



Life Matters Journal

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

This January marked 21 years since the opening of the Guantanamo Bay detention center. Since 2002, 779 Muslim men and boys have been detained there. Nine of those human beings have died in the prison. Today, hundreds have been released; however, 35 men remain detained indefinitely by the United States government. Of those remaining, most have never been charged with a crime. Several have been cleared for transfer by all relevant agencies, but are still imprisoned. Many of the detainees are victims of US-sponsored torture and all have had their human rights violated within the prison.



As someone who has played a small role in the movement to bring justice to the victims of this state-sanctioned violence, it sometimes feels as though this issue has taken a back seat in the minds of many otherwise justice-oriented people. The mainstream media rarely, if ever, covers the continuing abuses at Guantanamo. The hundreds of completely innocent men and boys who were kidnapped and tortured have been utterly forgotten and their plight ignored.

For those of us who hold a Consistent Life Ethic, we often find ourselves in the position of defending and standing with those at the very margins of the marginalized. At Rehumanize International, we boldly reaffirm the humanity of those who have been dehumanized by the state and the culture at large. We refuse to be silent and complicit with extreme abuse done against our Muslim brothers — and all human beings.

In this issue of *Life Matters Journal*, we aim to draw your attention back to the 35 men who remain detained in Guantanamo as well as the men and boys whose lives have been irrevocably changed by this institution. Our first article, written by Sean Wild, gives a brief recap of the 21 years since the prison's opening in the context of the war on terror. The final article in this issue, written by John Whitehead, details the current state of artwork made by Guantanamo detainees and the US government's campaign to strip that small connection to humanity from the men.

Other articles in this edition of *Life Matters Journal* discuss a range of issues related to the Consistent Life Ethic including war, suicide, executions, and euthanasia. I hope that as you read this magazine your commitment to building a culture of peace is strengthened. If so, I invite you to join us as a partner in this work to defend human rights for all human beings.

Peace,

Herb Geraghty

This journal is dedicated to the aborted, the bombed, the executed, the euthanized, the abused, the raped, and all other victims of violence, whether that violence is legal or illegal.

We have been told by our society and our culture wars that those of us who oppose these acts of violence must be divided. We have been told to take a lukewarm, halfway attitude toward the victims of violence. We have been told to embrace some with love while endorsing the killing of others.

We reject that conventional attitude, whether it's called Left or Right, and instead embrace a consistent ethic of life toward all victims of violence. We are *Life Matters Journal*, and we are here because politics kills.

Disclaimer

The views presented in this journal do not necessarily represent the views of all members, contributors, or donors. We exist to present a forum for discussion within the Consistent Life Ethic, to promote discourse and present an opportunity for peer-review and dialogue.

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Twenty-one Years of GITMO: On the Spotted History and Practices of the Guantanamo Bay Detention Center

By Sean Wild

January 11, 2023, marked the anniversary of the opening of the Guantanamo Bay Detention Center, commonly known as GITMO. In its twenty-one years of operation, GITMO has been marred with allegations of inhuman treatment, abusive conditions, and even torture.

GITMO is located on an American Naval Base in Cuba. The U.S. assumed control of the territory in 1903, as a condition of Cuba's independence from Spain, after the U.S. won the Spanish-American War. It was one of several conditions in an agreement known as the Platt Amendment. However, Cuba eventually repealed this amendment and no longer acknowledges American occupation of the territory to be legitimate.

The detention camp first opened on January 11, 2002, under the Bush Administration. It was opened in response to the September 11th terrorist attacks, and was intended for use as a facility to keep suspects with alleged ties to terrorist organizations. From the outset, practices at GITMO have been surrounded by controversy and secrecy. The Department of Defense originally did not release the identities of those being held, and the Bush administration claimed that detainees were not entitled to protections under the 1949 Geneva Convention,¹ which outlines the rights owed to those being held as prisoners during wartime. Both of these decisions proved to be legally unfounded and, after some legal battles, the number of prisoners and their identities were released. The courts also ruled that detainees were entitled to at least the minimal protections under the Geneva Convention.

Subsequent U.S. administrations had a range of responses to GITMO. During his presidency, President Obama attempted to close the camp, though these plans were met with bipartisan opposition from the halls of Congress.² In 2018, President Trump signed an executive order³ to keep the facility open indefinitely. President Biden vowed to close the camp⁴ before the end of his presidency, though concrete steps remain to be taken.

In 2009, speaking of the people detained at GITMO, former Vice

President Dick Cheney stated that they constitute the “worst of the worst.”⁵ The detention camp has certainly held a number of dangerous individuals,⁶ including some who were found to have ties to the September 11th attacks and/or Al-Qaeda. However, Brigadier General Martin Lucenti, who was the deputy commander of the joint task force that ran GITMO, said⁷ that a majority of the detainees “weren't fighting. They were running. Even if somebody has been found to be an enemy combatant, many of them will be released because they will be of low intelligence value and low threat status.” In 2006, Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee Senator Arlen Specter said⁸ that “where we have evidence, they ought to be tried, and if convicted, they ought to be sentenced.” He added that the majority of those being held at the time had been arrested based on “the flimsiest sort of hearsay.”

[...] the majority of those being held at the time had been arrested based on “the flimsiest sort of hearsay.”

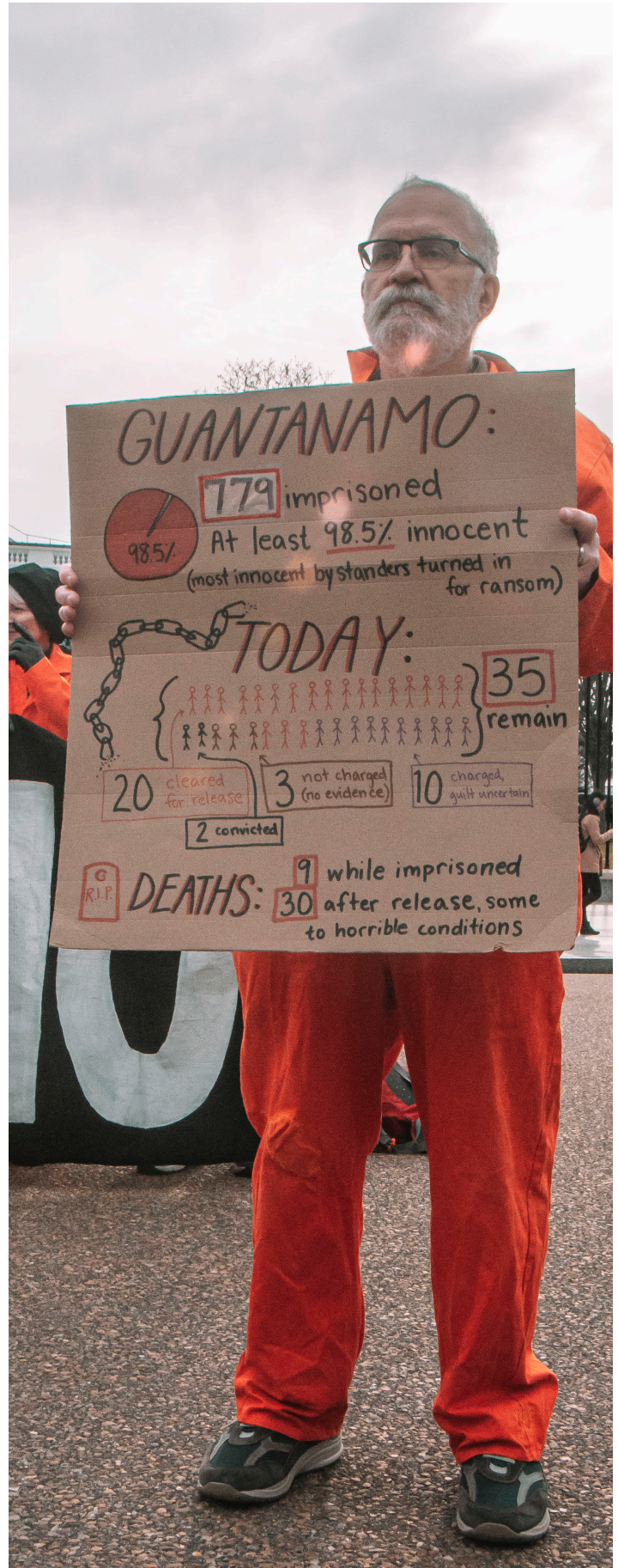
Many have criticized the conditions and interrogation techniques used at GITMO, including human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the United Nations Convention Against Torture. In June of 2004, the International Committee of the Red Cross⁹ visited and inspected sections of the facility. A condition of the inspection was that the Red Cross' report would

remain confidential. However, the report was leaked to The New York Times; it stated¹⁰ in part that the practices employed at GITMO constituted “serious violations of international humanitarian law,” and that “persons deprived of their liberty face the risk of being subjected to a process of physical and psychological coercion, in some cases tantamount to torture, in the early stages of the internment process.”

Looking at the history of GITMO shows that U.S. practices regarding people suspected of terrorism are in serious need of reform. A logical step towards that goal would be to halt operations at GITMO, close the camp, and turn to an alternative course of action. The U.S. government must find a way to develop the policies and procedures necessary for the country's safety without resorting to the violation of the dignity and rights of the human person.

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On Khashoggi and Yemen, a Timid Biden Administration Capitulates to the Saudi Regime Yet Again

By Samuel B. Parker

The second week of December was a rough one for the Biden administration.

In the span of only eight days, President Biden recommended that Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman receive diplomatic immunity¹ for his role in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and then successfully scuttled a Yemen War Powers Resolution² that would have halted U.S. involvement in the violence of the Yemeni Civil War.

The diplomatic immunization of Crown Prince bin Salman played out in a federal court in Washington, D.C. in early December. Hatice Cegnize, fiancé of the late Khashoggi, had sued the Saudi monarch for orchestrating the brutal slaying of her partner. Both U.S. and Turkish intelligence agencies have conclusively determined that Crown Prince bin Salman directly ordered the assassination³ of the dissident journalist, who routinely criticized the foreign and domestic policies of the Saudi government. U.S. and Turkish officials insist that covert Saudi agents were operating under Crown Prince bin Salman's explicit instructions when they abducted Khashoggi inside of a Saudi consulate in Istanbul, strangled him to death, dismembered his body with a bonesaw, and subsequently tampered with evidence and fled the country.

Despite overwhelming indications that Crown Prince bin Salman eliminated a civilian journalist, a federal judge dismissed the lawsuit against the Saudi royal on December 6th. The judge expressed his reluctance to do so, but remarked that he essentially had "no choice"⁴ due to the fact that the U.S. Department of State, under the guidance of President Biden, had "informed the court that [Crown Prince bin Salman] is immune."⁵ After vowing to hold Khashoggi's killers accountable for their flagrant acts of violence, President Biden backed down entirely, failing to even enact minimal diplomatic penalizations against the Crown Prince,⁶ let alone prosecute him for murder.

Just as President Biden was working to shield his fellow head of state from liability related to the Khashoggi case, his administration was tangling with Senate Democrats over a proposed resolution⁷ aimed at ending U.S. contributions to the Saudi intervention in the Yemeni Civil War.

Saudi involvement in the ongoing conflict in Yemen has racked

up nearly 10,000 civilian casualties⁸ in the last seven years: a figure that, while already alarming, is widely considered to be a conservative estimate. As Saudi Arabia pummels Yemeni men, women, and children from the air and fuels a severe famine by blockading Yemeni ports,⁹ the U.S. government recklessly continues to train Saudi pilots and deal arms to Riyadh; since 2015, Saudi Arabia has purchased more than \$64 billion worth of weapons and sophisticated weapons technology¹⁰ from the United States. To make matters worse, the U.S. government has neglected to track whether these weapons are being used¹¹ by Saudi forces in Yemen, implicating the United States in Saudi war crimes¹² that have targeted wedding parties, funerals, hospitals, and other civilian gatherings and population centers.

In an effort to curtail U.S. aid to the Saudi military, Senator Bernie Sanders introduced a Yemen War Powers Resolution that would forbid any and all military assistance to Saudi Arabia without specific approval from the U.S. Congress. The resolution gained some Democratic support in the Senate, but Senator Sanders promptly withdrew it after President Biden threatened a veto.¹³

These actions are disappointing, but they are not surprising. President Biden has already demonstrated that, like many of his predecessors, he is eager to usurp unconstitutional control over U.S. military operations around the world, and he is prepared to interrupt any political momentum that compromises that illegitimate executive power. He has also shown no sign of willingness to challenge the Saudi government on the global stage, making him the latest apparent hostage to U.S. interests in oil and national defense.

While lethal arms flow from the United States to Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia has positioned itself as the fifth largest supplier of foreign oil to the United States. President Biden has overseen the importation of a third of a billion barrels of Saudi oil¹⁴ since he took office in 2020, in a continuation of a trend established by presidents before him. Given the refusal of the United States to buy Russian oil during the Russo-Ukrainian War,¹⁵ the Saudi market share is sure to increase in the coming years. The maintenance of numerous U.S. military installations and a strategic CIA drone base¹⁶ in Saudi Arabia is yet another complicating factor.

Saudi Arabia remains one of the few ostensibly compliant trade partners and hosts in a region that is allegedly pivotal to U.S. economic and security interests. Consequently, the U.S. government seems to have concluded that it simply cannot risk any damage to relations with Crown Prince bin Salman. The tragic result of this purely pragmatic calculus is the perpetuation of a global society wherein status, wealth, and influence can purchase impunity.

For the price of petroleum and Patriot missiles, the U.S. government has auctioned off both its credibility and its virtue.

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Iranian Government Poised to Use Mass Executions to Quell Deepening Unrest

By Samuel B. Parker

In November, an Islamic Revolutionary Court in Iran sentenced a protester to death¹ in a judicial proceeding that raises serious concerns regarding the response of the Iranian government to civil unrest. The protester, who was arrested while participating in demonstrations against the Iranian state and was charged with property destruction and “enmity against God,” is one of several dozen people currently facing execution for offenses related to ongoing protests in Tehran and throughout the country.

The unrest erupted in September, when 22-year-old Masha Amini died while in the custody of the Iranian morality police.² Amini was detained for failing to properly wear a hijab in public; she was taken to a nearby police station, where Iranian officials insist she perished after experiencing sudden heart arrhythmia³ due to an underlying cardiovascular disease. But Amini’s family denied that she had any such pre-existing condition⁴ and several witnesses have contradicted the official story, claiming that Amini was violently beaten⁵ in the back of a police van. After Iranian authorities stuck to their story and allegedly refused to release CCTV footage⁶ from inside the vehicle, thousands of Iranians took to the streets to demand answers and accountability.

Now, hundreds more people have found themselves in the line of fire. According to the Human Rights Activist News Agency,⁷ as many as 341 demonstrators have already been killed⁸ by Iranian military forces. This number includes 43 child fatalities. Meanwhile, almost 16,000 people have been apprehended⁹ for their involvement in public protests. These figures are likely to grow.

It was not initially clear what the Iranian government intended to do with these protesters after their arrests. But in early November, the Iranian Parliament released a letter signed by a majority of its members in which the legislative body called on the Iranian judiciary to dole out austere retribution.¹⁰ The letter, endorsed by 227 of the 290 legislators, referred to protestors as “enemies of God”¹¹: a criminal designation which is punishable by death. Afterwards, members of the Iranian parliaments reportedly chanted “death to seditionists”¹² in a chilling display of despotic disregard for human rights and life.

Iranian courts seem to have assented. The unidentified defendant who was sentenced to death for “waging war against God”¹³ and “corruption on earth”¹⁴ is merely one of many who will face similar charges. At least 10 other people have also been accused of capital crimes¹⁵ thus far, and there is no sign whatsoever that Iranian courts will exercise restraint in conducting their

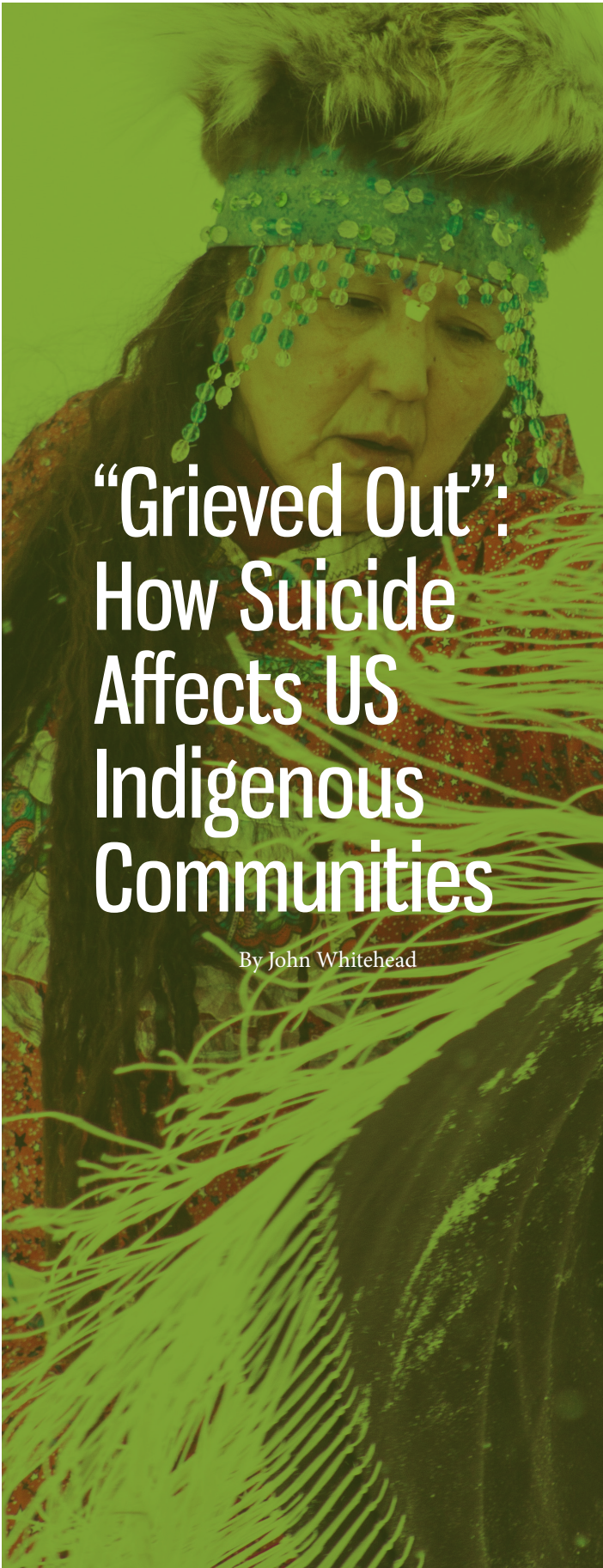
trials or the trials of the thousands of protesters who have yet to be formally charged.

False reports¹⁶ circulated online in mid-November that the Iranian government had sentenced 15,000 people to death. These reports were debunked, but the reality is that a mass execution of this scale is neither impossible nor unrealistic. Iranian authorities have brazenly displayed both a willingness to employ lethal force against civilians and an eagerness to implement political processes predicated upon violent intimidation in order to discourage further disorder and dissuade the Iranian people from seeking justice. And if history is any indication,¹⁷ there is no reason to expect that Iranian police will practice moderation in the streets, or that the Iranian judiciary will show leniency¹⁸ in the courtroom.

The international community must respond to this rapidly developing crisis, but must be sure to avoid harming innocent Iranian men, women, and children who are desperately trying to survive under the Iranian regime in a nation and region that have been routinely exploited for western interests and destabilized by western intervention.¹⁹ Rather than embracing aggressive military posturing or economic measures that will victimize the Iranian people, U.S. officials must tactfully avail themselves of diplomacy. The U.S. government can use targeted sanctions to directly undermine the elements of the Iranian regime,²⁰ such as the morality police and prominent figures within the Iranian security apparatus, that are responsible for both recent events and historical atrocities. U.S. officials and third parties can also work to ensure that Iranians have access to the internet and other requisite technology²¹ for disseminating their message to the world. Most importantly, Americans and others can demonstrate support and solidarity by informing themselves of the plight of the Iranian public and sharing the stories of the Iranian people.

The protests in Iran are an immediate call for transparency in response to suppression, but they are also a broader struggle for fundamental human freedoms and dignity, particularly for marginalized women. They are an internal challenge to the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic of Iran: inspired and driven forward from within. In the face of violent repression and totalitarian abuses of power, neutrality and complacency cannot be valid options.

Editor’s note: Since the publication of this article, four protesters have been executed in Iran; fifteen others remain at risk of execution.²²



“Grieved Out”: How Suicide Affects US Indigenous Communities

By John Whitehead

Editor's note: This post discusses suicide and sexual and intimate partner violence.

Suicide is a leading cause of death in the United States; an estimated 47,646 suicides occurred in 2021.¹ Although suicide affects the general US population — the national suicide rate has been on an upward trend for roughly 20 years — indigenous communities are affected most severely.² Native American and Alaska Native communities have suicide rates dramatically higher than that of the general population.³ This situation requires special attention.

The national US suicide rate, adjusted for age, has hovered around 14 per 100,000 people in recent years.⁴ In contrast, non-Hispanic Native Americans and Alaska Natives had a suicide rate of 23.9 per 100,000 in 2020.⁵ Among racial/ethnic groups, these indigenous communities have a noticeably higher suicide rate than both non-Hispanic white Americans, who have the next highest rate (16.9), and any other peoples of color in the United States.⁶

Beyond being more frequent, suicide patterns among these indigenous communities have other notable characteristics. Like suicides in the general US population, suicides among Native Americans and Alaska Natives skew heavily male. The suicide rate for men in these communities was 36.4 in 2020 versus 11.7 for women.⁷

Younger Native Americans and Alaska Natives tend to have higher suicide rates, whereas rates diminish among older members of these communities. This pattern contrasts with that among white Americans, where the suicide rate tends to be higher among older cohorts. A comparative study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention measuring suicides among Native Americans and white Americans over a 12-year period found that 35.7% of indigenous suicides were among people 10-24 years old, while only 11.1% of suicides by white individuals were from this age group.⁸

When these patterns are considered together, young Native American and Alaska Native men have a horrifyingly high suicide rate. For men ages 15-24 in these communities, the suicide rate in 2019-2020 was 59.7, roughly four times the national rate. For men ages 25-34 in these communities, the suicide rate in 2019-2020 was 71.1, roughly five times the national rate.⁹

Different factors may account for suicide's disproportionate toll on these indigenous communities. The comparative study of suicides in indigenous versus white populations found that roughly 70% of the indigenous people who had died by suicide lived in rural or other nonmetropolitan areas. Rural areas generally have higher suicide rates.¹⁰ American Indian and Alaska Native communities also have the highest poverty rate of any racial/ethnic group in the United States: 25.9%, roughly double the national rate.¹¹

A combination of geographic isolation and high poverty likely leads to a lack of healthcare, including mental health services. The CDC's comparative study found that American Indians and Alaska Natives who had died from suicide were less likely than whites who had died from suicide to have received mental health care or a mental health diagnosis before their deaths.¹² Underfunding of the federal Indian Health Service department, which provides healthcare for millions of indigenous people, is a related problem.¹³

Trauma may also play a role. Although suicide disproportionately affects indigenous men, American Indian and Alaska Native

women have the highest suicide rates of any racial/ethnic group among women.¹⁴ Women from these communities are also more likely to be targets of violence: almost 84% experience violence in their lifetimes, according to one estimate, including sexual and intimate partner violence.¹⁵ Such experiences may increase suicide risk.

The prevalence of suicide among certain indigenous communities may also contribute to further suicide, a pattern known as “suicide contagion.” The CDC also found that indigenous people who died from suicide were more than twice as likely as white people to be affected by the suicide of a relative or friend.¹⁶ R. Dale Walker, a psychiatrist of Cherokee heritage, worked with a Native American community that had experienced 17 suicides in eight months and reported hearing the sobering phrase “grieved out.”¹⁷

This pattern of violent death disproportionately affecting some of the most marginalized people in the United States requires a response. Native American and Alaska Native communities need the resources and opportunities necessary to reduce poverty and improve healthcare. More specifically, they need adequate, well-funded, and culturally appropriate mental health resources.

Given the high suicide risk among young people, mental health programs in schools or other youth-focused settings could be especially valuable. Providing support to those who have lost loved ones can help prevent suicide contagion.¹⁸ Giving Native American communities the power to prosecute non-Native Americans for crimes committed on reservations may help reduce domestic violence.¹⁹

Karen Hearod, a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma who works as an administrator at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, commented that, “Despite all of the things that tribes have endured, we’re still here...There is strength and resilience we can find in that.”²⁰ Members of indigenous communities deserve support in their struggle against suicide and other threats to their lives.

Those interested in mental health resources for Native American and Alaska Native communities may wish to consult the One Sky

Center (<http://www.oneskycenter.org/>). Those in need of immediate assistance can call or text the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988.

Notes

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5. From here onward in the article, references to suicide rate statistics framed similarly are per 100,000 people.
6. Ehlman et al., “Changes in Suicide Rates.”
7. *Ibid.*
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13. Anna Almendrala, “Native American Youth Suicide Rates Are at Crisis Levels,” HuffPost, October 10, 2015, <http://bit.ly/3OmLArn>.
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20. Dastagir, “Suicide Rate for Native American Women.”





Meincke's Moment

By Jack Champagne

As human beings, we instinctively understand the violence of war. After all, war carries with it by its very nature the implications of death and destruction, usually for an ostensible purpose, often for no reason at all. And from even ancient times we have understood that this violence perpetuates itself after the fighting has stopped, even among the survivors of the victorious nation. We have metaphorical language to describe the aftermath of such violence, analogizing it to results of physical force in terms such as “moral injury” or “post-war trauma”.

What happens when we continue to inflict mortal harm against wartime victims that is physical as well as mental and social? Mark Meincke gave a stirring answer to that question before the Veterans Affairs Committee of the Canadian House of Commons. Meincke is a veteran of the Royal Canadian Infantry Corps, and the host and founder of the Operation Tango Romeo Trauma Recovery podcast, a project that developed out of his experiences peer counseling other traumatized veterans. He weaves a harrowing story that proceeds from his service as a United Nations peacekeeper as a part of Operation HARMONY. HARMONY involved the deployment of thousands of Canadian troops from 1992 to 1995 to police the fallout of the breakup of Yugoslavia. The result was so bloody and fraught with ethnic and religious conflict that it is the subject of two competing claims of genocide. The things that Meincke experienced in the Balkans, a subject he is understandably hesitant to address in detail, have imprinted themselves upon both his body and mind. “Genocide will do that to you,” he says without a hint of irony. He was sufficiently injured so as to qualify for veterans benefits and lived with post-traumatic stress disorder for 23 years of his life before being diagnosed.

Meincke describes the shared experience with veterans of the wars in Korea and Vietnam, who similarly suffered in silence in the days before PTSD was widely understood diagnostically, now reaching out for help. He helped fill the gap by becoming a peer support facilitator. Through this work with other veterans, he came across the tragic story of an anonymous veteran who, instead of being offered help or services by his VA caseworker, was pressured

to take his own life. According to Meincke, this veteran was offered MAiD (Medical Assistance in Dying) completely unprompted and persistently after refusing twice.

On the Rehumanize Blog, we have discussed Canada’s pressure on the indigent and the disabled to accept legal suicide in lieu of even minimal services necessary to improve their quality of life, but the incident described by Meincke has a particularly grotesque quality. There can be no pretense of “dying with dignity” in this case; the implications of the state sending a man to his death, only to offer him nothing but death upon his return, is inexpressibly ghastly. The message it sends to its injured veterans is clear: “it would have been better for everyone if you had simply died in the field.” It is a horrific vision of human lives that sees them first as a fungible resource, then as a little more than a liability. Meincke even offers his testimony in trepidation, for fear that it might affect his ability to receive benefits, implying that the state knows that what it is doing is immoral and would simply prefer its victims to keep quiet. With the eligibility for MAiD being expanded to include the mentally ill early next year, this incident is simply a window into Canada’s future.

Famed labor historian and philosopher of nonviolence Staughton Lynd once described the cycle of violence that follows from participation in warfare. “Modern warfare,” he stated, “requires of the infantryman the gift of his or her life, if not in the form of death in combat then in the form of personal disintegration when the warrior comes home.”¹ Canada’s increasing preference for medicinal murder over support for the most vulnerable gives that disintegration a shockingly literal character.

Notes

1. Lynd, A. and Lynd, S. (2017) *Moral injury and nonviolent resistance: Breaking the cycle of violence in the military and behind bars*. PM Press.



“Our Artworks are Parts of Ourselves”: The Unresolved Status of Art by Guantánamo Bay Detainees

By John Whitehead

“Just as the heart beats in the darkness of the body, So I, despite this cage, continue to beat with life.”
SHAIKH ABDURRAHEEM MUSLIM DAST
Held at Guantánamo for three years

The US prison at Guantánamo Naval Base, Cuba, remains a significant unresolved legacy of the Global War on Terrorism begun in 2001. Since the prison opened in January 2002, roughly 780 men have been detained there as part of US counter-terrorism policies. Today, 35 men remain there, with their ultimate fate yet to be resolved.¹

One lesser-known aspect of the Guantánamo detainees’ experience is the art they created in prison. Art classes have been offered at the prison since 2010, but by their own account prisoners there have made works of art even before then.² Who owns this art — and what will ultimately become of it — is a subject of controversy, however.

An open letter to President Biden from eight former detainees states that “From the very beginning, we made art... We drew with tea powder on toilet paper. We painted our walls with soap and carved Styrofoam cups and food containers. We sang, danced, recited poetry, and composed songs.” The art classes gave them greater power and freedom to continue these activities.³

Some detainees gave artwork to their lawyers as gifts. One lawyer, Beth D. Jacob, was impressed by her client’s paintings and reached out to Erin Thompson, a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, about possibly putting them on display. The eventual result was a 2017 exhibition at the college of 36 paintings, drawings, and sculptures by men who had been or were still detained at Guantánamo.⁴ The exhibition’s theme was depictions of the sea, which detainees were generally not allowed to view from the prison.⁵

The John Jay College exhibit apparently attracted the attention of

the US Defense Department, which suspended further transfers of detainee art from Guantánamo. A department spokesman told the New York Times that “items produced by detainees at Guantánamo Bay remain the property of the U.S. government.” The Defense spokesman also expressed concerns about where money from sales of the art might go. Thompson, an exhibition curator, responded that only art by detainees who had been released was available for sale.⁶

Ramzi Kasem, a lawyer for several detainees, said that “one of my clients was told that, even if he were ever to be released, that he would not be able to take his art with him, and that it would be incinerated.”⁷

Further exhibitions of Guantánamo detainee artwork have been held since 2017, including one at DePaul University in Chicago this year.⁸ The DePaul exhibition curators supported former detainee Mansoor Adayfi in organizing the open letter to Biden, which was released in October of this year.⁹

The letter appeals to the president to “Please end the Trump-era policy of preventing artwork from leaving Guantánamo and release the captive art from the prison.” The signatories note that “Arriving at Guantánamo was like entering a state between life and death. We were completely isolated from the rest of the world and became numbers in orange jumpsuits, caged 24/7.”¹⁰ They go on to explain the art’s importance to them:

[W]hat we got wasn’t just paper, pens, and paints. These were our tools to connect to our memories, to our

previous lives, to nature, to the world, to our families. Art was our way to heal ourselves, to escape the feeling of being imprisoned and free ourselves, just for a little while. We made the sea, trees, the beautiful blue sky, and ships. We painted our hope, fear, dreams, and our freedom. Our art helped us survive...

Art from Guantánamo became part of our lives and of who we are. It was born from the ordeal we lived through. Each painting holds moments of our lives, secrets, tears, pain, and hope. Our artworks are parts of ourselves. We are still not free while parts of us are still imprisoned at Guantánamo.¹¹

Being able to sell artwork may help former detainees seeking financial support. Thompson commented that “The amounts are modest, but proved very helpful to men struggling to find their feet and make a living after losing 10 or 15 years of their lives.” She argues that since inmates serving sentences in federal prisons are allowed to make and sell art, the same freedom should be given to Guantánamo detainees.¹²

Some former detainees value the art beyond any money it might earn them. Moath al-Alwi, who has been imprisoned since 2002 but has been recommended for transfer to another country, commented that “as far as I am concerned, I’m done, my life and my dreams are shattered. But if my artwork is released, it will be the sole witness for posterity.” Khaled Qasim, who was also recommended for transfer after roughly 20 years imprisonment, has said “My artworks are part of me and my life. If the US government does not agree to release my artwork, I will refuse to leave Guantánamo without my artwork.”¹³

Those wishing to support past and present detainees in their appeal can sign the Open Letter. Those wishing to learn more about the artwork can go to Art from Guantánamo Bay.

Notes

1. “The Guantánamo Docket,” *New York Times* interactive feature, accessed November 11, 2022, <http://bit.ly/3GesnWV>.
2. “Free the Captive Art from Guantánamo: Open Letter to President Biden from Former Guantánamo Prisoners,” accessed November 12, 2022, <http://bit.ly/3g0roiD>; Molly Enking, “Guantánamo Detainees Ask Biden to Let Them Keep Their Art,” *Smithsonian*, October 18, 2022, <http://bit.ly/3AhIxen>.
3. “Free the Captive Art from Guantánamo”; “The Guantánamo Docket”; and Enking, “Guantánamo Detainees Ask Biden.”
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