier 57,” a filthy facility of razor-wire topped chain-link cages that was soon dubbed “Guantanamo on the Hudson.” While being imprisoned in New York City’s own Gitmo didn’t begin to compare to being tossed in the real McCoy or any other secret offshore site, there was one striking similarity. U.S. intelligence officials estimated that 70-90% of prisoners detained in Iraq “had been arrested by mistake.” That was also 2004. The next year, it was revealed that, of the large majority of RNC arrest cases that had run their course, 91% of the arrests were dismissed or ended in acquittals.

On the American prison planet, not only has the principle of habeas corpus been formally abolished and torture proudly added to the mix, but that crucial tenet of the legal system, the presumption of innocence, has been cast aside. Whether at home or abroad, the solution for U.S. security forces is a simple one, identify the likely suspects, conduct sweeps, and preemptively lock them up.

Concentration Camp, USA?

According to recent statements by the Department Homeland Security’s Immigration and Customs Enforcement bureau, some time in the future undocumented economic migrants may be imprisoned on “old cruise ships.” Other illegals may even find themselves in a KBR concentration camp.

Earlier this year, news broke that Halliburton subsidiary, KBR — the firm infamous for building prison facilities at Guantanamo Bay and for scandals stemming from work in the Iraq war zone — received a \$385 million contract from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to build detention centers, according to the New York Times, “for an unexpected influx of immigrants” or “new programs that require additional detention space.” For anyone who remembers the First World War-era proposal by four state governors to imprison members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) for the duration of the conflict, or the 1939 Hobbs (“Concentration Camp”) Bill that sought the detention of aliens, or the forcible relocation and imprisonment of Japanese and Japanese-

Americans during World War II, or the 1950 McCarran Act's provisions for setting up concentration camps for subversives, or the Vietnam-era plans to round up and jail radicals in the event of a national emergency and conduct mass detentions in the face of possible urban insurrections, the announcement may have seemed less than startling. But thought of in the context of prison-planet planning, it nonetheless strikes an ominous note indeed.

One Vietnam-era radical, former Pentagon analyst Daniel Ellsberg, grasped the implications immediately. "Almost certainly this is preparation for a roundup after the next 9/11 for Mid-Easterners, Muslims and possibly dissenters," he said. "They've already done this on a smaller scale, with the 'special registration' detentions of immigrant men from Muslim countries, and with Guantanamo."

Fear of a Prison Planet

In 2005, Irene Khan, Amnesty International's general secretary, described Guantanamo Bay as "the gulag of our time." But the American gulag is so much more than Guantanamo and so much worse. The combination of U.S. "homeland" prisons, where "one in 140 Americans, or as many people as live in Namibia, or nearly five Luxembourgs" are locked away, the offshore imperial detention facilities, the shadowy CIA black sites, and the ever-shifting outsourced detention facilities operated by other nations adds up to something new in history — the makings of a veritable American prison planet.

Nick Turse is the associate editor and research director of Tomdispatch.com. He has written for the San Francisco Chronicle, the Nation, the Village Voice, and regularly for Tomdispatch. Articles from his recent Los Angeles Times series, "The War Crimes Files" can be found here, <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-vietnam20aug20-sg,0,7940522.story> gallery. TomDispatch.com is a project of the Nation Institute.

The original source of this article is [Tom Dispatch](#)

Copyright © [Nick Turse](#), [Tom Dispatch](#), 2006

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Nick Turse](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca

