

## IN GUANTANAMO, ENSNARED IN THE WAR ON TERROR

By Jordan G. Teicher, September 11, 2017



To Debi Cornwall, Guantánamo Bay Naval Base is a study in contradictions.

On the one hand, the United States military promotes an image of the base as a seaside paradise with bowling alleys and beaches that any service member would be lucky to have as a posting. But there's also the Guantánamo the world knows as the site of the infamous detention camp where people suspected of being terrorists have been held indefinitely without trial and endured torture.

"There are two very different things happening at once in this place," Ms. Cornwall said.

In examining those contradictions through photographs and documents, Ms. Cornwall has raised tough questions about the lives caught up in the United States' so-called war on terror. In her book, "Welcome to Camp America: Inside Guantánamo Bay," which Radius Books will publish this month, she prods readers to face these realities and come to terms with them.

"My goal in making this work was to invite people to look at Guantánamo again after almost 16 years," she said. "Most of us have stopped looking."

Mamdouh, an Egyptian-Australian entrepreneur, returning to his hometown outside Alexandria, Egypt, in 2015. He was held for two years and nine months, and was released on Jan. 27, 2005. Charges were never filed. Credit Debi Cornwall Ms. Cornwall studied photography at the Rhode Island School of Design. After working with Mary Ellen Mark and Sylvia Plachy, and as an Associated Press stringer, she attended Harvard Law School and worked for 12 years as a civil rights

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lawyer representing people who would be exonerated thanks to DNA analysis. She returned to photography in 2014, eager to explore power's effects on individuals through art, rather than law.

"There's a clear thread for me professionally from my work as a lawyer to my work as an artist," she said. "I think the main difference now is that I am more interested in raising questions than in answering them."

Lens first featured Ms. Cornwall's Guantánamo project three years ago, when she was in the middle of "Gitmo at Home, Gitmo at Play," a series of photographs depicting life on both sides of the wire taken during three visits to Cuba between 2014 and 2015.

To secure access, she had to adhere to a 12-page document of rules, including those prohibiting the taking of any photographs revealing the identity of detainees, military personnel or civilian staff. As part of the agreement, the military was also allowed to review all the photos directly from her memory cards and could delete any photographs that violated the rules. When she shot with film, she was required to process it under the watch of military censors in a mobile darkroom she built in the bathroom of the Navy lodge where she was staying.

"My strategy was to work within the limitations established by the military's rules and to look at what I was being asked to see," she said. "Later, I placed that in a context of what we're not allowed to see using text in the book."

Since 2014, her project has expanded to include "Gitmo on Sale," a series of photos featuring plush turkey vultures, bobble heads and other objects sold at Guantánamo's gift shops. It now also includes "Beyond Gitmo," a series of 14 portraits of former detainees who have been freed to nine countries, among them Egypt and Ireland. There are still 41 detainees held at the prison.

Mourad, center, a French-Algerian Muslim youth counselor. He was held for two years and eight months. Charges were never filed in the United States, but upon his return to France he was charged, tried and convicted, and he served another year and a half in prison. His conviction was overturned on appeal. Credit Debi Cornwall  
After contacting the men through their lawyers — or, sometimes, directly on social media — Ms. Cornwall photographed them with their backs to the camera. The intention, she said, was to replicate in the free world the Guantánamo rule against photographing faces.

"It was important for me to convey visually in this series the reality that it's not over when the body is freed," she said. "Essentially, I photographed each of these men as though they were still in Guantánamo."

Those portraits, which are printed on free-floating inserts, come with select information about the men, including the amount of time they spent in detention. Sometimes, the men are quoted directly about their time in prison. Other times, Ms. Cornwall provides excerpts from transcripts of their interrogations or case proceedings.

The entries never fail to note that no charges were filed against the men.

"Rather than laying out a case or telling any one man's story from start to finish — as I would as a lawyer — as an artist I'm compiling these seemingly disparate materials to provoke questions," she said. "The real work is done in what's missing, in what's in between."

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Those missing pieces are most apparent in the government documents, once classified but still heavily redacted, about the abuse at Guantánamo that Ms. Cornwall includes throughout the book. In the book, each of those texts is partially covered by a folded page, presenting viewers with a deliberate challenge: Will they lift the page and discover the brutal truth beneath?

“You can flip past if you don’t want to know,” she said, “but you’re aware you’re choosing not to look.”