

Bush Insider Reveals Guantanamo Deception: Hundreds of Innocent Jailed

By [Prof. Bill Quigley](#)

Global Research, April 21, 2010

[The Huffington Post](#) 20 April 2010

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [Law and Justice](#)

Colonel Lawrence B. Wilkerson, Chief of Staff to U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, provided shocking new testimony from inside the Bush Administration that hundreds of the men jailed at Guantanamo were innocent, the top people in the Bush Administration knew full well they were innocent, and that information was kept from the public.

Wilkerson said President Bush, Vice President Cheney and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld “indefinitely detained the innocent for political reasons” and many in the administration knew it. The wrongfully held prisoners were not released because of political maneuverings aimed in part to cover up the mistakes of the administration.

Colonel Wilkerson, who served in the U.S. Army for over thirty years, signed a sworn declaration for an Oregon federal court case stating that he found out in August 2002 that the US knew that many of the prisoners at Guantanamo were not enemy combatants. Wilkerson also discussed this in a revealing and critical article on Guantanamo for the Washington Note.

How did Colonel Wilkerson first learn about the innocents in Guantanamo? In August 2002, Wilkerson, who had been working closely with Colin Powell for years, was appointed Chief of Staff to the Secretary of State. In that position, Wilkerson started attending daily classified briefings involving 50 or more senior State Department officials where Guantanamo was often discussed.

It soon became clear to him and other State Department personnel “that many of the prisoners detained at Guantanamo had been taken into custody without regard to whether they were truly enemy combatants, or in fact whether many of them were enemies at all.”

How was it possible that hundreds of Guantanamo prisoners were innocent? Wilkerson said it all started at the beginning, mostly because U.S. forces did not capture most of the people who were sent to Guantanamo. The people who ended up in Guantanamo, said Wilkerson, were mostly turned over to the US by Afghan warlords and others who received bounties of up to \$5000 per head for each person they turned in. The majority of the 742 detainees “had never seen a U.S. soldier in the process of their initial detention.”

Military officers told Wilkerson that “many detainees were turned over for the wrong reasons, particularly for bounties and other incentives.” The U.S. knew “that the likelihood was high that some of the Guantanamo detainees had been turned in to U.S. forces in order to settle local scores, for tribal reasons, or just as a method of making money.”

As a consequence, said Wilkerson “there was no real method of knowing why the prisoner

had been detained in the first place.”

Wilkerson wrote that the American people have no idea of the “utter incompetence of the battlefield vetting in Afghanistan during the initial stages...Simply stated, no meaningful attempt at discrimination was made in-country by competent officials, civilian or military, as to who we were transporting to Cuba for detention and interrogation.”

Why was there utter incompetence in the battlefield vetting? “This was a factor of having too few troops in the combat zone, the troops and civilians who were there having too few people trained and skilled in such vetting, and the incredible pressure coming down from Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and others to ‘just get the bastards to the interrogators.’”

As a result, Wilkerson’s statement continues, “there was no meaningful way to determine whether they were terrorists, Taliban, or simply innocent civilians picked up on a very confused battlefield or in the territory of another state such as Pakistan.”

In addition, the statement points out “a separate but related problem was that often absolutely no evidence relating to the detainee was turned over, so there was no real method of knowing why the prisoner had been detained in the first place.”

“The initial group of 742 detainees had not been detained under the processes I was used to as a military officer,” Wilkerson said. “It was becoming more and more clear that many of the men were innocent, or at a minimum their guilt was impossible to determine let alone prove in any court of law, civilian or military. If there was any evidence, the chain of protecting it had been completely ignored.”

Several in the U.S. leadership became aware of this early on and knew “of the reality that many of the detainees were innocent of any substantial wrongdoing, had little intelligence value, and should be immediately released,” wrote Wilkerson.

So why did the Bush Administration not release the men from prison once it was discovered that they were not guilty? Why continue to keep innocent men in prison?

“To have admitted this reality would have been a black mark on their leadership from virtually day one of the so-called War on Terror and these leaders already had black marks enough: the dead in a field in Pennsylvania, in the ashes of the Pentagon, and in the ruins of the World Trade Towers,” wrote Wilkerson.

“They were not about to admit to their further errors at Guantanamo Bay. Better to claim everyone there was a hardcore terrorist, was of enduring intelligence value, and would return to jihad if released,” according to Wilkerson. “I am very sorry to say that I believe there were uniformed military who aided and abetted these falsehoods, even at the highest levels of our armed forces.”

The refusal to let the detainees go, even those who were likely innocent, was based on several political factors. If the US released them to another country and that country found them innocent, it would make the US look bad, said Wilkerson. “Another concern was that the detention efforts at Guantanamo would be revealed as the incredibly confused operation that they were. Such results were not acceptable to the Administration and would have been severely detrimental to the leadership at the Department of Defense.”

At the Department of Defense, Secretary Rumsfeld, “just refused to let detainees go” said Wilkerson.

“Another part of the political dilemma originated in the Office of Vice President Richard B. Cheney,” according to Wilkerson, “whose position could be summed up as ‘the end justifies the means’, and who had absolutely no concern that the vast majority of Guantanamo detainees were innocent, or that there was a lack of useable evidence for the great majority of them. If hundreds of innocent individuals had to suffer in order to detain a handful of hardcore terrorists, so be it.”

President Bush was involved in all of the decisions about the men in Guantanamo according to reports from Secretary Powell to Wilkerson. “My own view,” said Wilkerson “is that it was easy for Vice President Cheney to run circles around President Bush bureaucratically because Cheney had the network within the government to do so. Moreover, by exploiting what Secretary Powell called the President’s ‘cowboy instincts,’ Vice President Cheney could more often than not gain the President’s acquiescence.”

Despite the widespread knowledge inside the Bush administration that the US continued to indefinitely detain the innocent at Guantanamo, for years the US government continued to publicly say the opposite – that people at Guantanamo were terrorists.

After these disclosures from deep within the Bush Administration, the newest issue now before the people of the U.S. is not just whether the Bush Administration was wrong about Guantanamo but whether it was also consistently deceitful in holding hundreds of innocent men in prison to cover up their own mistakes.

Why is Colonel Wilkerson disclosing this now? He provided a sworn statement to assist the International Human Rights Clinic at Willamette University College of Law in Oregon and the Federal Public Defender who are suing US officials for the wrongful detention and torture of Adel Hassan Hamad. Hamad was a humanitarian aid worker from Sudan working in Pakistan when he was kidnapped from his apartment, tortured and shipped to Guantanamo where he was held for five years before being released.

At the end of his nine page sworn statement, Wilkerson explains his personal reasons for disclosing this damning information. “I have made a personal choice to come forward and discuss the abuses that occurred because knowledge that I served an Administration that tortured and abused those it detained at the facilities at Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere and indefinitely detained the innocent for political reasons has marked a low point in my professional career and I wish to make the record clear on what occurred. I am also extremely concerned that the Armed Forces of the United States, where I spent 31 years of my professional life, were deeply involved in these tragic mistakes.”

Wilkerson concluded his article on Guantanamo by issuing a challenge. “When – and if – the truths about the detainees at Guantanamo Bay will be revealed in the way they should be, or Congress will step up and shoulder some of the blame, or the new Obama administration will have the courage to follow through substantially on its campaign promises with respect to GITMO, torture and the like, remains indeed to be seen.”

The U.S. rightly criticizes Iran and China for wrongfully imprisoning people. So what are we as a nation going to do now that an insider from the Bush Administration has courageously

revealed the truth and the cover up about U.S. politicians wrongfully imprisoning hundreds and not releasing them even when they knew they were innocent? Our response will tell much about our national commitment to justice for all.

Bill Quigley is Legal Director at the Center for Constitutional Rights and professor of law at Loyola University New Orleans. Bill can be contacted at quigley77@gmail.com

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