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Bodily Destruction, Bodily Empowerment: A Year of Detainee Resistance at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba

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Bodily Destruction, Bodily Empowerment:
A Year of Detainee Resistance at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy in Culture & Performance

by Mathew Sandoval

2014
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Bodily Destruction, Bodily Empowerment:
A Year of Detainee Resistance at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba

by

Mathew Sandoval
Doctor of Philosophy in Culture & Performance
University of California, Los Angeles, 2014
Professor David Gere, Chair

My dissertation covers the 2005-2006 resistance movement staged by detainees at our military detention facility in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in which hundreds of detainees took collective action against detention conditions and mistreatment. In reconstructing the history of this movement I analyze issues of power and the body by focusing on detainee hunger strikes and suicides. I
argue that insofar as Gitmo functions as a continuation of war by other means, where the site of contestation is the detainee body, the hunger strikes and suicides are simultaneously forms of self-destruction and self-empowerment in which detainees shuffle off their subjugation and seize their bodies back from military control. Furthermore, I maintain that forms of embodied resistance performed by detainees are more than symbolic actions aimed at publicizing their suffering, they are physical interventions that disrupt camp operations and challenge the military’s biopolitical and disciplinary strategies, all while building collectivity and community among detainees across nationality, ethnicity, race, class, and language.

My dissertation puts forward a much-needed alternative history of Guantanamo. Although there exists a wide literature examining Guantanamo in terms of foreign policy, legal precedent, and human rights, there’s been no extensive coverage dedicated to the ways detainees challenge their detention. This leaves us with an insufficient analysis of Guantanamo. By focusing on detainee resistance and approaching detainees as subjects with agency, I not only fill a gap in the literature, I overturn long-standing paradigms that formulate detainees as either dehumanized evil enemies or dehumanized helpless victims.
The dissertation of Mathew Sandoval is approved.

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2014
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Introduction

The guard might have called a “Code Yellow,” Gitmo’s euphemism for a detainee who’s fainted from hunger strike. The guard might have called a “Code Snowball,” meaning the detainee was attempting suicide or committing an act of “self-harm.” Whatever code the guard radioed in, it didn’t matter. It was too late. The detainee was lying on the floor of his cell motionless and unresponsive. There was nothing the military could do. Or rather, the military had already done all it could do. It had done all it could do for close to eleven years. And that’s why this man was dead.

His synapses fired for the last time inside a brain eaten away by a sickness of the heart. His pulse beat for the last time inside a heart eaten away by a distress of the mind. His breath paused. His blood stalled. His body crumpled in a ball, orange fabric sagging from his skinny frame.

He died in a cell in Guantanamo.

He was a human being.

His name was Adnan Latif.

He was finally free.

Ten years, eight months, twenty-two days. Dead at the age of 36, Adnan Latif spent more than a quarter of his life at Guantanamo.

He spent all of 2002 detained. He spent all of 2003 detained. He spent all of 2004 detained.

He spent all of 2005 detained. He spent all of 2006 detained. He spent all of 2007 detained.

He spent all of 2008 detained. He spent all of 2009 detained. He spent all of 2010 detained. He spent all of 2011 detained. He spent his remaining days of 2012 detained.

Every January Adnan Latif was at Guantanamo. Every February he was there. Every March he was there. Every April he was there. Every May he was there. Every June he was there. Every
July he was there. Every August he was there. Every September he was there. Every October he was there. Every November he was there. Every December he was there.

So indefinite, so repetitive. So indefinite, so repetitive. So indefinite, so repetitive. So indefinite…

He’d endured more of Guantanamo than his body could handle. So he decided to swallow more pills than his body could handle. And with that Adnan Latif took his own life. It was his after all. It wasn’t anybody else’s, save Allah’s. His life was his own.

For nearly eleven years it didn’t seem that way, though. Gitmo’s interrogators told Latif his life belonged to them, then made it so. Gitmo’s guards told him his life belonged to them, then made it so. Gitmo’s top officials told him his life belonged to them, then made it so. The U.S. Department of Defense told him his life belonged to them, then made it so. The U.S. Congress told him his life belonged to them, then made it so. The U.S. Court of Appeals told him his life belonged to them, then made it so. The U.S. Department of Justice told him his life belonged to them, then made it so. The U.S. State Department told him his life belonged to them, then made it so. The CIA told him his life belonged to them, then made it so. The Bush White House told him his life belonged to them, then made it so. The Obama White House told him his life belonged to them, then made it so. They made it so that Adnan Latif had no other choice. When he took his life he was taking it back. It was his after all.

Guantanamo both was and wasn’t the measure of this man. Sure, he had spent most of his adult life detained, but this was a man with a family. This was a man with loving parents and siblings. This was a man with a wife. This was a man with a child. His young boy, Ezzi Deen, was only three when he waved goodbye to his father in August 2001, as Latif traveled to Pakistan in search of affordable medical care. He suffered neurological damage from a car accident years prior which fractured his skull and punctured his ear drum. Ezzi Deen was 14 years old when he finally saw his
father again, this time to bury him. The young boy had waited more than ten years to be with his father again, play with his father again, embrace his father again, grow up and learn from his father. He waited for his father to arrive at their doorstep with a smile and a hug. But his father arrived quite differently. He showed up in Yemen in a large metal box. His body lay inside a black body bag. Written on the bag were two series of numbers: 9-8-2012 and 156. The first was the date of his death, the second was his internment number. No name. No information. No description. No letter. Nothing resembling a shred of humanity. Just a box, a bag, a number. The United States, even in his death, was unwilling to concede that Adnan Latif wasn’t anything more than an object, something to be acted upon, something to be shipped around the world, from one plane to the next, from one truck to the next, from one metal box to the next. When young Ezzi Deen, through choked back tears, scooped handfuls of dirt onto his father as he buried him, he was helping restore his father’s humanity. Adnan Latif’s life was his afterall, it wasn’t anybody else’s, save his family’s.

Although Latif’s story is uniquely tragic in its end, his experience as a Guantanamo detainee is sadly not unique at all. There is a common thread of misfortune running through the narratives of nearly all the detainees. How Adnan Latif arrived at Guantanamo, the circumstances that brought him into US custody, and why he remained at Gitmo for ten long years without ever being charged with a crime, is the stuff of tragedy. No trial, but plenty of tribulation.

His saga began in 1994 when he survived a near-fatal car accident in Yemen, which left him with a punctured eardrum, a fractured skull, and neurological problems that would last him the rest of his life. The Yemeni government paid for him to receive initial care at a hospital in Amman, Jordan. However, Latif could never afford the cost of the follow-up care that was needed, so he sought help from charitable organizations. After years of seeking assistance to his lingering head trauma he was finally aided by a local Yemeni humanitarian agency who arranged for Latif to receive free medical care in Pakistan. So, in August 2001 he jounied there. He spent weeks waiting in
Pakistan for treatment. Eventually he was forced to travel to Afghanistan to meet with the man charged with arranging his medical care. Again he waited. But his waiting was cut short and his hopes of receiving medical care were dashed when the US began its heavy bombing campaign in Afghanistan. Trapped in an unfamiliar country suddenly thrown into chaos, Latif fled the country like so many others.3 4

When he finally got to the Afghanistan/Pakistan border he was seized, along with hundreds of other young Arab men, by Pakistani authorities. He had on his person no weapons, no explosives, no signs of military involvement, just his medical records. Despite this, Pakistani police interrogated him, drew up a prisoner intake form claiming he received military training and fought on the front lines for the Taliban, and then sold him to US forces for a bounty using the intake form as proof of his terrorist ties. It was a document drafted in haste, a document filtered through interpreters and two languages before translation into English, a document open to transcription errors, a document used for a get-rich-quick bounty. Yet, this single unreliable document drafted by Pakistani police ended up being the basis for Latif’s next ten years of indefinite detention. Within a month of his capture he was flown to Gitmo among the first batch of prisoners.5 6

Adnan Latif should never have been at Gitmo. Plain and simple. What’s especially upsetting is that the US government had admitted as much on several occasions. According to court documents filed in a habeas corpus petition by Latif’s legal team in US federal court, the military had recommended him for release as early as 2004. A memo from Guantanamo’s Joint Task Force to the Department of Defense, states that Latif, "is not known to have participated in combatant/terrorist training,” and that he should be transferred to another country.7 This was after two years of Latif pleading his innocence and detailing his story over and over again to interrogators. Yet he remained caged in Cuba.
In 2006 and 2007 the military’s assessment was repeated, and the Bush administration placed Latif on an approved transfer list. The United States was prepared to allow his release, “subject to the process for making appropriate diplomatic arrangements for his departure.” In other words, the government determined he wasn’t a terrorist and would transfer him as soon as they could find a country willing to take him, as had been the case with scores of other detainees. This was after five years of suffering detention. Yet he remained caged in Cuba.

In 2009 President Obama took office and created a task force charged with reviewing the cases of all remaining Guantánamo detainees in order to determine who would be transferred and who would face criminal charges. Obama’s task force reviewed Adnan Latif’s situation. They gathered all the information, analyzed every piece of data, looked at all the evidence, and concluded that he should be released and sent home. This was now the third time that the US government had conceded, internally at least, that Latif should not be at Guantánamo. This was after seven years of wasting away, mostly in solitude. Yet he remained caged in Cuba.

In early 2010, president Obama declared that all transfers of Yemeni detainees from Guantánamo back to their homeland were suspended. It didn’t matter that they were innocent or cleared for release, the United States refused to send them back to their families in Yemen. Obama’s decision was a response to the fear-mongering sweeping the nation in the wake of the failed attempt to blow up an airliner on Christmas Day 2009 by “underwear bomber” Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a young Nigerian man accused of receiving terrorist training in Yemen from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninusla. “Given the unsettled situation [in Yemen],” Obama stated, “I’ve spoken to the attorney general and we've agreed that we will not be transferring additional detainees back to Yemen at this time.” The (flawed) logic was that if a country was in an “unsettled situation” that it meant de facto that detainees returning to Yemen would be susceptible to joining Al Qaeda and launching attacks against the United States. What this meant for Adnan Latif and the
forty-plus other Yemeni detainees cleared for release was that even if the United States had acknowledged that they were not terrorists and posed no threat, that they would remain detained at Gitmo and treated as if they were terrorists who posed a threat, because one day in the future, maybe, they might eventually pose a threat, maybe. So after eight years of being detained for crimes he didn’t commit, he was now going to continue to be detained for crimes that maybe one day he also might not commit. As journalist Andy Worthington has made a point of saying, “only at Guantánamo can fear trump justice to such an alarming degree.”11 12 And so Adnan Latif remained caged in Cuba.

Despite Obama’s order, a glimmer of hope remained when in the summer of 2010 Latif finally had his case heard in US federal court, where he filed a petition of habeas corpus contending that he was unlawfully detained. Even though Obama’s own task force had determined that Latif should be released and transferred, the president chose instead to buck their recommendation and argue in court that Latif was lawfully detained and should remain in US custody. Judge Henry Kennedy concluded that the government failed to demonstrate that Latif’s detention was lawful, and they had no substantial evidence to prove he was in Afghanistan fighting for or giving support to Al Qaeda and/or Taliban forces.13 He ruled that the Obama administration immediately arrange for Latif’s release. And so, again, it appeared Latif would be able to finally leave Gitmo.

But that didn’t happen. President Obama chose instead to appeal the judge’s decision to the D.C. Circuit Court to keep Latif at Gitmo. Impervious to the recommendation of his own task force, it appeared the Obama administration was more interested in taking the same position that the Bush administration had taken with respect to Guantánamo cases, that the courts should have no say in how the president chooses to pursue his wartime duties or put in check his wartime decisions. So in 2011 when the appeals court ruled 2-1 in the government’s favor, overturning Judge Kennedy’s order and allowing the United States to indefinitely detain Adnan Latif, it dashed any
hopes he had of ever leaving Guantanamo and returning to his family, embracing his wife, or watching his son grow up. And when in 2012 the Supreme Court refused to hear his case appealing the appellate court’s ruling, it was the nail in the coffin. After eking out the remnants of an existence at Gitmo for 10 years, surviving the daily abuses and humiliation, grasping in the dark alone, cowering in the light alone, having the tide of hope swell only to see it crash in the very next instance, being told one day he would be released, then another that he would stay, over and over again, all the while knowing he was being held simply because he wanted to receive affordable health care, all the while knowing he was being held simply because he was an Arab man, all the while knowing he was being held simply because he was Muslim in a place and time when being Arab and Muslim was a liability, in a place and time when that was reason enough for a foreign power to buy you, beat you, torture you, imprison you, and keep you forever, after all of that, after all of that, after all of that, Adnan Latif was back at square one, which was nowhere, which was rock bottom. And so he remained cage in Cuba. And that was more than his body could bare. So he took his own life. It was his after all.  

Adnan Latif had endured so much. So incredibly much. For ten years he had only the rote monotony of injustice. He spent the majority of his time locked away in solitary confinement, unable to communicate with others, unable to interact with anyone but himself, unable to see the sunlight, unable to go outside and breathe fresh air, unable to move more than a few paces in any direction. The isolation haunted him. He saw ghosts in the darkness, heard their voices. He couldn’t sleep, and when he did his mind was full of nightmares.

He spent many days licking his wounds after being beaten by Guantanamo’s riot squad, the “Emergency Reaction Force”, for even the pettiest of offenses. Speaking too loudly, writing on the walls, or stepping over a painted line on the floor of his cell while his food was delivered through the food slot was all the provocation the ERF squad need to come an exact brutality. Thrown to the
floor, dragged along the floor, strangled, compression applied to his pressure points by a six-man team of guards, this was Latin’s bodily reality. Standing only 5’5” and barely 115 pounds, he arrived to many sessions with his lawyers with cuts and bruises, eyes swollen shut. Oftentimes he couldn’t find much rest or comfort after the beatings either, as guards would remove his mattress and blankets, forcing him to ice his injuries on the cold concrete floor.  

He went to great lengths to express the mistreatment he faced, hoping to awaken the consciousness of others and bring them to action, through his poetry, through his letters. He articulated his suffering with a strength that belied the frailty of his situation. “Not even mountains could withstand” the hardships he’d faced, he once wrote. “This prison,” he insisted, “is a piece of hell that kills everything, the spirit, the body and kicks away all the symptoms of health from them.”

In another letter he stated:

*It’s the injustice and the torture I am enduring. The torture that humiliates, wastes one’s dignity; that makes a person call for death every second; scream asking for it with no hesitation and without a second thought. Laying the body in the grave is better than laying it in fire and torture that I am enduring.*

This desire for death to extinguish his physical and mental anguish existed in more than just his words. It existed in his actions. For ten years Adnan Latif had tried countless times to commit suicide. His lawyers stated for years that, “He sees death as his only way out.” They noted how often they would arrive at Gitmo to meet their client, perhaps offer him some reassurance, bolster his spirits, only to have Latif arrive to meet them in a “suicide smock”, the padded, tear-resistant, single-piece, green garment used at Gitmo to prevent detainees from attempting to hang themselves. Along with the suicide-proof underwear, the fabric was such that it couldn’t be torn, rolled up, folded, or fashioned in any way to be used as a potential noose. And Latif had tried numerous times to hang himself, once making two attempts in one day.
He tried other methods as well. He banged his head repeatedly against the walls and doors of his cell, perhaps hoping to re-fracture his skull, this time lethally. He swallowed glass, shards of metal, garbage bags, styrofoam cups, plastic bottles, screws, even his own prayer beads, all in attempt to take his own life. On one occasion during a meeting with his lawyer, he chipped off a piece of molding on the underside of the conference table and used it to saw into his wrist until he struck a vein, draining his blood.24

Just as the government tried to use every resource at its disposal to control and dominate his life, he used every resource at his disposal to take his life. It was a matter of wit. It was a matter of will. Leaving Guantanamo, by any means necessary, became all that mattered to Latif. Perhaps nowhere is that more apparent than in a letter to his lawyer David Remes in 2010:

David Remes,

Do whatever you wish to do, the issue is over.

I am happy to express from this darkness and draw a true picture of the condition in which I exist. I am moving towards a dark cave and a dark life in the shadow of a dark prison. This is a prison that does not know humanity, and does not know anything except the language of power, oppression and humiliation for whoever enters it. It does not differentiate between a criminal and the innocent, and between the right of the sick or the elderly who is weak and is unable to bear and a man who is still bearing all this from the prison administration that is evil in mercy.

Hardship is the only language that is used here. Anybody who is able to die will be able to achieve happiness for himself, he has no other hope except that. The requirement is to announce the end, and challenge the self love for life and the soul that insists to end it all and leave this life which is no longer anymore called a life, instead it itself has become death and renewable torture. Ending it is a mercy and happiness for this soul.

I will not allow any more of this and I will end it. I will send move it to a world that is much better than this world. There, the real life will live again that will be filled with complete happiness and be rid of all harassments. There, the environment will clear up, things will calm down and you will be able to relax and you will not see the world of evil people.

I am in need of a person who blindfolds his eyes from me looks the other way and leaves me in my freedom so that I can choose my end. With all my pains, I say goodbye to you and the cry of death should be enough for you.

A world power failed to safeguard peace and human rights and from saving me. I will do whatever I am able to do to rid myself of the imposed death on me at any moment of this prison.
For detainees at Gitmo, cunning is an art form. It’s also a survival skill. This is true, even, and especially, in cases when one chooses he no longer wants to live. Finding a way to commit suicide in a place where surveillance is constant and omnipresent is nothing short of miraculous.

It may forever remain a mystery how Adnan Latif was able to smuggle and ingest twenty-plus doses of Invega, a drug used to treat schizophrenia. What we do know, courtesy of the military’s initial investigative report on his death, which was released thanks to a Freedom of Information Act, is that he had recently been prescribed Invega by Gitmo’s medical staff on account of his deteriorating mental health. Camp doctors diagnosed Latif as suffering from “Bipolar Disorder and Borderline Personality Disorder with antisocial traits,” characterizing one of his most recent breakdowns as “manic with psychotic features.” Doctors also noted that his “diagnoses evolved over the course of his detention,” which is an evasive way of acknowledging that his solitary confinement, indefinite detention, and harsh treatment were factors in damaging the man’s brain, body, and spirit. Because of these various diagnoses Adnan Latif’s body was a virtual pharmaceutical lab at the time of his death. In his system were significant amounts of painkillers, anti-anxiety, and anti-psychotic medications, including Codein, Percocet, Sequel, Ativan, Celexa, morphine, and Remeron. That much we know. But again, how he smuggled, concealed, and then ingested a fistful of pills is unknown. He may have hid them somewhere on his body. He may have, as the military speculated, hid them in his Koran. What is deadly certain, however, is that the pills worked.

Maybe it was his empty stomach that aided in the effects of the medication, allowing the pills to eat away at his body more rapidly. He hadn’t eaten on the day of his death. He refused breakfast. He refused lunch. But it wasn’t because he didn’t feel like eating. It was because Adnan Latif was
protesting his detention by hunger striking. How he came to the hunger strike, how he came to Camp 5, and how he ultimately came to his death is a complex series of events.

It began a month earlier, in late July, at Gitmo’s Camp 6, where Latif was being housed at the time. During one of his few exercise allowances in the recreation yard he tried to explain to one of the military interpreters that he hadn’t received his medication. Using the interpreter he attempted to get the attention of the camp guards, with the hopes that they would call medical personnel to deliver his medication. He made numerous desperate appeals to his military captors. He may simply have been ignored. He may not have been taken seriously. He may have gotten agitated, even unruly about having his requests disregarded. It may have pushed him past a breaking point. But one thing was certain, when he picked a rock up off the ground and chucked it at the guard tower above him, breaking the spotlight, the military response would be swift and it would harsh.29

Dozens of armed soldiers were immediately called in to surround the recreation area. Armored Humvees pulled up to the fence. Guards drew their guns, spotted through their scopes, steadying for a shot. Adnan Latif stood in the rec yard armed only with small rocks, maybe a handful of dirt. It was a standoff. He simply wanted his medication.

Upon being apprehended from the yard that day he was sent to Gitmo’s psychiatric ward. He remained housed there for a number of weeks. It was in the psych ward that Adnan Latif re-launched what would be his final hunger strike, as he had just ended a hunger strike a month earlier. Detainees who saw Latif in the hospital during this time noted that he was held in the “feeding-block” area of the facility, which suggests that not only was he engaged in a serious hunger strike but he was also being force-fed by military physicians in order to keep him alive.30 Which is to say keep him from killing himself.

The inability to exercise control over his own body may have been why Adnan Latif acted out and got into another confrontation with his military handlers. In the first week of September, a
few weeks after his transfer to the psychiatric ward, he assaulted a guard with, what they call at
Gitmo, a “cocktail”, a concoction usually consisting of any combination of food, water, bodily fluid,
and/or excrement. He had been punished for this act numerous times in the past, as had most of
Gitmo’s detainees. In a prison with very few means of countering the physical, mental, and spiritual
attacks detainees endure year after year from guards, from interrogators, from camp officials, from
the Pentagon, from the U.S. Court system, from the White House, the “cocktail” became a common
method for detainees to get one over on their captors. And the punishment for Latif’s “cocktail” in
the psych ward was stiff. He was ordered for transfer to Camp 5, Gitmo’s solitary confinement
facility. It was the place he feared the most. It was the place most detainees feared the most, and the
military knew it.31

Adnan Latif was escorted from the psychiatric ward to Camp 5’s Alpha Block on September
6. According to fellow detainees he fought the transfer tooth and nail. He protested and resisted
with all the strength his hunger-stricken body could muster.

Latif’s fear was justified. He was all too familiar with Camp 5, and he knew exactly where
they were going to place him for punishment - Alpha Block cell 105. He had been held in the cell
before. It brought back memories he didn’t want to remember, memories he could never shake off.
The kind of memories that got stored away in bone. The kind of memories that got etched into
heart. The kind of memories that no amount of medication could mitigate. He had described the
cell years ago in letters to his lawyers. He said, “[it] resembles a lion’s cage. It has been made
especially for me in this way.”32 The cell was next to a generator which forced him to suffer through
the drone of a never-ending electric hum.

Protesting and pleading with guards as they escorted him into the cell, Latif was given
assurance by a female psychologist on the scene that his concerns would be taken to camp officials.
But as the door of the cell hissed shut another guard told him he would never leave Camp 5.33 In
less than 48 hours that threat became a tragic reality. Adnan Latif knew the cell. He knew it all too well. It had been his nightmare. On September 8, 2012, after countless hunger strikes, after countless suicide attempts, after countless acts of resistance, after more than ten years of detention, after more than ten years without seeing his family, his friends, his loved ones, that cell in Camp became more than his nightmare, with a handful of pills, and perhaps a prayer, it became his tomb.

***

Adnan Latif’s suicide sparked a chain reaction at Gitmo the likes of which he could have never foreseen. The military, having just endured their seventh suicide at the base, were desperate for answers. How could another detainee under strict surveillance have killed himself? Was it a problem of standard operating procedure? Did any of the camp personnel fail in their duties? They needed answers quickly, not only to prevent potentially more detainee suicides, but to provide an explanation to a media corps hungry for answers.

In the course of its investigation the military surmised that Adnan Latif may have been able to secretly hoard his collection of pills by hiding them in the binding of his Koran and/or his genital area.\(^{34}\) The military’s conclusion forced a change to standard operating procedures. Guards would return to a policy of regularly inspecting detainee Korans, a practice that had long been abandoned due to numerous reported instances of soldiers desecrating or mishandling the holy book.\(^{35}\) In addition to Koran inspections, camp personnel would also perform genital inspections whenever detainees left or entered their cells.

These violations of detainees’ bodies, faith, and culture, were reminiscent of the sorts of violations that had haunted their entire existence at Guantanamo. So detainees did what they had always done in such circumstances, they organized themselves cell by cell, block by block, and formed a mass resistance movement. Just as the violations had echoed days of Gitmo’s past, detainees used methods of resistance from days of Gitmo’s past. In early 2013, mere months after
Latif’s suicide, more than a hundred of the 166 remaining detainees at Guantanamo launched a mass hunger strike.\textsuperscript{36}

This hunger strike garnered world-wide attention. Media outlets tracked the events daily, noting incessantly the increase or decline in participation numbers among the detainees. President Obama, who had given up on efforts to keep his campaign promise of closing the camp, was suddenly placed in the political position of rec Committing to shutting the illegal camp down for good.\textsuperscript{37} The detainees’ starving bodies were affecting the mechanisms of power in a direct way, through resistance, through endurance, through organization and persistence.

When Adnan Latif committed suicide on September 8, 2012 he used his body to challenge the military’s authority over his body. When more than a hundred detainees launched a hunger strike months later they took up the power of Latin’s act to challenge the military’s authority over their own bodies. These snowflakes of resistance have created an avalanche of political action, to the point where President Obama is now drafting options to override Congress and close Gitmo through executive fiat, making the camp, once and for all, history.\textsuperscript{38}

But there are plenty of histories still to tell about Guantanamo. I would like to offer one, one that has long been disregarded, or at least left unexamined. See, when Adnan Latif committed suicide, and when those remaining detainees launched their hunger strike, they were enacting historical repertoires of bodily resistance. The seeds of their actions in 2012 and 2013 were sewn back in 2005, when from June 2005 to June 2006 detainees engaged in a year-long resistance movement against their military handlers. The hunger strikes, the suicides, as well as the military’s repression of these collective actions, were all codified in this turbulent year of political struggle, inscribed into the bodies of detainees, inscribed into the policy documents of the military, inscribed into the power-relationships between the two, and inscribed into the very annals of history, a history that I am set to tell. My dissertation surveys the detainee resistance movement from June 2005 to
June 2006, and the forms of collective action detainees employed, namely hunger strikes and suicides, in order to analyze issues of embodiment and power.

**Choices**

The time frame I have selected, June 2005 to June 2006, is not an arbitrary one. Nor is it one that I artificially impose, even though I recognize all choices by an author are to one degree or another ones that are imposed onto the subject of study. I am hyper-aware that I am framing that which is not mine, the struggle of men caged indefinitely in a land foreign and strange to them. In all of what follows, I have done my best to be self-aware and reflexive about my privilege as an un-incarcerated individual un-privy to the same sorts of targeting and mistreatment from the State that are experienced by the subjects of my dissertation. So I have done my best, my absolute best, to be reflexive about my positionality, even while trying to explain the political struggle of others and the actions they take to alleviate, overcome, or combat their struggles. All of which is to say, that the choice to delimit this study as June 2005 to June was organic, and informed both by the actual actions taken by detainees and the research that I performed to understand those actions.

I didn’t set off with this particular research project in mind. I had wanted to write about all the various hunger strikes and suicides that had been staged by detainees at Gitmo from the camp’s opening in 2002 to the present. I wanted to catalogue all of these events, synthesize them in some way that would be coherent and analyzable. I wanted to understand what it meant to deplete the body and destroy the body as a political act. The acts were so harrowing and incredible, that I couldn’t help but what to understand what was happening here. I had followed Guantanamo in the media since its inception, and like most anti-war activists I adamantly opposed the creation of an illegal detention center that was not only imprisoning these men indefinitely but Torturing them, yes I use the word capital “T” Torture here intentionally, and not as some shorthand for “enhanced
interrogation” or acts that come close to or approximate Torture, but Torture itself as defined and clarified. Yet, in following the Guantanamo issue I was endlessly intrigued by mentions of hunger strikes, detainees starving themselves as a political protest. I wanted to know more, but on the whole, littler more was offered. There were news articles, sure, but this coverage was far outweighed by articles and scholarship about torture and trials and foreign policy. These topics were necessary and important, but left in the background were these bodies who were destroying themselves. I began noticing that these protesting bodies were always in the background. No one had really foregrounded the detainees’ active and protesting body. By the time I entered my PhD program literature about Gitmo had proliferated. There was no shortage of books about Guantanamo. Yet still in the background were these active and protesting bodies. Nobody had foregrounded them, given accorded those bodies with the very agency they were expressing by protesting. I saw an opportunity to rectify that, primarily because it needed to get done.

And so I began researching the detainee hunger strikes and the, at that time, five suicides that had been staged at Gitmo. I started first by researching the Summer 2005 hunger strike, which I knew was the most extensive and elaborate hunger strike that had been staged at the camp. Because of this, it was also the most covered and written about. I endlessly scoured news local, national, and international news articles that had made mention of the hunger strike. I read books written by lawyers of detainees that made mention of the hunger strike. I read the published memoirs and hundreds of testimonies from released detainees, who had mentioned to greater or lesser degrees the hunger strike that happened in Summer in 2005. I read declassified government documents that catalogued or documented the hunger strike. I read court injunctions filed by detainee lawyers, which made mention of the hunger strike. Piece by piece bit by bit I began to puzzle together this hunger strike.
In conducting this very investigative research I found, to my surprise, that what had been referred to informally as the Summer 2005 hunger strike was in fact two hunger strikes. One began as a localized hunger strike that started in Gitmo’s Camp 5 before it spread to other camps and picked up steam, which lasted from late June to late July 2005, when detainees officially called off the hunger strike in order to negotiate with Gitmo’s military officials. When those negotiations went sour a renewed hunger strike began in August, which lasted through the Fall with various levels of detainee participation. But my research revealed more. Although a number of hunger strikers had remained fasting throughout the Fall, a third hunger strike with mass participation broke out at the end of December 2005 and lasted until early February. After giving up the protest because the military had implemented some nefarious means of punishing hunger strikes, a fourth hunger strike erupted at the camp, again with mass participation, from late May to early June.

My research also revealed that a flurry of other protest actions either accompanied or operated in the interstices between the mass hunger strikes. These included acts of noncooperation with guards and interrogators, disobeying camp rules and procedures, the throwing of bodily fluids and excrement at camp personnel, an armed uprising, and suicides. The hunger strikes weren’t the only ways detainees were resisting and protesting, they were merely the heightened crystallizations of collective action on a much broader scale.

I realized that what I was looking at while conducting this research wasn’t a single hunger strike, or even a series of hunger strikes. What I was looking at was a resistance movement. More than that it was a very well-organized and well-coordinated resistance movement with mass participation from a variety actors performing collective action despite differences in age, ethnicity, race, nationality, political ideology, ability, and language. This was a major shift in perspective for me. I wanted to tell this story. I wanted to write about this resistance movement, which began in June 2005 with a hunger strike in Camp 5 and culminated some twelve months later when three
detainees simultaneously hung themselves, committing coordinate suicide. So to return to my initial statement, the time frame I selected for this research was not one I arbitrarily or artificially imposed upon the subject. I am limiting my study to these dates because I want to recognize this resistance movement as a resistance movement, and document it and analyze it as such.

This is something that scholars and journalists haven’t done thus far. By and large people who’ve written about Guantanamo have treated the hunger strikes and various acts of resistance during this time period as distinct unrelated events. Or, if they had tried to make associations, they drew only vague and under-analyzed connections between forms of detainee actions. A hunger striker would sometimes be noted in a book or article as having participated in an earlier hunger strike. A detainee attempting suicide would be discussed as having also been a hunger strike participant. But, again, these were loose and hazy associations, with no particulars. No examination was made of how one act of resistance might have informed another, or how they built off one another, or how they served as countermoves to certain strategies of repression from the military. These are all comfortably disregarded, in what can only be described as missing the forest for the trees. My dissertation is the first work to actually recognize the resistance as a resistance movement, to examine it as such, to write about it as such. And while my aim is still to analyze the bodily forms of collective action taken by detainees, I am mindful that they are operating within the context of, and even creating the formation of, a resistance movement.

Structure

The organization of my dissertation is rather uncomplicated. I allow the structure of the detainees’ resistance movement to inform the structure of my writing. That is to say the narrative structure is a straightforward chronicling of the events in chronological order.

Chapter 1 begins with the hunger strike that started in Gitmo’s Camp 5 before spreading to other camps and eventually leading to the formation of a Prisoner’s Council, a democratic body of
selected detainee representatives charged with negotiating with camp officials. Chapter 2 chronicles the renewed hunger strike that occurred in the wake of the military’s reneging on promises made to the Prisoner’s Council, and the eventual force-feeding of hunger strikers. Chapter 3 concerns those handfuls of detainees who continued to hunger strike from October 2005 to February 2006 even in the face of force-feeding and other punitive measures. Chapter 4 concerns the first coordinated suicide via medication overdose and the armed uprising that was coupled with it in May 2006. Chapter 5 is dedicated to the triple suicide via hanging that took place in June 2006.

I use this chronological narrative structure for a few interrelated reasons. The first reason comes out of a certain moral and political obligation to the detainees. I knew from the first key-stroke on this document that I wanted to do more than simply analyze the hunger strikes. I wanted to do more than attempt to theorize the politics and meanings of the bodily acts detainees used to perform their resistance to military repression.

After researching the 2005 to 2006 resistance movement I knew I wanted to tell a story. I wanted to tell this story as a story, because it’s an important story that hasn’t been told before. Sure, fragments of the story had been told here and there in the closed to one-hundred-thousand-plus pages of text I had read. But the story, in its entirety, hadn’t been pieced together before and structured as narrative. No one had yet tried to offer a history of this contentious period at Gitmo.

Tim Golden, investigative journalist and senior writer at the New York Times came the closest when he published “The Battle for Guantanamo” in the New York Times Magazine in 2006. His was an incredible piece of journalistic yarn-spinning that was unique not only for his breadth of coverage, but for his unfettered access to the Gitmo military officials who attempted to put down the detainees’ hunger strikes. Even though the scope of Golden’s article was limited to the hunger strikes and events of Summer 2005, his work stands alone as an attempt to capture at least an early history of the resistance movement. I am indebted to his work in this regard. It has
been one of my most valuable sources for this project. However, there was still so much of the story of the resistance movement that needed to be fleshed out, to be pieced together, to be shaped. There was so much more of the story to be told. And so I chose to make the best attempt I could, with all the available resources I had at my disposal, to tell it.

Yet, there was another component of my moral and political obligations that informed the narrative structure of this dissertation. I was aware that in narrating these events I was offering a history. But not just any history. This was a history of detainees protesting and resisting their military captors. This was a history of detainees pushing back against the strategies of the State. This was a history of detainees challenging Power. In no exaggerated sense this was very much a “people’s history.”

Everything I know about history, or rather histories, I owe to Howard Zinn. As Zinn was so keen to point time and time again in his lifelong work, there are histories shaped by Power, inscribed and reinscribed by Power, that serve Power’s end, which serve as “official history.” These are the histories in American textbooks, the histories that tell of presidents, military leaders, the wealthy, the elite, and the powerful. Then there are “people’s histories”, histories which are shaped by actors with relatively little power who expend great effort trying to challenge Power, destabilize Power, alter Power, revolutionize Power, overthrow Power. These histories, these unofficial histories, these people’s histories, are of critical importance. They tell us not just what officials and elites want us to believe, those polished and well-crafted so-called “objective” versions of events, they actually allow us to think critically about power relations in our culture and society. These histories are instructive for knowing how political and economic policies affect people on the ground, and how political and economic policies are affected by the tenacity of people organizing themselves and taking action. What a people’s history offers isn’t just a different perspective, isn’t just a different vantage point, but a fundamentally different kind of knowledge.
All of this is to say, that I chose to tell the history of the 2005-2006 detainee resistance movement because I absolutely believed that it was critical that this story exist in public discourse. I wanted to ensure that we never forget the challenges detainees posed to the military and the United States government. So that when Guantanamo is studied years from now, it won’t be a history limited what the State did or didn’t do, how it acted or didn’t act. Such a history is insufficient. How could we ever understand slavery if we didn’t understand the history of slave revolts? How could we ever understand the industrial revolution if we don’t understand the history labor strikes and unions? How could we ever understand American Democracy if we didn’t understand the history of the women’s suffrage movement? How could we ever understand Jim Crow segregation if we didn’t understand the history of the black liberation movement or civil rights movement? How could we ever understand the AIDS epidemic if we didn’t understand the history of organizations like Act-Up? How could we ever understand the current American economic recession if we didn’t understand the Occupy movement? In the same way, how could we ever say we understand Guantanamo if we don’t have a history of detainee resistance?

The second decision for employing the narrative structure I use in this dissertation was an artistic one. Before I was ever trained as a scholarly writer I was trained as a creative writer. I have always been first and foremost a poet and playwright. I was crafting poems and performances long before I ever came into academia. I enjoyed telling stories. I consider myself a story-teller. This is the format I feel most comfortable with, the one I fall back on. Poetry and performance are my language. They inform my writing here in this dissertation, and will no doubt continue to structure every piece of scholarly work that I put forward for the rest of my career.

I realize that story-telling is a lost craft within academia. The pressures, codifications, standards, and disciplinary methods of the institution discourage many scholars from telling stories or functioning as story-tellers. That’s not to suggest that some people aren’t trying, or that such
works don’t exist. Rather, it’s to suggest that such works within the realm of academia don’t circulate with much frequency or with much regard. Story-telling’s relationship to academia is that of an object, an object of analysis. It’s rarely used as a method of analysis.

I say all this while acknowledging that I am not immune to those same institutional pressures. Not by a long shot. I know that to write a passable dissertation I have to write within the confines of the institution’s standards of a dissertation. But I have found ways to remain true to myself and my voice. I have found ways here and there to resist.

It’s important for me to say that my attempts with regards to form and style aren’t merely ways to stay true to myself, my art, and my politics. They are also ways to stay true to the subjects of this dissertation. Scores of writings produced by detainees have been crafted with an incredible amount of artistry, and story-telling, and beauty. More than a few detainees have expressly used poetry as their form of expression and communication. So much poetry was being produced by detainees at Guantanamo that an edited collection was compiled and published in 2007 by University of Iowa Press. Poems from Guantanamo: The Detainees Speak made clear that detainees were writing about their lives in ways that made sense to their experiences, their identities, their culture, their history, and their religion. Story-telling and the poetic use of language abound in detainee writings. Any survey of the letters detainees write to their families or their lawyers, letters that act as general communiques, even suicide letters reveal that the poetic spirit is alive and well. So I chose not to deny the story-telling and poetry inside myself, because it was obvious detainees weren’t denying it in themselves.

Argument

Although I use a straightforward chronological narrative structure, I weave together three main arguments throughout each of the chapters. Briefly, these are that Gitmo operates as a
political space where the detainee body is the site of contestation, that the embodied acts of resistance performed by detainees are more than symbolic actions, and that these embodied acts of resistance actualize the alternatives to the very sorts of repressions and oppressions that face them in detention. I make these three broad arguments in order to frame an understanding of the resistance movement and the bodily tactics employed within, and thus make way for a more detailed analysis. But let me take these one at a time, from the broadest claim to the smallest.

My first argument concerns the function and target of Gitmo. Briefly, Gitmo is not what we believe it to be. Or rather, the primary function of Gitmo is not what the military, the White House, and officials say it is. This, even the State’s talking points have shaped and continue to shape our understanding of Guantanamo.

I am influenced here by Government and International Studies professor John Hickman, whose 2013 book *Selling Guantanamo: Exploding the Propaganda Surrounding America’s Most Notorious Prison* analyzed in great detail how the American and international public uncritically accepted the U.S. Government’s talking points, thus creating a public misperception of Gitmo’s rationale and purpose based on sophisticated State propaganda. Hickman contends, as do I, that the government and intelligence community have, since January 11, 2002, “sold” to the public the idea that Gitmo serves three related purposes: detention, intelligence gathering/interrogation, and prosecution.

Hickman also suggests that the media, left, right, and center, national, and international, accepted the government’s claims hook line and sinker. Even liberal and leftist media, pundits, activists, lawyers, and human rights organizations, who have been openly and staunchly critical of Guantanamo have continued to use the State’s talking points in this regard. No doubt this has led to the kinds of scholarship produced about Guantanamo, which overwhelmingly concerns itself with detention, interrogation, and trials (or lack thereof). Torture, interrogation methods, the
(il)legality indefinite detention, tribunals, and judicial decisions make up the vast majority of literature about Guantanamo, scholarly, journalistic, popular, or otherwise. In other words, even when offering criticism of Guantanamo and pressing for its closure, we are still operating according to the terms of debate created by the State.

Hickman argues that Gitmo is not simply a detention site, even though detention is very much a part of the State's strategy. Neither is Gitmo simply an interrogation site, even though interrogations and acts of torture have certainly occurred, and are also very much part of the State's strategy. Finally, Gitmo is not a site for prosecution, which, at this point, should be fairly obvious given that the vast majority of the detainee population have never faced a trial or charges and never will. Yet still, all three talking points continue to be accepted as the primary of functions of Gitmo.

I agree with Hickman on all of these points. The function of Gitmo is none of three rationales offered by the government and repeated by the media. However, Hickman and I differ slightly with regards to identifying and analyzing what the function of Gitmo actually is, if it is neither detention, nor interrogation, nor prosecution.

In my dissertation I argue that Gitmo functions as a continuation of war by other means. Or, to put it another way, and be more specific, Gitmo is a warzone where the site of contestation is the detainee body. Gitmo, insofar as it functions as war, it is not a battle for territory or the resources that territory supplies. Rather, it is very much a battle over the body, against the body, for the body, of the body, and through the body of detainees. Detention and interrogation are then not ends in themselves, they are means. They are strategies of war. They are strategies to manage, control, master, discipline, punish, and subordinate the bodies of detainees. Understanding the significance of the detainees’ resistance movement and the forms of direct action they employ depends upon an understanding of Gitmo as a continuation of war by other means.
I use the term war here both in its literal sense and as metaphor. In the first sense, Gitmo is very much a continuation of the United States’ “War On Terror”, which was launched in the Fall of 2001 after the September 11 attacks. It was the execution of that war that led to the capture, transfer, and imprisonment of the men who occupy Gitmo’s cages, even if they weren’t captured in Afghanistan or anywhere near the so-called “battlefield,” and even though according to the logic of the war on terror as pursued by the United States the “battlefield” is the entire globe. All of which is to say, Gitmo is a continuation of war insofar as it is not only a product of war, but part of the process of war. However, in pronouncing that Gitmo is war, the continuation of war by other means, I also mean war in terms of metaphor. It is is this sense of war, war as model, that is perhaps most important for understanding Gitmo’s function and significance, and the function and significance of the detainees’ resistance movement.

In saying that Gitmo is war, a continuation of war by other means, I have in mind a very specific kind of war with very particular objectives. In order to understand the kind of war taking place at Gitmo I turn to what be may be an unexpected source, Carl Von Clausewitz, arguably the greatest military theorist of the 18th and 19th century. Although Clausewitz is often read and remembered as a philosopher of wars between nation-states, he does dedicate some time in On War, his posthumous 1832 treatise concerning various theories of war, to analyzing the, at that time, growing phenomenon of “people’s wars”, or what we may now refer to as guerrilla wars or asymmetrical wars.

To provide a definition of war, a definition that would take on more significance in his understandings of asymmetrical wars, Clausewitz offers the image of two bodies, wrestlers locked in battle. The objective of this physical confrontation is to render the opponent “incapable of further resistance.” This is a quite different conception of war than we may be used to, where we imagine the objective is to annihilate the enemy wholesale. For Clausewitz though, the objective of war from
the point of view of Power, whether that be the State or an occupying force in a foreign nation, is to diminish the enemy’s capacity to resist while preserving one’s own material means and moral will to pursue its objective in the face of the enemy’s continued resistance.44

It is this understanding of war that I have in mind when I say that Gitmo is war, a continuation of war by other means. Gitmo functions as an asymmetrical war, in which the power relations between detainees and the military are skewed in favor of the military. Furthermore, the objective of this war is for the military to render detainees incapable of resistance. And finally, the target for that objective, the site where the battle takes place, is the detainee body, for it is the body’s capability to resist that is at stake in this war.

But if Gitmo is a continuation of war by other means, what are those “other means”? And if the objective of this war is to render detainees incapable of resistance, then what exactly are they resisting? To answer these questions, and build a more nuanced understanding of war and the war on the body, it’s necessary for me to look elsewhere.

There is no doubt that in formulating Gitmo as war, the continuation of war by other means, I am borrowing directly from, and attempting to build upon, a formulation articulated by political philosopher Michel Foucault close to 40 years ago. In Foucault’s 1975-1976 lectures at the College De France, later published under the title Society Must Be Defended, Foucault advanced the explicit hypothesis that “Power is war, the continuation of war by other means.”45 This, of course, was a conceptual inversion of the proclamation put forward Carl Von Clausewitz, later championed by Mao and other revolutionary parties, that war is simply the continuation of politics by other means. Foucault reverses Clausewitz’s hypothesis in order to account for the fact that power in modern societies is no longer conceived in terms of law and sovereignty, instead power uses a schema of war, force, struggle, strategy, and tactics, which are exercised on and through individual bodies.46

Power, suggests Foucault, may be thought of as a continuation of war by means other than weapons
and battles. It is the “silent war” that carries on after wars of weapons in which Power inscribes the relationship of force into the bodies of individuals. But how does this inscription happen? What are its tools, its “other means” of war?

In a word, discipline. The other means of war, the means of Power, over the body, through the body, of the body, against the body, are disciplinary mechanisms. In his landmark book on power and penology, Foucault describes discipline as the multitude of methods that make possible “the meticulous control of the operations of the body.” Elsewhere he describes discipline as an “art of the human body” that subjugates the body at the same time that it increases its desired skills, makes the body more obedient and docile as it becomes more useful, and conversely makes the body more useful as it become more obedient and docile. Discipline separates bodies, isolates bodies, individuates bodies, analyzes bodies, classifies bodies, ranks bodies. In short, discipline performs all of the operations we associate with detention and interrogation at Guantanamo. The conditions of detention and the methods of interrogation used on detainees - isolation, sensory deprivation, ridicule, humiliation, religious desecration, physical suppression, and more - are disciplinary strategies of war, strategies of power. Power and War as conflated concepts, because they operate conflated concepts, use discipline to render the body docile and subjugated, or, to bring back Clausewitz’s formulation, to render the body incapable of resistance.

This is all well and good. However, my primary concern in this dissertation is not with an analysis of power, per se. An analysis of power is merely a necessary first step in order to provide an analysis of responses to power, objections to the strategies and forces of power as it subjugates the body, disciplines the body, diminishes the body’s capacity to resist. The term resistance is a key one. As I explained above with regards to Clausewitz’s conception of war, the entire objective of war, and thus our entire understanding of Gitmo and detainees’ collective actions, hinges on the concept of resistance. So what do I mean by resistance?
I said earlier that war, from the point of view of the State, is oriented towards strategies that compromise the enemy’s ability to resist. Resistance, then, can be seen as the tactics of the weak in this asymmetrical war, tactics which orient themselves toward resisting any and all attempts by the State to compromise their ability to resist. Or to put it another way, borrowing from the recent work of political philosopher Howard Caygill, we may think of resistance as a repertoire of tactics that preserve and enhance one’s ability to resist in the face of the enemy’s application of force.\textsuperscript{50}

If the deployment of war is comprised of offensive strategies, then resistance is comprised of defensive tactics. Resistance is, in fact, a form of defense manifested and shaped entirely by that which it opposes.\textsuperscript{51} In formulating his notions of resistance in relation to war, Clausewitz held that resistance was not only a defensive stance, but that it was pure negation, lacking positive purpose. Resistance is a repetition of acts that negate, negate, negate, negate. The enemy in its deployment of war has positive purpose, according to Clausewitz. It has military objectives that it pursues. On the other hand, the objective of resistance, if there exists one, is merely to oppose, evade, undermine, and erode the purposes of the enemy.\textsuperscript{52} We can say, then, that the primary elements of resistance are defense and negation. But to this we can add another, duration. For if, as both Caygill and Clausewitz suggest, resistance is a matter of negating and fending off the enemy’s objectives while preserving one’s capacity to resist those objectives, then an inherent aim of resistance is to do so for as long as possible. This is how the power of resistance gets articulated, as sustained perseverance over time. It’s not a matter of singular acts of resistance, but rather persistent and continued acts of resistance. As Caygill puts it, it serves the interests of resistance to extend the conflict for as long as possible, because a war of resistance is, “a fight in and for time which pursues the minimal aim of ‘exhausting’ the enemy through sheer persistence,” and through this exhaustion, “the initiative of the enemy is sapped, its military momentum undermined.”\textsuperscript{53} Endurance and longevity, we might say, are the art of resistance.
Given this definition, we may characterize resistance as a protracted struggle, episodic in nature, given to open skirmishes followed by disappearances, small defeats or small victories followed by regrouping and reorganization. Caygill refers to these as clusters or sequences of resistance and counter-resistance. That these sustained episodes are so inherent to the very nature of resistance is why I refer to the collective acts of resistance staged by detainees from summer 2005 to summer 2006 as a resistance movement. I do this to indicate that detainee resistance during this time period carries on many of the hallmarks usually associated with social movements, which social movement scholar par excellence, Sidney Tarrow, defines as “collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interactions with elites, opponents and authorities.”

These four empirical properties: collective challenge, common purpose, solidarity, and sustained interaction, are qualities that, as I will show throughout this dissertation, are attributable to detainees’ resistance as well. I also refer to detainees’ collective action as a resistance movement to signal that I am attuned especially to the bodies of detainees, bodies that are very much mobilized.

I take so much time here explaining my argument, and bring in authors like Hickman, Clausewitz, Foucault, Caygill, and Tarrow, because establishing a framework of war and resistance, I believe, helps us make sense of Gitmo. It helps us understand how it operates and what its functions and strategies are in its capacity as the continuation of war by other means. Taking time here and leaning on these authors also helps us make sense of the embodied collective actions taken by detainees from the Summer 2005 to Summer 2006, while recognizing these actions as constituting a resistance movement staged within the asymmetrical war zone that is Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

But such deductions, or inductions as the case may be, are not fantastical ungrounded suppositions, nor are they mere theoretical formulations on my behalf. Rather, they reflect the United States military’s own stated intentions, even when such intentions were stated obliquely or
benignly. Underneath Gitmo, and underneath the entire war on terror, is the functioning of a war against resistance. The military has not denied that in pursuing the so-called “war on terror” they are executing a strategy of counter-insurgency, by which they mean a strategy to counter the resistance of local guerrilla militias. The military and intelligence agencies no longer can deny, or at least can no longer credibly deny, that the majority of methods used in detention and interrogation at Gitmo are either based on the CIA’s Kubark Manual of counter-intelligence, a guidebook for dealing expressly with prisoners who are resistant to normal methods of interrogation, or the reverse-engineering of exercises developed at the military’s SERE school, where soldiers practice skills that allow them to survive, evade, resist, and escape enemy capture and imprisonment.\textsuperscript{56} In these cases the military have been using very explicit ways to battle resistance at Gitmo. In fact, mere months after opening Gitmo’s gates the Department of Defense implemented “Counter-Resistance Techniques” to break detainees who were resisting interrogation.\textsuperscript{57} These “enhanced interrogation methods” were drafted and approved at the highest echelons of the United States government in documents and memos that have now come be to be known as the “Torture Papers.”\textsuperscript{58} Such military strategies acknowledge, sometimes at the level of exact nomenclature, that Gitmo, as a continuation of war by other means, is oriented toward the resistance of detainees.

My first argument, then, can be summarized as follows: Gitmo is war, the continuation of war by other means, where 1) the objective of this war is to destroy the detainees’ capacity to resist; and where 2) these “other means” refer to the military’s strategies of disciplining, managing, and controlling the detainee body, which are accomplished through methods of detention and interrogation; thus 3) making the detainee body the site of contestation.

The second main argument I weave throughout this dissertation concerns the methods of collective action employed in the resistance movement. Detainees primarily used hunger strikes and to a lesser degree suicide attempts, as well as coordinated but general acts of noncompliance with
military orders or camp rules. I contend that these collective actions are more than symbolic acts, and that the body in resistance is doing more than serving as a signifying or communicating agent.

I put great emphasis in this argument because I fear a misreading may be occurring with regards to detainee resistance, which, if I’m being honest, I would say is indicative of a broader misreading of methods of collective action more generally, but that is the topic of a research project unto itself. I say that the forms of detainee resistance are more than symbolic acts, because a majority of the time when people discuss them, when they bother to discuss them at all, they refer to them as protests. Hunger strikes, for instance, are almost always written about, whether in news articles or academic scholarship, as being used by detainees “to protest.”

I take protest here to mean what it means in its common definition, that it is an expression of dissent. Of course there are a multitude of variations to this basic definition, but a survey of any dictionary, from the most rudimentary to the most scholastic, will show that definitions of protest will include any or all of the following words or phrases: a declaration, an objection, a display, show, say, express, expressing, an expression, etc.. Even when definitions account for embodied acts of protest, as opposed to letter-writing and the like, these acts are still understood as speech acts. I believe that this is what most authors have in mind when writing about hunger strikes and other detainee actions, that by taking action against the military they are performing signifying acts, symbolic acts, to communicate dissent and dissatisfaction with treatment, conditions, lack of legal access, and more.

I do understand that protest is often just used as a shorthand to describe any and all forms of challenges to authority, or any and all forms of dissent, or any and all forms of political action. Protest has become a catch-all term, in this regards. No doubt I am guilty of this myself, even though activism, social movements, direct action, and the body are my areas of scholarship. However, because these are my areas of research I do want to draw specifics for a moment, but only
because I don’t want to risk losing what I believe is most important about the hunger strikes and collective actions taken by detainees. I’m doing this because I want to avoid continuing to reduce them to mere symbolic acts. In a sense I want to recuperate their other powers, because the body is doing so much more than “speaking” when it clashes bodily with the State.

To support my argument I want to bring in Gene Sharp, one of the foremost scholars on political activism and a three-time Nobel Peace Prize nominee. In his three-volume magnum opus, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Sharp schematized a classification system for cataloging and evaluating all the various historically recorded forms of nonviolent action that have been used over time and across the globe. In *Volume 2, The Methods of Nonviolent Action*, he creates three broad categories in order to mark variations among methods of nonviolent action, thus allowing for a comparative analysis between diverse methods. These are Protest and Persuasion, Noncooperation, and Intervention.  

Using such a classification system Sharp draws a clear distinction between protests and actions like hunger strikes. Protests belong primarily to the category of Persuasion, which include actions such as picketing, vigils, marches, demonstrations, and walk outs, among others. Sharp understands protests as primarily symbolic acts of opposition or attempts at persuasion, which include but extend beyond verbal expressions but stop short of becoming noncooperation or intervention. Protests, as persuasion, are intended to communicate or influence an audience, whether that audience is the opponent, supporters, or potential supporters. Protests may also be used to arouse publicity and attention around an issue, thus gaining support for the cause, and convincing the opponent to change or alleviate the issue. Communication, expression, and display, in other words, are the key features and functionality of protests. This is counterposed with the features and functionality of his two other categories, noncooperation and intervention.
Hunger strikes, according to Sharp’s rubric, along with such methods as sit-ins, occupation, blockades, and guerrilla theatre, belong to the category intervention. He defines this category as methods that physically intervene in the situation, that disrupt and destroy, that pose a direct and immediate challenge, and that use the physical body to create interference. Detainee hunger strikes absolutely operate in this manner, as do all of the methods detainees have in their repertoire of resistance. From refusing to leave their cells for interrogation, to refusing to shower, to pulling IVs out of their arms, to pulling the feeding-tubes out of their noses, to throwing bodily fluid “cocktails” at camp staff, to overdosing on medication, to hanging, to hunger striking, detainee use their bodies to physically intervene, resist, and interfere. This, I argue, is what they do first and foremost.

That’s not to say that these methods of intervention don’t also signify, symbolize, and communicate. In fact, Dance Studies scholar Susan Leigh Foster argues that very point. In her essay “Choreographies of Protest”, Foster troubles the distinctions Gene Sharp makes in his classification system. By analyzing political actions Sharp would normally classify as interventions - lunch counter sit-ins, AIDS activist die-ins, and the uprising in Seattle during the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting - she illustrates that these too function as symbolic actions in their own right. She makes this philosophical maneuver by, “approaching the body as a vast reservoir of signs and symbols, by envisioning the body as capable of both persuasion and obstinate recalcitrance.” This is a continuation of Foster’s lifelong academic project of explicating the semiotic capabilities and power of the body, theorizing the body and the body’s movement and actions as a bodily writing, thus troubling the much too prevalent construction of the body as the object upon which culture, gender, race, values, and history are inscribed. She puts these theorizations of the body to work in the context of social movements in order to show that the body engaged in political action is simultaneously a signifying agent and an agent of disruption.
Of course Performance Studies has something to say here too. Performance theorist Richard Schechner, in his own way, has spent a lifetime arguing along the same lines as Foster, the body and bodily action exist as both presentations, at the level of material reality, and representations, at the level of signification. Applying these principles to political performances and public demonstrations in his essay “The Street Is the Stage,” Schechner offers the formulation that direct actions, or what he terms “political direct theatre,” are “actual + symbolic,” meaning they do something plus they communicate something.65

As an example we might imagine a labor strike. The refusal of workers to perform their labor is a symbolic act. It communicates to management, and often to a broader audience, that working conditions are so horrendous, or violations of labor rights are so egregious, that they, as an organized force, refuse to stand for it any longer, something has to be done, action has to be taken. This is what is conveyed through the workers’ body in a labor strike. At the same time, the strike is the very action that is taken to rectify the situation or lead to a change in the situation. The refusal to work is a bodily act of intervention and an act that sends a message.

To return again to the detainees at Guantanamo in their resistance movement, there is no doubt that the same thing is happening in their collective actions. Their forms of action, from hunger strike, to suicide, to noncompliance, are saying something even as they are doing something. They are actual + symbolic enactments, intervening and signifying. In fact, in terms of Gene Sharp’s classification, I would contend that detainee methods of resistance belong to all three categories, they protest and persuade, they don’t cooperate, and they intervene, and do so simultaneously.

However, and this is a critical however, in repeatedly framing and discussing detainees’ collective actions as protests, by which we mean statements or expressions or appeals or messages, we risk losing something important about them. As much as these actions may say something, they are more importantly doing something. The former is a politics of the voice, the latter is a politics
of the body. By approaching the body as a disruptive magnitude and not as a message-carrying system, by approaching these resistances as bodily actions as opposed to texts, even as we acknowledge that bodies are always already signifiers and signifying, we see that detainees are intervening directly into their situation and negating the State’s attempt to discipline their body, control their body, subjugate their body. If we only understand these actions as a politics of the voice where detainees are protesting, and thus making appeals to others for justice, whether those others be the military, the State, or sympathetic observers who reside within the networks of power and are capable of favorably manipulating those networks of power, then we may fail to recognize that detainees’ embodied resistances are very much self-validating forms of agency, in which detainees don’t always require others to intervene on their behalf to obtain justice, or liberation, or human rights, that the they are perfectly capable of, to borrow a historical phrase from political activist Mario Savio, throwing their own bodies upon the gears, and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, to make the odious machinery of war grind to a halt.66 This is what detainees’ actions do. This is what their bodies do.

Of course, detainees’ bodily actions also do more than just resist, interfere, and symbolize. Political action of all stripes and colors do more than they usually expect, and more than they usually intend. A student sit-in at the Chancellor’s office, for instance, may keep him from leaving the building until he changes a particular campus policy, but a body engaged in political action and enmeshed in a collection of other active bodies may also through the act of sitting-in develop lasting bonds with strangers, forge a new sense of identity and subjectivity, develop more confidence in themselves and in their bodies’ ability to make change, provide a more visceral and nuanced understanding of the strategies of power, create a connection to other resistant bodies across space and time. This, all through the act of sitting-in. These are often the unexpected outcomes and productions of activism. Even when they don’t achieve their desired ends, they still do something.
So what then could the detainees’ methods of resistance be doing other than intervening and signifying? The third argument that I weave throughout the dissertation concerns this very question. I contend that by enacting bodily forms of resistance detainees bring into existence the alternatives to the very things they are resisting. They actualize the things that the military, with its strategies of subjugation and domination, attempt to deny them. If resistance is negation, and the hunger strikes and suicides are a subtraction of body and life, then detainees perform a kind-of activist mathematics using these methods of resistance, creating a positive from a double negative.

Fort instance, the military has developed very sophisticated strategies for keeping detainees physically isolated, without mental stimuli, and without human connection, instilling into the very bodies of detainees a visceral and existential sense of isolation. They often segregate detainees from others who speak the same language, intentionally placing an Arabic-speaking detainee in a cell next to an English-speaking detainee and a Pashto-speaking detainee, for instance. The military also closely regulated incoming and outgoing mail, so that detainees couldn’t communicate with the outside. Furthermore, camp authorities implemented disciplinary isolation units to punish detainees for breaking camp rules, misbehaving, or failing to cooperate, which almost always included hunger strikers. These units were often used specifically to hold hunger strikers. But the military didn’t stop there. They also built an entire isolation complex, known as Camp 5, made up of administrative isolation units, similar to those in supermax prisons in the United States. Here detainees are only allowed one hour per day outside of their cell. In practice, however, this often meant that detainees were stuck in their isolation cells 24 hours a day for several days in a row.

The military also created a classification system of discreet hierarchies, marked by different color uniforms for specific classifications of behavior. At the upper end of the classification system the military granted better living conditions, a separate camp for the well-behaved, longer and more frequent recreation time, extra privileges, and more comfort items. This is literally the creation of a
classed society, where detainees compete in marketplace determined by social and cultural capital, which is constructed and distributed by the military. Similar to isolation strategies, what this induces so nefariously is the feeling of solitude and individuality, given that the only relation detainee can have to one another in this social capitalist marketplace is that of competition. In these ways the military’s war strategy of detention and interrogation separate and isolate detainees.

Enter the hunger strikes and methods of embodied resistance. They actualize the alternative, thus not only undermining but completely obliterating the military’s strategy of subjugation. The hunger strikes here are resisting, but they are doing something special and unforeseen. They are building connectivity to fellow detainees. The organization of bodies into a mass hunger strike, but virtue of its bodies acting in unison and solidarity create a collectivity that strategies of war cannot break. They form a union in their struggle. Indeed, detainees who have struggled together almost always refer to each other as brothers. The military’s denial of family connection by regulating and censoring detainee mail and communication from loved ones winds up being undermined by the hunger strike, which creates familial bonds and connectivity. Furthermore, even when some detainees cannot lend their bodies to the cause and can only offer moral support assist in the connectivity. Whereas the military strategizes to create individuals, resistance creates a collective. Starving bodies aggregate into an empowered social body. Their actions actualize the exact justice being denied them.
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16 Marc Falkoff, “A Death at Gitmo.”


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52 Ibid., 28.

53 Ibid., 27-29

54 Ibid., 5.


56 For more on the roots of U.S. interrogation methods at Gitmo see Jane Mayer’s *The Dark Side*, Alfred McCoy’s *The Question of Torture*, and Michael Otterman’s *American Torture*.


60 Ibid., 117.

61 Ibid., 118.

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66 Mario Savio Memorial Lecture Fund website, [http://www.savio.org/who_was_mario.html](http://www.savio.org/who_was_mario.html).
Chapter 1

By June 2005 the 520 remaining detainees caged at Gitmo had endured enough. It had all
gotten to be too much. Three years of daily abuses. Three years of consistent heartache. Three
years of muscle fatigue. Three years of bones settled in discomfort. Three years of cramped joints. Three
years of bad sleep. Three years of no sleep. Three years of nightmares when they could sleep. Three
years of internalized degradation. Three years of externalized desolation. Three years wearing one’s
anguish like a cloak. Three years cloaking one’s anguish in a worn-out smile. Three years of fear,
turned hate, turned futility, turned hate, turned fear. Three years of viscous cycles and circular logic.
Three years of imprisonment at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. There was simply nothing they hadn’t
seen. No cruelty they hadn’t witnessed. No suffering they hadn’t experienced. No horror story they
hadn’t heard. No pain they hadn’t felt.

But there was still something that could elicit terror among the detainees. There was still
something they wanted to avoid at all costs. That was Gitmo’s Camp 5.

For the nearly one hundred detainees who had the misfortune of being penned inside, Camp
5 was dread. It was deadening. It was more than a camp, more than a prison. It was a machine,
pure machine. Camp 5 was a turbine that seized the men, wrung all hope and force from their
beleaguered bodies, funneled it into a wash, rinsed it out to sea, left it languishing in the gulf, letting
it lap up against the island’s shoreline and limestone cliffs. It was a perfect technological instrument
engineered with the most sophisticated microphysics for breaking down the human body,
rearranging it, and manufacturing it into an object that could be controlled. But like all perfect
systems, it was imperfect. The question wasn’t if, but when and how detainees would finally exploit
that imperfection, compromise the machine, and grind it to a halt.
Camp 5 was the most recent addition to Guantanamo, its first real brick and mortar prison. Built in May 2004 for a $16 million price tag, it was nothing if not state-of-the-art.\(^1\) By comparison the prison structures over in Camp Delta, which housed Camps 1 through 4, were basically just slapdash stockades built from large metal shipping containers, retrofitted with mesh steel cells. Those were impostors of prisons. With Camp 5, the military finally had a genuine penal asylum, one comprised solely of solitary confinement units.

It was a singular structure, two stories tall. From an aerial view one could see it had five long wings spoking off a central hub, four wings dedicated to cell blocks, and a fifth wing for administrative offices. It looked like a large asterisk.

Inside, the place appeared pristine. All surfaces sterile. The scent, the sight, the sensation - clinical. The hum of industrial fans. The hiss of automated doors. The click of boot heels. The hubbub of clipped conversations. The cement. The polished cement. Every floor was slicked with it. Every wall was smoothed with it. Cement was omnipresent. It gave the camp an unnatural luster.

The cell doors were colossal cast iron crypts of locks and latches, the entire thing lacquered in crimson. Inside the cells were square slabs of cement substituting as beds. Above the bed was a small slit of window, tall but sliver thin, layered with a frosted film that let in only a little light.

Any surface not cement was stainless steel. A waist-high silver tower of metal was set off to the corner of the cell. Attached to this metal tower, a toilet, a sink, a faucet. Set high in a corner of the ceiling, encased in steel also, a closed-circuit camera. Its vision sidling slowly across the cell, capturing all activity. The optics of security. The security of optics.

And the light. The light was relentless. Fluorescent bulbs lined the ceiling. Left on literally all day long, they illuminated every last millimeter of the cell at all times. And the white. The white was relentless too. Alabaster walls reflected every last ounce of luminescence, refracted every last wavelength of brilliance. Almost blinding. And sleep, impossible. Closed eyelids were pointless.
Rolling over was useless. Everywhere the light flooded. It was still years before the jailed men could secure some eye masks to assist with sleep. But then, in June 2005, the only solution detainees had landed on was letting their hair grow long enough to shade their eyes. Innovation as a survival skill. The body as a defense system.

Needless to say, the construction of Camp 5 was not a neutral, humanitarian move on the part of the Pentagon. It wasn’t built to benefit detainees, provide them with improved amenities, or bring conditions into compliance with the Geneva Conventions. Rather the prison construction was purely ideological. First of all, the construction of Camp 5 signaled a permanence to their detention. Whereas the previous make-shift provisions suggested to detainees that their legal limbo was in flux, at worst in some kind of holding pattern, Camp 5 suggested their indefinite detention would be a long-term affair. The material was the message. The metal steeled the military’s resolve, the concrete cemented the detainee’s status.

Camp 5 wasn’t designed to hold just any detainee, either. While Guantanamo supposedly held “the worst of the worst,” Camp 5 supposedly held “the worst of the worst” of even that lot. According to the military, it was devised to hold any detainee who was considered a threat to camp operations, a threat to military handlers, or a threat to themselves. In addition to housing detainees who were supposedly the most noncompliant from a detention standpoint, Camp 5 also held men the government designated as “valuable” from an intelligence standpoint. But holding such detainees was hardly the point. Camp 5 was erected explicitly to manage, control, regulate, and discipline the bodies of defiant detainees. And every mechanism imaginable, every technology thinkable, every device at the military’s disposal, was implemented to do just that.

That started with the so-called “nerve center” of Camp 5. This was an elevated, glass-enclosed control center in the middle of the facility from which the entire camp was run. The control center provided clear sight-lines into both stories of each 12-celled wing of the prison.
Every occurrence between guards and the 100 prisoners (at capacity) could be carefully observed from the “nerve center.” The control tower was also equipped with touch-screen computers connected to the surveillance cameras set up in each cell, so that all activity could be monitored inside the cells as well. On the one hand, an observation tower/control center for exterior observation, on the other hand closed-circuit cameras for the interior. Each deployed for the purposes of surveillance. Both technologies, one architectural, the other electronic, combined in Camp 5 to create the perfect mechanism of control and discipline - a panopticon.

The Panopticon is a type of prison theorized in the late 18th century by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham, designed to be the quintessential structure for reforming inmates. Bentham’s blueprints for the Panopticon saw a spherical prison structure, with cells ringing the interior circumference. At the center of the structure stood a large tower with 360-degree windows facing the cells. From this tower, an administrator could observe all the inmates without the inmates’ ability to tell whether they were being observed. It was essentially, for its era, the exemplary technology of surveillance.

Although Bentham’s design never quite materialized to his exact specifications, the Panopticon reappeared in the 1970s and 80s when it was further theorized and explicated by French philosopher Michel Foucault. For Foucault, the Panopticon presented the perfect prison apparatus for the operation and production of Power, where the bodies of prisoners were brought under control and disciplined through the procedures that the Panopticon provided— observation, regulation, and normalization. But for both Bentham and Foucault the Panopticon, even when it served as metaphor, was still presented as a physical structure, an architectural technology. It has been argued persuasively by Human Geography professor Hille Koskela that the advent and ubiquity of surveillance cameras and closed-circuit television have made it so that panopticism, as an
instrument of Power, has been extended electronically. The use of both the electronic and architectural formats at Camp 5 produces a panopticism practically unparalleled.

Camp 5’s intersecting and omnipresent panoptic systems reduce detainees to mere objects. They become objects of an invasive visualization, objects of a scrutinizing gaze, always for the purposes of disciplining the noncompliant detainee body. These all-encompassing surveillance technologies don’t just control the bodies they detain, they actively shape it according to the military’s strategies and objectives.

The body’s every move is monitored. Every act is captured. Every insignificant, inappreciable aspect of life is accounted for, appreciated, and prescribed with a possible significance. A detainee locked away in Camp 5 is studied, measured, and analyzed. If he eats, if he shits, if he pisses, if he gets sick, if he speaks, if he reads, if he prays, if he paces, if he sleeps, if he wakes, if he is inspected. Privacy is not just invaded by Camp 5’s panopticism, it’s obliterated. A detainee’s entire existence is situated within the visual field of the military’s gaze. Unlike standard maximum-security prisons where closed-circuit cameras surveil the prison blocks but not necessarily the individual cells, Camp 5 offers detainees no escape. The camp’s “nerve center” in conjunction with the architecture allow literally everything to be perceived incessantly. This is supervision as a product of super vision.

Detainees are not ignorant to Camp 5’s constant surveillance. They know they are being watched. And that is precisely the point of the Panopticon, to instill in the prisoner the notion that he may be monitored at any time. The Panopticon produces the threat that any moment is potentially an observed moment. All acts, gestures, and behaviors can potentially be witnessed. Detainees just don’t know exactly when these potential points of observation will occur. And again, that is precisely the point of the Panopticon. Random, irregular, sporadic, indeterminate,
unspecified, uncertain instances of surveillance. This is where indefinite detention meets indefinite inspection, and with insidious effects.

The constant threat of being watched creates in the prisoner a form of self-regulation, self-discipline. It would be a mistake to say that the Panopticon directly or unilaterally forces the prisoner to act this way or that. Rather, the Panopticon creates the scenario wherein the prisoner feels obliged to discipline himself, a silent and invisible form of behavioral coercion by virtue of optics alone. Detainees perform as if they know they are being watched, because they never know when they aren’t. Their behavior is therefore normalized in accordance with the standards of camp regulations and expectations. This is discipline internalized. The detainee strictly governs his own bodily comportment, disposition, and behavior. Or, as Foucault would have it, the prisoner “becomes the principle of his own subjection.” This ensures that, at least theoretically, guards and camp authorities don’t ever have to resort to physical force to ensure obedience and discipline. Again, that is precisely the point of the Panopticon, to reduce reliance on overt repression for compliance. The technologies of surveillance are impersonal and anonymous. They ensure that the human interaction between guards and detainees remain at a bare minimum. They also attempt to convince detainees that because their control comes as a product of some disinterested nondescript technology and not physical violence that their jailers are more benevolent than malicious.

The Panopticon doesn’t observe for the mere sake of observation. Panoptic technologies work to accumulate knowledge of the object it holds in its gaze. In the case of Camp 5, the observation tower/“nerve center” and the closed-circuit cameras are methods used to learn everything there is to know about a particular detainee. That knowledge can then be used for interrogation purposes. Everything about a detainee’s existence within his Camp 5 cell can be captured by cameras, relayed to analysts, and used to strategize a new interrogation plan. If a detainee only eats half his meal, or eats quickly, or eats slowly, or only eats his rice, or never eats his
bread, or doesn’t eat at all, or suffers constipation, or suffers diarrhea, the cameras will know, which means his interrogators will know. The detainee’s behavior can then be used against him by interrogators in devising an interrogation strategy or during interrogation itself. If a detainee is observed doing physical exercise in his cell everyday between 10 and 11am, that might be a perfect time to extract him from his cell to conduct an interrogation. If the a detainee is observed napping every afternoon between 4pm and 5pm, that might also be a perfect time to schedule an impromptu interrogation. If a detainee has a hard time sleeping at night, he might be offered sleeping pills in exchange for cooperation during his interrogation. Camp 5’s Panoptic technologies, it turns out, are the perfect apparatus for aiding interrogations. First, they discipline the detainee through the techniques of self-regulation, making the prisoner more compliant with camp rules and guards’ instructions, as well as more cooperative with interrogators. Then, they inspect and scrutinize the now-disciplined detainee in order to calculate how he might be exploited further. In other words, the surveillance systems gather intelligence on how best to gather intelligence. These are integrated systems whose cumulative effect is nothing more and nothing less than the total subjugation of the detainee body.

Interrogation was very much a part of military strategy for subjugating bodies at Camp 5. Far from being just a state-of-the-art complex with architecture and surveillance technologies to confine and control the most non-compliant, Camp 5 was outfitted with its own in-house interrogation facilities. The interrogation rooms, of which there were two on each floor of the facility, had a sterile sensation similar to the rest of the facility. White walls, polished cement floors, bright halogen lights. The interrogation facilities, too, were hyper-sophisticated and state-of-the-art. Closed-circuit cameras and hi-tech audio equipment inside each room recorded the interviews. The technology allowed a live interrogation to be relayed to a remote location. Analysts in these remote rooms observed the interrogation on ultra-modern monitors, and notated the events on
desktop computers. It let them fact-check, compare accounts, and perform database research, all in real-time. It also allowed interrogators to record interview sessions and play them back later for further analysis.

Outfitting Camp 5 with an in-house interrogation center wasn’t done as a matter of mere convenience, of course. Again, like the rest of Camp 5 it was a matter of ideology, a matter of military strategy, a matter of inscribing power relations spatially. In other camps if a detainee was scheduled for interrogation he had to be transported from his given prison complex to the interrogation complex. While the ensuing interrogation was certainly no walk in the park, the trek from prison to interrogation complex at the very least afforded the detainee an opportunity to leave the confines of his cell and be outdoors, feel fresh air, and despite the shackles, cuffs, and military escort the detainee had at least the illusory feeling of bodily autonomy, even if only momentarily. Not so with Camp 5 detainees.

Everything stayed in-house. There was never a need for a Camp 5 detainee to ever visit Camp Delta or the rest of Guantanamo again, save to see his lawyer if he had one, or to visit the hospital in the case of a serious medical emergency, but that was hardly necessary given that Camp 5 also contained its own in-house medical facility.\(^\text{11}\) The camp was constructed precisely to preclude detainees from even the prospect of seeing anything else or experiencing anything else.

What this means is that on top of operating as a perfect panoptic system and a site of austere isolation, Camp 5 was, what sociologist Erving Goffman would call, a highly-perfected \textit{total institution}. In his book Asylums, an examination of the various asylums functioning in modern society (mental institutions, orphanages, prisons, army barracks, work camps, boarding schools, monasteries), Goffman put forward the term total institution to refer to a place of residence where groups of similarly-situated individuals are cut off from wider society for an extended period of time, living an enclosed and formally regulated existence.\(^\text{12}\) While the basic social arrangement in modern
western society is that individuals work, eat, sleep, and conduct their various business and affairs in separate places, with different people, and under multiple authorities, total institutions operate as a breakdown of these various spheres of life, so that all aspects of an individual’s existence are conducted in the same place under the same singular authority. Given these constraints it is difficult, if not impossible, for an occupant of a total institution to have any autonomy of action, as the most minute segments of life are regulated, regimented, and sanctioned by staff and supervisors. The enclosed, unescapable space and its administration by authority figures (guards, wardens, doctors, nurses, bosses, managers, etc.) create a social dynamic and power dynamic that is equally enclosed and unescapable. Thus total institutions are as much social constraints as they are architectural constraints, where an occupant’s subjection is a combination of spatiality and sociality.

Of course, Goffman’s term applies to practically any prison anywhere. However, some total institutions are far more totalizing than others, and thus more sophisticated in terms of social control. Gitmo certainly is a total institution by any metric, but Camp 5 is even more refined in its totalizing effects. Detainees housed here are, unlike detainees in Camps 1 through 4 and Camp Echo, not afforded the opportunity to ever leave the camp. Even more, they are only rarely allowed to leave their cell, and even if they do they don’t get to interact with anyone other than military staff. This degree of strict enclosure and limitation of socialization perform two immediate function. First, they strip a detainee of his conventional identity, replacing it with an institutionalized identity, so that he begins to see himself only as an inmate under the rigorous and regimented control of military authority. Second, this new identity, which is marked by internalized subjugation, transforms the formerly noncompliant detainee into a thoroughly compliant body who acts in accordance with camp rules and directives. In this way Camp 5 represents something like a total institution within a total institution, a Gitmo within a Gitmo.
The combination of these methods — panopticism and total institutionalism — are neither ideologically neutral nor do they produce neutral effects on detainees. They are highly-sophisticated strategies of war on/against/through the detainee body. The sum total of their operations is the production of what political philosopher Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, would call a docile body.

In Foucault’s calculation, a body is docile insofar as it is subjected, transformed, used, and improved by mechanisms of Power. It’s not just that a body is dominated or controlled, it’s that some of the body’s capabilities are increased during the process of control and domination. In the case of Camp 5, the military diminishes the forces of detainees’ bodies using the technologies of panopticism and total institutionalism, transforming them into disciplined subjects with no autonomy. At the same time that the military strips a detainee’s body of power it also redirects some of the body’s forces into an aptitude that will be beneficial for the State. Disciplining detainees into docile bodies is a strategy to ultimately make detainees compliant with guards and interrogators, cooperative with authority, willing to offer up more intelligence that the military needs in order to retain its power, build its power, and circulate its power into other arenas.

But this kind of knowledge production requires cooperation from detainees, and that cooperation can only occur if they have been disciplined by the various technologies of Power into docile bodies. This is why Camp 5 strips detainees of all bodily power and capabilities except for the capability to cooperate. Their docile bodies become more useful as they become more obedient, they become more obedient as they become more useful, where useful is roughly translated as the ability to offer up information. And Camp 5 was the apparatus that made possible the technology of both extracting and amplifying the body’s utility in the course of the body’s subjugation.
By June 2005 Camp 5, as a machine dedicated to controlling and disciplining detainee bodies, was practically perfected. But then a remarkable thing happened. Despite how intricate and all-encompassing these technologies and microphysics of Power actually were, detainees resisted. The methods of controlling and rendering the body docile did not work. The place designed precisely to prevent detainee resistance was where resistance festered the most. And now it was ready to explode.

Detainees in Camp 5 may not have wanted to launch a resistance movement, but ultimately they had to. They didn’t have a singular causal event to put their bodies into action, because they didn’t need one. Survival and self-determination were reason enough. Every second of every day Camp 5 inscribed upon their bodies resistance is futile. Now detainees would flip the script, use their bodies to write a new text — resistance is the only option. But there could be no doubts among the detainees that a hunger strike, though audacious, was risky, would take dedication, and even more than that, would take organization.

They may have tried yelling through the walls. They may have tried hollering through the air vents, the cracks in the door, or any accidental aperture that their cells provided. They may have passed notes clandestinely. They have covertly etched words, phrases, communiques, in places otherwise concealed. They may have knocked on the walls, rapped on the pipes, thumped on their door, using the kind of improvised tap code made famous by prisoners of war everywhere. Detainees might have developed any number of inventive techniques and secret systems to communicate with one another. Prisoners with little to do and nothing but time are capable of all kinds of artful ploys. But somehow, some way, detainees communicated and organized themselves cell by cell and block by block. This alone was an act of defiance. But there was more to come.

On June 21, 2005, detainees in Camp 5’s Alpha Block began a hunger strike. It started small. It started modestly. For an entire week all the detainees in Alpha refused to eat their
breakfast. The plan they’d organized had been met with overall approval by the Camp 5 population.16

The following week more detainees joined in. Now they were refusing two meals a day.17 Every tray of breakfast served through the “beanhole” slot in their door was turned away. Every tray of lunch brought to their door was turned away. Detainees were pacing themselves, testing themselves. They were training, priming the body to perform what would become a perilous feat of endurance. They were building something inside themselves that would have the force to push back against the odious machine that was Camp 5. They were building a power that could move through glass, cement corridors, and stainless steel. Which is to say, they were building their mettle. Which is to say, they were building a movement.

On July 2, after eleven straight days of steadily building the movement, the refusal of food was full-blown.18 Nearly all of the close-to 100 detainees locked up in Camp 5 had joined the cause and were now participating. Every meal served through the beanhole was turned away, left to rot, or thrown back out. Camp 5 was now officially on hunger strike.

The military may have wondered how long the detainees’ refusal would last, but there was no knowing. Detainees themselves didn’t have the answer. They would strike for as long as they needed to. It seemed that each detainee had their own particular reason for participating in the hunger strike, and those reasons varied from one detainee to the next. So although the rationale for resistance was unique, the resistance was generalized

This wasn’t symbolic resistance either. Detainees weren’t merely engaging in extreme starvation for show. Nor were they doing it to make a point to the military. Certainly the hunger strike did make a point, but the point wasn’t to make a point. In a case of the medium being the message, the point of the hunger strike was to resist. And this was determined resistance, highly determined. The military could measure that determination either in the drastic amount of weight
lost from each body, or the sheer number of bodies falling sick, fainting, filling up Camp 5’s meager medical facility.

British detainee Omar Deghayes made a point of keeping a daily diary of the Camp 5 hunger strike, offering a kind-of real-time recording of the growing resistance movement. According to him Jarallah al-Marri, a citizen of Qatar who’d been detained at Gitmo since the first few weeks of the camp’s opening, was the first to fall seriously ill. He was taken to the hospital on July 3 after his weight dropped from 120 pounds to a mere 103. Al-Marri’s lawyer, Jonathan Hafetz, believed his hunger strike exacerbated his already serious heart condition, which also helps explains why he was hospitalized and given an IV so early in the campaign.

Before too long, however, the health of other detainees was compromised too. For instance, Omar Khadr, the Canadian citizen transferred to Guantanamo at only 15 years-old, had taken to bouts of throwing up blood before he was ultimately discovered on the floor of his cell unconscious a few weeks into the hunger strike. Such episodes became a regular occurrence in nearly every block of Camp 5. Deghayes’ diary records numerous instances of detainees fainting, falling unconscious in their cells, and bleeding internally. Deghayes was not immune to the effects of the hunger strike either, as his lack of energy kept him from making entries in his diary for a number of days in a row. Writing on July 19, Deghayes exclaims: “I am back alive. I was very sick to write anything last few days in much pain and like dead.”

Within a matter of weeks the hunger strike had gotten so serious and momentous that most detainees were suffering health problems in some form or fashion. The medical room within Camp 5 was completely overwhelmed with starving bodies. The military had to bring in a number of extra emergency response cots. When they ran out of room in the medical room the cots had to be set up in Camp 5’s interrogation rooms in order to accommodate the scores of infirm hunger strikers.
This in itself was a huge victory for the detainees’ growing resistance movement. Their hunger strike was working. It was making not only a meaningful difference in the detainees’ lives, it was making a material difference. Their wasted but radically activated bodies had the power to shut down Camp 5’s interrogation operations. The military was suddenly placed in a position where they had to choose between caring for detainees at all costs, and thus attempt to save their public image as a benevolent and human rights-honoring force, or keep interrogations happening at all costs, and thus continue to discipline and subjugate detainee bodies. Detainees were, at least temporarily and at least in some respect, winning, even as their bodies continued to waste away.

And their bodies really were wasting away. By all estimation, these were men who’s health had been seriously compromised on account of their starvation. Many weren’t healthy to begin with, and therefore should never have engaged in an activity so physically taxing. Yet, they continued to resist in spite of this. That’s how much the resistance meant to these detainees. Their bodies were the only means of intervening into the machinery of Camp 5 and resisting its processes, even if that intervention meant destroying their body in the process. The hunger strike was difficult, there can be no doubts about that, but it was worth it to take this kind of collective action. Omar Deghayes acknowledged this very thing when he wrote in his diary on July 12, 2005: “I found morals are very high and everyone is steadfast they want to go on and just continue whatever the costs.”

Of course, some detainees couldn’t participate in this form of resistance. Understandably, not all detainees could withstand the havoc that starvation wreaks on the body. Detainees in Camp 5 understood this too, and so they actively discouraged some from participating. Those who were considered too old or too sick to withstand the wear and tear of a hunger strike were advised to offer their moral support instead of their already beleaguered bodies. While some detainees in Camp 5 heeded the advise of fellow detainees, a number joined the hunger strike anyway. That’s
how much force the hunger strike had. It tornadoed through camp sweeping up detainees as it gathered storm.

Eventually the hunger strike broke a dam, releasing a number of other tactics of resistance. The rejection of food became an all-out rejection of everything. Camp rules were openly violated. Regulations were transgressed. Cooperation with guards and staff ceased almost entirely.

Camp 5 detainees began rejecting their recreation time. These very precious opportunities of momentary respite from their isolating detention were treated with disdain. Insofar as it was associated with the military it was refused. Detainees were taking a stance of noncooperation with all the various apparatuses of discipline and control, even, and specially, those ones that were so precious, so precious because they were so rare. Before the hunger strike, detainees would’ve complained to guards about their inability to get recreation time. Now, it was to be spurned outright.

For some detainees this included showering. As with recreation time, opportunities to shower were few and far between. Often shower time was included only with recreation time. These were luxuries to men who were living in conditions of absolute austerity. But now showers too were to be resisted. One form of self care (cleaning the body) was sacrificed in order for another (agency of one’s own body) to be born.

Along with the boycott of recreation and showers, detainees who’d previously been awarded special “comfort items” on account of their good behavior turned those items back into guards. Extra blankets, bars of soap, books, and bottled water were all returned to their military jailers. The hunger strike was now a uniform strike. Resist everything at all times everywhere. No “comfort item”, no “reward for good behavior”, no “luxury”, was worth the price of their body.

This level of resistance was in a way truly unfathomable. Camp 5 was supposed to be a perfect disciplinary mechanism, a machine that took noncompliant detainee bodies, ground them
down, and reproduced them into compliant bodies. The camp had been constructed into a physical architecture that would aid this bodily reproduction, and was outfitted with the most sophisticated technologies to ensure such a reproduction was complete. And yet here were detainees producing their own bodies, noncompliant bodies, resistant bodies. They had taken the austerity of Camp 5 and reverse-engineered it to create a body depleted in a different kind of way, via starvation, and disciplined in a different kind of way, via regimens of resistance, which were the repeated refusals of food. Resistance wasn’t supposed to happen, not in Camp 5, least of all coordinated mass resistance.

In the same way that Camp 5 had been designed to mold discipline into the bodies of noncompliant detainees, it had also been built to ensure that detainee bodies remained completely isolated, and felt completely isolated. The camp, after all, was modeled after standard American “Supermax” prisons, also known as “Administrative Isolation Units” or “Secure Housing Units.” Such prisons have long been criticized for their level of sensory deprivation, and at Gitmo the level of deprivation was incredible.

Supermax prisons are those that utilize strategies of control and confinement that go above and beyond standard maximum-security prisons. Prisoners are usually physically isolated to their cell for 23-24 hours a day. At Camp 5 detainees reported that their isolation typically lasted 24 hours a day for several days in a row. In Supermax facilities prisoners also, by virtue of the isolation, experience a quantitative and qualitative reduction in activity and stimuli. Surveying the variety of Supermax prisons in the United States, psychologist and prison expert Craig Haney, who’s spent a lifetime researching supermax facilities in North America, has characterized them as facilities that, “typically meld sophisticated modern technology with the age-old practice of solitary confinement,” in which, “prisoners experience levels of isolation and behavioral control that are more total and complete and literally dehumanized than has been possible in the past. The combination of these
factors is what makes this extraordinary and extreme form of imprisonment unique in the modern history of corrections."

Prisoners in such units, when allowed to leave their cells, which isn’t often, are usually cuffed and chained during transport, activity, or “free time.” In this way they are denied even the false sense of bodily liberation, even temporary bodily liberation, that exists in maximum-security prisons. Within a Supermax there is simply never a time when a detainee’s body is not restrained by the institution’s equipment, technology or personnel. Autonomy and agency are simply evacuated from the body.

Aside from the restraint, prisoners are also excluded from the normal routines and collective activities that accompany life in lesser prisons. There are no cellmates. There is no communal dining. There are no visitations to the library. There are no educational or vocational classes taken with other prisoners. There are no classes period. There is no work that one performs. Prisoners merely sit in their cell alone, communicating to one, interacting with no one, save the prison staff occasionally, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

Prisoners also, and this was certainly the case with Camp 5 detainees, experience recreation time completely alone. That, of course, was if recreation was even ever offered. Detainees as part of their resistance movement may have boycotted recreation time, but recreation time was a true rarity. Many in Camp 5 reported that they were only offered their one hour of recreation at night. In these cases, rec time was often refused simply so that detainees could continue sleeping, which was its own form of luxury given the bright lights remained on in the cell all day and night. When it wasn’t offered at night, the military also took to offering recreation time to detainees during the peak of the afternoon, when the heat was unbearable. So, for all intents and purposes, recreation time at Camp 5 not only didn’t occur because of the strategy of solitary confinement and isolation, it didn’t
occur because it was offered at the most inopportune times, which compounded the sense of isolation.

All of these provisions make Supermax and supermax-like facilities an extreme and exceptional form of imprisonment. The comprehensive and relentless isolation set them apart from other correctional institutions. The model here is one of total deprivation. And this existential deprivation isn’t an unforeseen byproduct of the implementation of isolation, it’s absolutely the intent. As Craig Haney had made clear, is used specifically to do the following:

to deprive prisoners of most of the things that all but the most callous commentators would concede are basic necessities of life—minimal freedom of movement, the opportunity to touch another human being in friendship or with affection, the ability to engage in meaningful or productive physical or mental activity, and so on. In most prisons—even in maximum security—prisoners retain some small but meaningful freedoms. They can take advantage of admittedly minimal opportunities for programming and activity, and many manage to fashion a semblance of an authentic life, especially in the institutional spaces that remain unregulated. But supermaxes have become places of nearly pure punishment where, by virtue of the totality of the control and the sheer degree of deprivation, there are very few of these interstices left. As a result, it is nearly impossible for supermax prisoners to eke out a meaningful life (as opposed to a mere existence). 30

It’s important to note that Haney is talking here about the virtual isolation of solitary confinement and not literal isolation, such as the cramped spaces of punishment like “the box” or “the hole,” which historically and universally have only ever rarely been utilized by penitentiaries. However, in terms of overall effect on the inmate, the matter of virtual isolation versus literal isolation is almost a distinction without a difference. The technological sophistication of Supermax prisons makes them more nefarious than “the box” or “the hole” in that the solitary confinement is so institutionalized, so everyday. The isolation in placed like Camp 5 are less a form of punishment and more a spartan form of existence.

This is why Camp 5 was different than the isolation blocks located in Camp Delta, which the military designated to serve as temporary disciplinary units to punish detainees who disobeyed orders. These were the infamous November and Oscar blocks located in the rear of Camp 2, and India block, which was located in the rear of Camp 1. According to the 2003-2005 Camp Delta
Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) these blocks were known as Maximum Security Units (MSU). By the military’s own admission MSU’s were, “designed for segregation and isolation of detainees for disciplinary or intelligence gathering purposes.”

As stated in the SOP manual, detainees can be sentenced to these isolation units for a maximum of ten days. However, time in isolation can be extended to upwards of 30 days if another disciplinary infraction occurs while in isolation. It can even be extended beyond 30 days with the authorization of a commanding officer. The same holds true for detainees placed in isolation units for interrogation and intelligence purposes. The SOP states they can be held for up to 30 days in solitary confinement with an extension beyond that if it’s determined that their isolation is a “military necessity”, which the SOP also explicitly states is grounds for detainees to have absolutely no access to or visitation from the International Committee for the Red Cross.

So, even though in theory India, Oscar, and November blocks are supposed to isolate detainees temporarily, in practice that is rarely the case. “Temporary” here is relative, and is entirely at the discretion of the jailers and interrogators, whether the rationale is justified or arbitrary. Detainees have consistently reported regularly serving time in these isolation blocks for 30 days or more. Former detainee Murat Kurnaz in his memoir Five Years of my Life described being punished for misbehavior and placed in solitary for three months straight at one point. British detainee Omar Deghayes, the unofficial recorder of the Camp 5 hunger strike, called Oscar Block and the other punishment isolation blocks, “the tools of the devil.”

Yet, detainees punished and sent to serve ten days or more in India, November, or Oscar blocks, know that eventually they would go back to general population somewhere in Camp Delta once they had served their temporary stint, even when accounting for the loose interpretation of “temporary.” That wasn’t the case with detainees in Camp 5. This was isolation practically unparalleled, if only because it was all pervasive and very-much permanent. This is what made the
camp so ominous, and what made detainees so afraid to be transferred there. It was the exception normalized, a threat and punishment turned into daily reality.

In the same way that the panopticism and total institutionalism of Camp 5 doesn’t have neutral effects on the bodies of detainees, prolonged isolation has no neutral effects either. To be quite blunt, placing a person in solitary confinement against his will for an extended period of time induces an unbearable amount of stress. It results in a range of observable and quantifiable psychological, psychiatric, and physiological damage. Long-term isolation is nothing more and nothing less than an all out assault on the global well-being of an individual, an attack against one’s body-mind-soul, a stripping away of all that is fundamentally and comprehensively human, a ripping away of all the coordinates that locate the self. In fact, reviews of the literature conducted by Craig Haney (2003, 2008), Peter Scharff Smith (2006), and Bruce A. Arrigo and Jennifer Leslie Bullock (2008), show that in 50 years of research there is not a single published study on supermax-like prisons, solitary confinement, or isolation lasting longer than 10 days, that would show otherwise. After numerous clinical studies, controlled experiments, medical examinations, and personal descriptions, there is simply no data to show that this kind of confinement doesn’t pose a significant risk of harm to the individual. Extended isolation and solitary confinement, quite simply does damage, significant damage.

A wide range of symptoms are exhibited. These include physiological effects that seize upon a vulnerable body, such as neck, back, and abdomen pains, as well as digestive problems, loss of appetite, severe headaches, dizziness, and debilitated mobility. Extended isolation also has obvious psychological and psychiatric effects. Prisoners frequently report perceptual distortions and delusions, such as aural and visual hallucinations - seeing walls move, witnessing objects disappear, hearing voices, seeing apparitions. Many also experience insomnia, memory loss, loss of the sense of time, generalized anxiety and panic, and an inability to concentrate. Medical experts have found
that prisoners in long-term isolation suffer from or are at increased risk of developing clinical depression, psychosis, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Many doctors have also reported a heightened tendency of self-mutilation and suicidal thoughts and acts among inmates in solitary confinement. An investigative report on Supermax prisons in 2007 by *Time* magazine found that such medical conclusions were backed up by the accounts of prison officials, who have reported that suicides in many Supermax facilities are significantly higher than other kinds of prisons.

It’s worth noting that in many studies prisoners suffering from effects listed above had no previous history of psychiatric problems. In some cases an onset of serious symptoms occurred in healthy subjects after only a few days in solitary confinement. For those, however, who already experience psychiatric problems or endure a degraded psychological state due to previous traumas associated with their confinement, the negative health effects are exacerbated, adding unendurable stress to an already overtaxed brain and body.

The same holds true for remand prisoners, those held in solitary confinement while still awaiting trial. The overwhelming feelings of uncertainty associated with their indefinite detention and unknown fate amplify the negative effects of their isolation, creating a perfect cocktail of misery and anxiety. This must’ve been especially true for detainees in Camp 5 at Gitmo, who, by June 2005, hadn’t waited a few months to receive trial, but more than three years. Their’s was a truly indefinite indefinite detention.

Often the adverse physiological and psychological effects subside once released from solitary confinement, despite the fact that health risks are heightened the longer one remains isolated. But, in some cases prolonged isolation has profound and long-lasting consequences for the prisoners, even after being released. For instance many report an inability to re-adjust to and engage in social behavior, sometimes even fearing contact and proximity. This is because the kind of damage delivered to prisoners is unique to solitary confinement, in that the central harmful feature is a
reduction of meaningful social contact to near zero. Prisoners locked away in isolation are denied stimulation, activity, and significant social interaction, thus obliterating not only the social contact necessary to sustain their sense of self but the social context upon which their reality is constructed. Human beings are not just social creatures, sociality is the very basis of human existence. That is why solitary confinement is such a violent act. It denies the basis of one’s humanity, and in so doing erases the coordinates of the self.

The effects of extended isolation are not speculative results relegated to scientific studies. The health risks detailed above reflect the actual experiences of many Guantanamo detainees who’ve been held in both the permanent solitary confinement of Camp 5 and the disciplinary solitary confinement units scattered across Camp Delta. Take Salim Hamdan for instance, the first detainee to be tried and convicted under Guantanamo’s Military Commissions. Hamdan’s time in the supermax conditions of Camp 5, the disciplinary unit Camp Echo, and overall trauma of his capture and detention, amounted to a clinical diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Major Depression, as well as symptoms of anxiety, insomnia, and memory loss. This evaluation came from a psychiatrist who, on orders from the court, visited Hamdan on multiple occasions between May 2005 and May 2008, logging nearly 100 hours of examination. What she observed in Hamdan was a continually deteriorating subject. According to her testimony, “the effects of even one night of isolation on Mr. Hamdan’s mental state were so pronounced” that it often “impaired his ability to participate in the evaluation.” She made repeated attempts to military and judicial officials to suspend his solitary confinement, warning that if Hamdan remained in isolation, “his condition will continue to deteriorate and he will be at risk for developing even more serious psychiatric symptoms.” Her warnings, as would be expected, fell on deaf ears, as the military chose to keep Hamdan in solitary confinement anyway.
Symptoms similar to Hamdan were documented in Walid Hijazi, a Palestinian detainee who was among the first prisoners to arrive at Guantanamo. Lawyers of Hijazi retained a former Department of Defense psychiatrist tasked with evaluating the medical facilities at Guantanamo. After performing a number of psychiatric assessments of the detainee who’d spent two years isolated in Camp 5, he concluded that Hijazi met the clinical criteria for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Major Depressive Disorder with Mood Congruent Psychotic Features. The solitary confinement had developed in Hijazi significant anxiety and schizophrenia, which according to the psychiatrist would only worsen with continued isolation, leading to an increased risk of suicide. Unfortunately, this diagnosis was all too correct, as Walid Hijazi made multiple suicide attempts in his eight years of detention at Guantanamo. According to his 2007 JTF-GTMO Detainee Assessment form, Hijazi was a “high risk detainee from a health perspective”, who required daily visits from the camp’s Behavioral Health Unit to avoid further suicide attempts.

That conditions of detention at Guantanamo’s Camp 5 and other supermax prisons are extreme and dangerous to physical and psychological health is well substantiated. And it’s not just medical professions who have weighed in on the matter. In fact, a mere two weeks before detainees in Camp 5 began their hunger strike the US Supreme Court reached a conclusion similar to health experts, prison experts, and human rights advocates, when they ruled on a case brought by inmates of a supermax prison in Youngstown, Ohio. On June 13, 2005, justice Anthony Kennedy wrote in his Opinion that the supermax prison imposed “an atypical and significant hardship” on the inmates because the conditions of solitary confinement, “deprived [them] of almost any environmental or sensory stimuli and of almost all human contact.”

A previous, more substantial, and critical opinion came in the case Madrid v. Gomez, argued in the District Court of Northern California in 1995. In this class action lawsuit brought against the California Department of Corrections by inmates of Pelican Bay State Prison, California’s premiere
supermax facility, the prisoners contended that their conditions of solitary confinement violated their constitutional rights. Judge Thelton E. Henderson agreed. In his ruling he stated that the isolation they faced in the supermax prison, “press[ed] the outer bounds of what most humans can psychologically tolerate,” and constituted cruel and unusual punishment.51

This ruling was echoed by a Texas federal judge a few years later in Ruiz v. Johnson. The judge determined that conditions of isolation and sensory deprivation used in Texas’ supermax prisons were, “the cause of cruel and unusual pain and suffering by inmates” and thus unconstitutional. In fact, he stated, the suffering caused by extreme levels of psychological deprivation are equally, if not more, cruel and unusual than the pain and suffering caused by lashing an inmate’s back with a cat-o’-nine-tails, and that, “the wounds and scars, while less tangible, are no less painful and permanent when they are inflicted on the human psyche.”52

These American judicial summaries parallel the findings and resolutions of international governing bodies. Both the United Nations Committee on Human Rights and the Committee against Torture have entered damning opinions. In 1999, 2003, 2008, and 2011 the United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on Torture submitted reports specifically on the topic of solitary confinement. Each Rapporteur found that not only is prolonged solitary confinement a global phenomenon open to widespread abuse, but that the practice in and of itself “may amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and, in certain instances, may amount to torture.”53 Because this was an absolute violation against international laws, both Article 7 of the UN Convention on Civil and Political Rights and the UN Convention Against Torture, it was recommended that solitary confinement simply be banned in most cases.54

Again, the health effects of isolation are well known. I’ve tried to condense into five pages the overwhelming conclusions of more than 50 years of scientific studies on solitary confinement. But really, shouldn’t it only take the most rudimentary understanding of human beings to recognize
that the countless complexes of solitary confinement, from the thousands of supermax prisons that
dot the American landscape to Guantanamo’s Camp 5, do major damage. Not just damage, major
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The question then becomes, if the effects of isolation are well-known and well-substantiated
in scientific studies, court cases, and international law, then why would the United States build a
complex like Camp 5? The military knows the effects. Certainly experts at the Pentagon prior to
Camp 5’s construction would’ve been consulted, and certainly those experts would’ve been familiar
with the literature on the health consequences of solitary confinement. And yet the military went
ahead anyway and intentionally created a machine that had one overarching effect — to break down
the bodies of detainees. Why?
Quite simply, and this should come as no surprise, the negative health effects of isolation are exactly
the effects to the detainee body that the military is looking to induce. They aren’t using solitary
confinement in spite of the health consequences. They are using it precisely because of them. This is part of the overall strategy of war exacted by the military upon the bodies of detainees. Even more, this strategy of breaking detainees through isolation, breaking down their bodies, and draining their resistance has well-documented, if vile, storied past.

Historian Al McCoy has done yeoman’s work describing the genealogy of the forms of torture used on detainees in the war on terror, including and especially the use of isolation, in his book *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation from the Cold War to the War on Terror*. He traces the roots of the military’s use of isolation at Gitmo back to the CIA’s experiments in mind control during the Cold War, in which the agency secretly but directly funneled billions of dollars annually to fund psychological research in sensory deprivation for possible use in interrogation of the communist enemy. McCoy shows that the ultimate product of the decades-worth of CIA funded research was the publication in 1963 of the Kubark Counterintelligence Interrogation Manual, which codified not only the use of isolation but a host of other torture methods as well. This torture manual was distributed around the world to U.S.-backed regimes in Central and South America, where authoritarian anti-communist regimes fighting asymmetrical wars against counter-insurgent resisters utilized the CIA-developed methods to torture an unprecedented number of people in the 1970s and 1980s. The manual then migrated back to the United States after 9/11, where the methods were implemented by the US military at Gitmo.

The purpose of isolation, as laid out in the Kubark Manual and practiced at Gitmo’s Camp 5, was to create a scenario where the military could exercise complete control over the detainee’s environment, even more than the rest of the camps at Guantanamo. The austere and prolonged isolation then aids the military objective of inducing a physical and psychological “regression” within the detainee “to whatever earlier and weaker level is required for the dissolution of resistance and the inculcation of dependence.” So again, this is about sapping resistance from detainees,
disciplining their noncompliant bodies into compliance. However, rather than creating a docile body through panopticism and total institutionalism alone, existential isolation works in conjunction with these other methods to ensure the production of a docile body is complete.

This is what makes the Camp 5 hunger strike and all-out resistance staged by detainees so extraordinary. They are enmeshed in an well-integrated and seemingly-perfected system of control aimed precisely at exhausting and diminishing resistance within their bodies. Yet here they are embodiing resistance by engaging in a hunger strike and a boycott of various activities. Detainees are also doing something in addition, though, too.

Their bodies do more than just negate the military’s strategies of subjugation. They actually do more than just produce a body counter to a docile body. Their activated and resistant bodies create collectivity among themselves, create a “themselves” at all, as opposed to an isolated “self.” They bring into existence the very thing intentionally being denied to them by the military — collectivity and connectivity, the formation of a plural in an arena that is designed to produce only batches of a singular. Collectivity is not something presupposed to their collective action. They actually produce collectivity in the course of taking action.

Such is the power of direct action and resistance. Detainees are snared in isolation cells, with no way of physically interacting with one another. Yet, by resisting, by organizing that resistance using inventive and clandestine modes of communication, and by embodying that resistance, detainees in a very real way begin to physically interact with one another, have their bodies work in concert with one another. They may not be able to visit the recreation yard together, or kick a soccer ball around together, or study the Koran together, or eat together, but by not eating together, by hunger striking as a mass of bodies engaged in a singular purpose together, they are able to use their bodies to do something together. This is resistance creating immediate social change, by creating a social where one is not supposed to exist. Because how else, in the face of a machine that eradicates sociality, can
Detainees perform social activity? If not through resistance, how? If not through hunger strike, how? If not through noncooperation and subordination, how?

In the same way the military’s methods of isolation and surveillance create invisible networks that act on and through body, the hunger strike and noncooperation do the same thing. They create an invisible network that connects bodies together, carrying an electric resistance across wires that connect those bodies, wires that intertwine with the lines and matrices of military power, shorting them out at their sockets, rendering them inoperable and powerless. Detainees’ embodied resistance short-circuits the machinery of discipline, subjugation, and isolation that is Camp 5. This is how charged the detainees’ circuitry of resistance actually was. So charged in fact, that it had the power to not only shut down Camp 5, but spread out into the rest of Guantanamo, connecting to detainees elsewhere, and possibly shutting machineries of power there too.


5 Ibid.


9 Foucault, Discipline & Punish, 203.


13 Ibid., 5-6.

14 Foucault, Discipline & Punish, 136.


17 Ibid., 12.

18 Center for Constitutional Rights. New Hunger Strike Begins.


21 Deghayes, “Hunger Strike Diary.”


24 Ibid., 9.


32 Ibid., 9-1a.

33 Ibid., 9-2b.


37 Craig Haney, “Mental Health Issues in Long-Term Solitary and ‘Supermax’ Confinement.”


41 Craig Haney, “A Culture of Harm,” 975.

42 Scharff Smith, “The Effects of Solitary Confinement,” 498.


44 Arrigo and Bullock, “Psychological Effects of Solitary Confinement,” 628.

45 Ibid., 627.


http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB122/CIA%20Kubark%201-60.pdf.
It didn’t take long for detainees in other camps to learn of the hunger strike happening in Camp 5. At Guantanamo news traveled fast, serpentine. It snuck under fences, fissured through light fixtures, crept through concrete. At Camp 5 direct detainee to detainee communication was next to impossible based solely on the given architecture, but in other camps at Gitmo detainee communication was difficult too, but only because it was often discouraged by the military. And so detainees became resourceful. By July 2005 detainees throughout Gitmo had developed a number of enterprising practices for conversing and transmitting news, which was all the more incredible considering there were dozens of languages spoken by detainees from various nationalities and cultures.

There were a number of English-speaking detainees from the UK, but there also more than a few others who had at least a working knowledge of English. This made it possible for at least a few people on every block to understand the guards, which was another way of staying up on current events across the camp. Detainees would overhear the idle chatter of guards killing time, talking shit, passing on rumors, filling in the gaps of rumor with truths, with half truths. Sometimes guards talked to detainees directly and gave them various updates. Sometimes news was told to intimidate, or to mock, or to scold, but also to inform, because what’s the harm. Sometimes guards gave information to detainees to to kill the time that was killing them all.

The real information clearinghouse was the medical facility. It was usually the only place in the camp where detainees could interact with fellow detainees face to face, unbarred. Recreation time meant time alone. Shower time meant time alone. Interrogation time meant time alone. A visit to the hospital was really the only time they could leave their cells and expect to get some “free” time with fellow detainees.
They may have remained restrained when they visited the clinic, but there was a certain amount of physical and spiritual liberation that came from interacting with another body outside the confines of a steel-mesh cage. Stories were shared, news was passed, updates were given, advice was sought, advice was provided. In this way the clinic became not just a place of medical care, but a place of healing, and there’s a world of difference. Detainees could witness a pain other than their own, share suffering, alleviate suffering, feel social, feel human, leave their loneliness behind, leave their loneliness alone.

By early July 2005 hunger striking detainees from Camp 5 were filling up their own clinic and the interrogations rooms set up as temporary clinics. These starving bodies could no longer be housed in the rudimentary medical facilities of Camp 5. Even more the hunger strikers physical deterioration was getting severe, which meant they needed better service and facilities. For these reasons hunger strikers from Camp 5 began being transported to the camp’s main clinic. When bodies that had been starving for weeks started arriving at the clinic because of dehydration, fainting spells, and general failing health, detainees from Camp Delta (Camps 1 through 4) learned pretty quickly the state of affairs. Detainees who were in the clinic for regular medical visits saw the starving bodies of Camp 5 hunger strikers and talked to them about their plight and their evolving and expanding resistance movement. Naturally, news of the resistance in Camp 5 was brought back to their own blocks and own camps.

No convincing needed to be made to persuade the men in other camps that Camp 5 was a looming menacing machine. Detainees throughout Guantanamo knew of Camp 5. They feared it. Some shared that fear with others, airing it into the world hoping to dissipate its terror by speaking about it openly. Some hid that fear in pillows, under mattresses, inside prayer caps, snuffing out the flame of fear like wet fingers to a candle wick. Camp 5 was the darkness. It settled no ones mind that it was placed outside the confines of Camp Delta, as if it was a secret place where only secrets
go. They knew the men who were there, and they knew the depravities they faced. The horrors they didn’t know directly they could conjure up quite easily. In Guantanamo the torture that didn’t visit the body, visited the dreams, the nightmares, the imagination. No one wanted to be transferred to Camp 5. No one wanted to face the isolation.

Detainees in Camp Delta may not have suffered the same kind or level of isolation as those in Camp 5, but they did bear the brunt of a military strategy that kept them terribly cut-off and segregated in their own right. One part of this military strategy was to isolate them from the rest of the world, while the other part was concerned with keeping them separated from each other.

Like everything else at Guantanamo there was more than a sliver of daylight between the various policies and guarantees the military offered and what happened in actual practice. According to the military, one of the first privileges detainees were awarded upon their arrival at Guantanamo was the ability to mail a postcard to their family informing them that they were being held in U.S. custody at Guantanamo, and that they could be contacted there. In addition, the military maintained that detainees were allowed to send up to six pieces of mail per month. “Our goal is to keep the communications channels open between the detainees and their family members and friends,” declared an officer in charge of processing the detainees’ incoming and outgoing mail.

Of course how “open” that channel of communication was, was entirely up to the discretion of the military. All incoming and outgoing mail was put through a multilayer censorship process, which not only made the delivery time extremely lengthy but made the contents of any letter to or from a detainee open to redaction. In other words, a letter sent by a detainee to his family might take weeks, months, or years, to reach them, and by the time it finally arrived it might not even contain the message or sentiments the detainee had initially written.

Large portions of the letter may simply have been blacked out by military censors. In some cases the entire letter itself may be subject to the military’s black marker. The same held true for
letters written from family members to detainees. And even though family and friends could send mail to detainees through the International Committee for the Red Cross, as opposed to sending it directly through U.S. military, the process was the same. All mail would be screened, opened to redactions, and approved by the military before any letter reached a detainee’s hand.

Phone calls were completely out of the question. Various Gitmo commanders and military officials had contended for years that granting detainees access to telephone calls amounted to serious security risks. What kinds of risks to national security were posed by detainees calling their family were never specified or elaborated upon, however. The government even made the “security risk” argument in court when they tried to persuade a federal judge in 2005 that it was in the nation’s best interest not to allow detainees at Guantanamo the right to make a phone call. The government’s lawyer added that not only did it pose a security risk, but that the government simply did not have the resources required to monitor the phone calls.2

This justification seems like a spurious argument at best, for at least two reasons. In the first instance, the military and the Bush administration never tired of boasting to anyone who would listen how sophisticated the facilities at Gitmo were. Every aspect of detainees’ behavior, movement, and conversation was already being monitored in some form or fashion, which suggests that the resources were there. So it’s one or the other. Either the government has state of the art technology and equipment at Gitmo, along with tireless and professional personnel to ensure in every capacity the security of the United States, or the government doesn’t have resources to monitor a single phone call from the base. In the second instance, it can hardly be claimed that the government didn’t have resources to monitor phone calls, especially to and from Gitmo, when they apparently had resources aplenty to run an illegal domestic surveillance program where they monitored hundreds of thousands of phone calls and emails, as part of the now-famous “NSA warrantless wiretapping” program.3 It would have been more accurate for the government to say
that detainees’ ability to make phone calls to their wives, children, parents, and siblings was a
detriment to the military’s strategy of keeping the men feeling alone and isolated. An undermined
isolation strategy isn’t the same thing as a national security risk.

Even while the government argued that it was in the nation’s best interest to keep detainees
off the phones, lawyers for detainees argued that allowing telephone access was ultimately in the
military’s best interest. Allowing detainees to communicate with their families, lawyers contended,
would prove to detainees and an international public critical of Gitmo that the military was willing to
improve conditions of their confinement. Furthermore, lawyers argued, allowing detainees
telephone access might make it possible, for instance, for family members to persuade those who
were hunger striking to give up starving themselves, comply with the military, and resume eating and
drinking again.4

In any case, detainees’ ability to call their family and friends was an impossibility in the
summer of 2005. They would have to wait until 2008 before the DoD finally implemented a policy
whereby they allowed certain detainees, presumably those who showed good behavior and were
cooperative, the “privilege” of up to two monitored phone calls a year. There were strict military
limitations to these phone calls, however. They had to be limited to family and personal updates,
and not, for instance, the detainee’s treatment by the military or the conditions of his detention.5

Needless to say, the ability, or rather inability, for detainees to have any kind of contact with
their family and friends was a source of deep frustration among the men. Even by July 2005, three
years after detainees first arrived at Guantanamo, it was not uncommon for some men to have
received literally no word from anyone, despite having sent numerous letters and cards. Take Abdul
Razzaq Hekmati for instance. Hekmati was snatched off a city street in Afghanistan by members of
the Northern Alliance and handed over to U.S. forces before being transferred to Guantanamo in
March 2003, where he was held for alleged ties to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Defending his
innocence in front of multiple military tribunals at Guantanamo Hekmati declared that he spent years in Afghanistan undermining the Taliban, including conducting a daring mission to rescue three high-profile Anti-Taliban commanders from a Taliban jail in 1999, one of whom was Ismail Khan who now serves as a prominent cabinet member in Afghanistan’s newly-formed democratic government.6

After writing multiple letters to various friends and family members in Afghanistan, including Ismail Khan, to have them verify his story so that he could be freed from Guantanamo, the military told Hekmati that nobody could be located. For more than four years his letters went unanswered. For more than four years the Pentagon and State Department told him they could not locate or get in contact with anyone who could vouchsafe his story of being an anti-Taliban folk hero in Afghanistan. But four years proved to be too many, as Abdul Razzaq Hekmati died in Guantanamo of cancer at the age of 68 on December 30, 2007. He died truly alone, with no final contact. Of course it would take an investigative piece by The New York Times after Hekmati’s death, to find that Ismail Khan and other prominent members of the newly-formed Afghan government had made multiple attempts to corroborate Hekmati’s story and get him freed from Guantanamo.7

But even when waiting on a letter to arrive, waiting for correspondence, waiting on any inkling of human contact from loved ones wasn’t literally a matter of life and death, it may have felt that way for some detainees. Sometimes the waiting wasn’t even the hardest part, though. Even assuming a piece of mail could get through military clearance and actually be delivered, the letters were often censored beyond reason.

Consider Jamil el-Banna, a Palestinian with refugee status in the UK, who was abducted by the CIA in Gambia while on a business trip and taken to Guantanamo where he was held for years before eventually being released back to London. After three years in confinement he became very
distraught about the fact that he had not heard from his wife and five children, despite numerous letters he had sent them. Detainees close to el-Banna noted how devoted he was to his family and how much he worried about his young children.

Finally, his lawyers inquired with the military why he hadn’t been receiving any mail. Eventually the military, at the persistence of his legal team, found 16 letters that they had been holding but which remained undelivered. El-Banna was ecstatic upon receiving the letters, but was confused about how heavily redacted the letters were. Apparently the military thought it was pertinent to blackout sections of the letter they deemed too sensitive to security or operations. Such sections included phrases written by his children like, “We miss you, Daddy. We love you, Daddy. We’re thinking of you.”

Making matters worse is the fact that not only were letters from Jamil el-Banna’s family censored or kept from him, but his letters were also kept from reaching his family. That included the postcard the military supposedly guaranteed each detainee to send upon his arrival at Gitmo. Nothing he sent reached his family. El Banna’s wife and children went more than a year without knowing his whereabouts. Pregnant when he was abducted, his wife even gave birth to his daughter without any knowledge of his whereabouts. This military severed contact must have hurt Jamil el Banna quite deeply. And it goes without saying that the military severed contact hurts the detainee’s family just as much. This letter from Jamil el-Banna’s son Anas to Prime Minister Tony Blair, published in The Guardian newspaper, illustrates just how much hurt a family can endure by virtue of their loved one being held incommunicado in an unknown far-away land.

Dear Sir Tony Blair,

I am a boy called Anas Jamil El-Banna. I am 7 years old. Me and my four brothers are writing to you this letter from my heart because I miss my father. I am wishing that you can help me and my father. I am always asking mother, Where is my father, when will be come back? And my mother says I don’t know.

Now I have started to know that my father is in prison in a place called Cuba and I don’t know the reason why and I don’t know where is Cuba. I hope that you can help me because I miss my father. Every night I think of my dad and
I cry in a very low voice so that my mother doesn’t hear, and I dream that he is coming home and gives me a big, big hug.

Every Eid I wait for my father to come back. I hope to God that you can help me to bring my daddy back to me. I don’t want anything, I just want my daddy please.

Please Mr. Blair can you bring my daddy back to me on this Eid. I wish you a happy life with your children in your house.

Love,

Anas - 7 years old
Mohamed - 6 years
Abdulrahman - 4 years
Badeah - 3 years
Mariam - 9 months

Why would the military refuse to deliver mail that could prove a detainee’s innocence? Why would the military refuse to deliver mail to a detainee’s family? Why would the military find it necessary to censor touching expressions of love from his children? Why is a phrase like “We miss you, Daddy” redacted with the military’s black marker? What is it about “We love you, Daddy” that so threatens military interests that it has to be expunged, kept from the detainee’s eyes and heart?

The short answer is that this is another strategy of war upon the detainees’ body. Keeping detainees isolated on an island thousands of miles from their homes isn’t enough. They must also induce feelings of supreme isolation within detainees, break them down, make them dependent upon the military, sap every last ounce of resistance from their bodies. Letters corroborating a detainee’s story gives him hope. Letters of love from children gives him hope. Letters that actually reach another human being outside of the walls of the camp give hope. And where there is hope there is the desire to endure, to withstand, to resist. If a detainee feels a connection to the outside world then the military’s schematics of isolation are undermined and rendered defective. The military’s control over the body gives way to an uncontrollable body.

But these weren’t the only means of isolation detainees experienced. Where the military didn’t use solitary confinement, and didn’t cut men off from their families and the outside world,
they used other mechanisms to separate the men from each other. One of the most profound among these strategies, was the invention of a detainee classification system with distinct hierarchies, recognizable markers of class for each classification level, and economic incentives for each classification level.

According to the camp’s Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) the classification system was constructed to provide a “fair and consistent delivery of consequences for negative behavior and rewards for positive behavior.” Essentially it’s a program of rewards, privileges, consequences, and punishment. Although the SOP states that the classification system is “based on the premise that a detainee’s behavior determines the privileges they are allowed,” actually the system performs the inverse function. The privileges determine the detainee’s behavior, insofar as detainees begin to equate their behavior with access to those privileges, which is precisely what the military wants. Like other disciplinary mechanisms at Gitmo, the classification system is a form of behavioral control fashioned to manage and manipulate bodies in accordance with military strategy.

It is no surprise that this classification system was developed and put into place almost immediately after detainees staged their first ever hunger strike in February 2002. In that sense, it can be read as a counter-resistance strategy implemented to negate the first semi-organized mass resistance campaign staged by detainees. By Summer 2005 the classification system had developed into an optimal method of separating detainees, tracking detainees, and stratifying detainees into classifiable bodies in a manner that would also correspond to the larger strategy of sapping resistance from them and making them compliant.

At its most basic the system is a 5-level hierarchical order for categorizing detainees. Level-1 detainees are the most compliant and thus receive the most rewards and privileges. Below them are Level-2 detainees. Below them are Level-3 detainees. And below them are Level-4 detainees. Level-5 detainees are those under sole control of interrogators, who determine where they’d like to place
detainees in the camp and what items the detainee may receive. While levels one through four correspond to detainees’ behavior in the cells and on the blocks, and occasionally behavior in interrogation rooms, Level-5 detainees are manipulated within the classification system for intelligence gathering purposes.

Upon arrival at Guantanamo all detainees enter at Level-3. From there they can advance up a class or down a class depending on their behavior. To be promoted to a higher class requires that a detainee remain at whatever level they are currently located for a period of 30 days with no disciplinary infractions, violations of camp rules and regulations, or failures to comply with guard instructions. In other words, if a detainee performs their compliance convincingly and/or comes to embody compliance completely, then he is rewarded with upward class mobility. However, failure to perform or failure to comply completely results in class stagnation for an indefinite period of time. If the offenses, violations, infractions, or failures are severe enough or frequent enough than detainees will be demoted to a lower class, where they once again have 30 days to improve their behavior.

The distinct levels of classification come with equally distinct items and amenities. All detainees upon arrival are issued what the military calls “basic items.” These include a uniform, underwear, a Koran, flip flops, a blanket, and an thin pad that acts as a mattress for their still beds. These are standard-issued articles regardless of a detainee’s classification level as per Standard Operating Procedures, and they are not subject to confiscation by guards, even though detainees regularly report that even these items are taken away as punishment on occasion. Aside from the basic items the military also issues what they call “comfort items,” which the SOP absolutely allows to be taken away and even outlines strict guidelines for doing so. Comfort items are given or taken away depending on both a detainee’s classification level and his behavior as a classed subject. Level-1 detainees obviously have the most “comfort items” while Level-4 have the fewest, if they have any
at all. Such “comfort items” include: toilet paper, bars of soap, toothbrush, hair comb, prayer beads, prayer cap, shampoo, styrofoam cup, toothpaste, towel, tshirt, washcloth, water bottle, cold bottled water after recreation time. In other words, the sorts of objects that many Americans may take for granted as the basic necessities of day-to-day life are at Gitmo nothing more than privileges that have to be won, where winning equals total compliance with authority.

While the “comfort items” are visual markers that indicate a detainee’s class, both to himself, his fellow detainees, and camp personnel, the military has innovated other status symbols that make class recognition more obvious. Detainees at each classification level are issued different colored uniforms which they are forced to wear. The lowest class, those most noncompliant with military rules and authority, are issued the now-recognizable orange jumpsuits. Although the orange uniform has become synonymous with Guantanamo detainees, since mid-2002 that colored uniform has been reserved only for the lowest class of detainee. Those who are more compliant, Level-2 and Level-3 detainees, are issued tan jumpsuits. The all-white uniform is designated only for Level-1 detainees, who are privileged enough to wear the color associated with purity in Islam.

Of course these color schemes are not neutral choices by the military, nor do they have neutral effects or serve neutral ends. The uniforms, along with the comfort items, are subliminal and not-so-subliminal mechanisms of discipline and control. They don’t just signify a detainee’s status, they act as coercions to compliance. Those who wear orange and have few comfort items are treated by guards and presumably fellow detainees as the lowest of the low, not someone to associate with, especially for a fellow detainee who may be trying to vie for upward class mobility. Those who wear orange are supposed to vie for tan, those who wear tan are supposed to vie for white, those who are already wearing white are trying to retain their class status while maybe even maybe even making it more difficult for those directly below them to reach their superior level, since Level-1 is a very exclusive class. Within the military’s classification, in other words, class is always
something that is supposed to be displayed. The noncompliant body, the lowest of the low, is supposed to either be shamed into submission or compete against others an olympics of compl; inactive and obedience, in conjunction with all the other strategies the military employs to create docile bodies.

Markers of class aren’t just visualized in object and amenities, they are also physically spatialized in the camp’s geography and construction. The physical lay-out of Guantanamo, with it’s particular camps and the particular blocks that exist within each camp, absolutely correspond to the classification system. Level-4 detainees are generally held in Camp 5’s solitary confinement units. Level-3 detainees are generally confined to Camps 2 and 3. Camp 1 is comprised of Level-2 detainees. If the military’s classification system has successfully instituted within the detainee a desire for upward class mobility, then detainees are striving to get to Level-1 status where they can enjoy the all the features and advantages of Camp 4.

Camp 4 is a Guantanamo’s only minimum-security camp, and is designed to hold a limited number of detainees who’ve exhibited supreme compliance. Detainees in Camp 4 live communally in 10-man bays, with absolutely no cells or dividing structures between them, and they sleep on cots. On top of acquiring all of the available “comfort items” they are allowed privileges not afforded to any other class of detainee. They get nearly all-day access to the exercise yards, where they can enjoy ping-pong tables, a soccer field, a volleyball court, and shaded picnic tables, on top of getting more frequent visits from the librarian, electric fans, board games, and a full roll of toilet paper each week, as opposed to detainees in lesser classes who have to request toilet paper from guards when they use the bathroom.¹² (Footnote) Detainees in Camp 4 also get the advantage of eating meals together in their bays. In short, it’s a very communal camp in which detainees regularly get to experience open air and space, enjoying less restraint and isolation than those detainees located elsewhere in Guantanamo.
The incessant spectacle in Camp 4 of unrestrained bodies enjoying recreation and community is a dual-part military strategy in its own right. On the one hand, Camp 4 routinely stands in as the representative model for the rest of Guantanamo during the carefully staged visits from celebrities, congressional delegations, and the media. When visitors to Guantanamo are given a tour they are usually driven by Camp 4 in order to show them how lovely detainees have it, despite the fact that Camp 4 is the exception to the rule at Guantanamo, and different in almost every conceivable way from the rest of the camps where the majority of detainees are held. In this regard, Camp 4 operates as a kind-of “Potemkin village” for outside visitors.

Internally at Guantanamo, the spectacle of unrestrained bodies in Camp 4 is meant to affect detainees. Detainees in camps 1-3 often have clear sightless into Camp 4, so they get to see “how the other half lives” so to speak. They get to see what they are missing out on by not fully complying or being fully disciplined. The recognition of one’s class status reinforces one’s class status and internalizes one’s class status. One of two options are possible from this. Detainees build class resentment, so that they come to vilify those who are ahead of them experiencing greater amenities and a more luxurious way of life. Or they work harder to become more compliant, perform their compliance, and prove their compliance to military authorities. Either of these outcomes works to the military’s advantage. Either they spur detainees to obedience or they cement class divisions and break up solidarity among the men, keeping them from working in unison against military authority.

This last option has to be considered seriously. What the military has done quite intentionally is created a classed society, a society among detainees with a rigid class structure. The system makes them regulate their own bodies as they see other detainees who may have more as they have less, who may live better as they live worse. The classification system isn’t just a way to discipline and control bodies, although it serves that function quite well. Equally important, it
separates and stratifies detainees, encourages them not to cooperate with one another, but rather compete. It assures them that they have no one but to blame for their poor conditions but themselves, or perhaps their fellow detainees who are out-performing them when it comes to compliance and obedience.

Like the military’s other strategies of war against the body, the classification system individuates the body, isolates the body, and keep the body from making connections and becoming plural. This is why the classification is as genius as it is nefarious, and it’s no wonder it was instituted shortly after the camp’s first mass hunger strike in February 2002. Not only would it be a mechanism to subjugate bodies into full compliance with military authority, but it would actually prevent detainees from mobilizing themselves into an organized mass performing collective action. The collectivity and connectivity is what was a credible threat to camp operations.

Yet, against all odds, collectivity and connectivity are exactly what was mobilized in June 2005 when detainees in Camp 5 began a resistance movement with their open-ended hunger strike. They had broken through the isolation and separation to work together, work as one. The connections made between starving bodies didn’t stay stationary either. They traveled. By the second week of July, after Camp 5 detainees began piling their bodies into Guantanamo’s main clinic, detainees throughout Guantanamo began not only spreading news of the hunger strike they started participating in the resistance movement themselves, by going on hunger strike in solidarity.

In the same way that the Camp 5 hunger strike was chronicled by British detainee Omar Deghayes in daily diary entries that later became published, the solidarity hunger strike had its own recorder. Sami al Hajj was a tall, slender, Sudanese citizen with a round face, glasses, and a quiet disposition. He was also a professional journalist with Al Jazeera, captured and detained while on assignment in Afghanistan covering the US invasion like so many others. He’d been holed up in Kandahar in late 2001, occupying a small house and sharing equipment and resources with American
journalists from CNN, who spoke highly of him.¹³ When he and his Al Jazeera team eventually crossed the border into Pakistan to flee the war zone, he was detained by Pakistani Intelligence before being sold to American forces for a bounty, a fate shared by scores of detainees who eventually got hauled off to the cages of Gitmo. Even though detained, he never gave up his practice of journalism, writing down everything he saw and experienced. “I felt that I needed to document this for history,” al Hajj said after his eventual release in 2008, “so that the next generation knows the depth of the crime that was committed.”¹⁴

Al Hajj wrote long letters to his legal team detailing the resistance from his vantage point in Camp 4, the privileged minimum-security camp. According to al Hajj detainees in Camp 4 joined the “food strike” en masse on July 12, 2005, even though a number of detainees in Camps 2 and 3, and some in Camp 1, had already been hunger striking for days. Likewise, detainees in Camp 4’s Whiskey Block had begun hunger striking earlier too, upon news of what was happening up the hill in Camp 5. Eventually all of Camp 4 joined the resistance. When they did, al Hajj noted that the total number of detainees participating in the hunger strike throughout Guantanamo was minimum 190.¹⁵

Although by joining the hunger strike detainees outside of Camp 5 were participating in a generalized resistance against the military, there’s no doubt that each detainees had their own particular reasons for deciding to take collective action. By July 2005 detainees had accrued a laundry list of grievances. Detainees wanted their religion to be respected. They were tired of the military interrupting their prayers, either by making announcements over the camp’s loudspeaker system, or playing the Star Spangled Banner during prayers, or attempting to transport the men while in the act of prayer. Detainees also wanted an end to the desecration of the Koran, which had been mishandled and abused by guards and interrogators in various ways for more than three years.¹⁶ They also demanded better water and food, better medical treatment, the ability to contact their
families and have their mail restrictions revoked, the opportunity for a fair trial with proper legal representation, and an end to solitary confinement.

Perhaps the ultimate motivation for detainees joining the hunger strike, according to Sami al Hajj, was the basic need to stand in solidarity with detainees struggling in Camp 5. Writing to his lawyer he says, “The most important issue to us, immediately, was to close Camp V, more important than any other issue in the camp. The conditions are so bad there.”17 This was a matter of using one’s own body to not just collaborate with another body, but to interfere with the mechanisms of control that attempt to subjugate that body. The rest of the camps’ joining the hunger strike was not a symbolic act to signify to detainees in Camp 5 that there was an army of fellow starving bodies standing behind them and alongside them as they resisted the isolation of Camp 5, even though such symbols alone were no doubt useful and inspiring to detainees in Camp 5 who use the symbol of solidarity to continue their resistance. Their joining the hunger strike actually does more than merely signify, it assists in the process of building detainee power and empowerment, accumulating that power and empowerment to a critical mass and a critical force, one strong enough to actually shutter Camp 5 itself and liberate detainees from the complex of solitary confinement. Solidarity in these circumstances is literally laying one’s body on the line, risking bodily harm, even death, for another. As Sami al Hajj closes in his letter:

*It is not something I look forward to, but I must. We have to stand together on this, more for the prisoners who are being mistreated in Camp V than for anything else. I hope to survive it alive. But please tell my wife and my son that I love them.*18

By working in unison as a collective taking collective action not only successfully resist the strategies of separation and isolation, they completely dismantle the military’s classification system itself. As much as the military may have wanted the class structure to stratify detainees and prevent or discourage them from working together, the detainees were uniting and forming a common front.
Detainees levels 1 through 5 were all participating. Detainees in all camps were participating.

Individual bodies were becoming collective bodies. At the same time that the starving body was wasting away it was also being being called with another kind of sustenance, camaraderie and brotherhood. In fact, detainees who performed hunger strikes together would often refer to each other as “brothers” to signify the kinship developed through common struggle. The military could institute a class system to separate detainees all they wanted, by July 2005 detainees thought the camp recognized that despite their class position they had the same enemy, and the same fight.

What began as a metaphorical dismantling of the classification system through the collective hunger strike and growing resistance movement, gave way to a literal and material dismantling of the class structure. Detainees weren’t going to wait around to see if the military would bend to their demands and abolish the classification system, they were going to do it themselves. In this way, once again, their resistance becomes a bodily intervention and not mere protest.

By late-July detainees throughout Gitmo began relinquishing and rejecting all paraphernalia associated with their class. Detainees who had been awarded tan or white uniforms because of their level of compliance refused to don the class symbol any longer. They stripped down to their underwear and demanded to be given orange colored uniforms instead. In addition, detainees who had accrued a certain amount of comfort items began refusing those as well. Extra bottles of water, bars of soap, books, possessions, whatever they had that separated them from one another, that created immediate hierarchies, were renounced.¹⁹

Detainees in Camp 4 recognizing that their entitlements and their privileged residency were used to coerce their brothers into compliance performed a walk-out on July 17. Sami al Hajj reported that more than 40 Camp 4 hunger strikers decided to transfer themselves back to general population as a further act of solidarity.²⁰ They followed precisely the Standard Operating Procedures for a detainee transfer out of Camp 4. They packed only their basic items, leaving their
awarded comfort items neatly arranged on their bed, and stood patiently outside awaiting the military to enter Camp 4 and transfer them to other camps. But the military refused to transport them, essentially forcing them to remain in Camp 4. The detainees remained outside their bays overnight refusing to budge. Eventually the following afternoon the military begrudgingly removed the men from Camp 4 and dispersed them throughout Camps 2 and 3.

In these various ways detainees actually materialized the social changes they needed in their life, changes that counteracted the military’s strategies of isolation and separation. As opposed to merely demanding the military institute equality among them, detainees enacted the equality themselves. The class system didn’t need to be abolished through a military ordinance, they could do it themselves by refusing to cooperate with its logic. This is how their resistance movement operated. Detainees perform a kind-of activist mathematics by negating a negative and thus producing a positive. And this could only get more profound as the hunger strike and various forms of defiance continued to sweep through the camp. Every day more and more bodies gave themselves to the cause. The military could no longer fail to realize that the bodies they watched emaciating day after day weren’t getting more weak, they were getting more powerful.

The military had no answers for dealing with the detainees’ now full-scale resistance movement. They hadn’t developed a sufficient counter-resistance strategy. It was obvious that the regular mechanisms of control and discipline designed to prevent collective organization and sap resistance from the body hadn’t worked. In fact, those mechanisms had only fanned the flames of resistance.

With no strategy for drawing the hunger strike to a close or quelling the various forms of defiance enacted by detainees, the military could only try to minimize the damage. At the very least they had to hide the spectacle and knowledge of resistant detainee bodies. This was necessary for at least two reasons. First, in order to combat the various critiques against Guantanamo that had been
ongoing for more than three years, the military had to go out of their way to try to convince an international public that detainees received proper care and were not mistreated. That conditions had so deteriorated at the camp that detainees were now starving themselves nearly to death didn’t exactly fit the military’s narrative about how humane the camp was. Second, the resistant bodies of detainees had to be censored, either by hiding or by silence, because it undermined a major component of the military’s strategy, which was to not just have bodies under control but display them as being under control. Gitmo, as a continuation of war by other means, had to present the bodies of detainees as fully conquered, producing not just docile bodies but the exhibition of defeated bodies.

In his book “Selling Guantanamo” John Hickman makes the compelling argument, which I happen to agree with, that the government’s rationale for opening Guantanamo was not to use it as a site for interrogations, or detention, or prosecution, but rather to use it as a site for displaying vanquished boogeymen from one war so that another war could be launched. In other words, in order for the Bush administration to successfully build a case for launching a war in Iraq they had to first present, what Hickman calls, a “spectacle of victory” in Afghanistan, which would also appease Americans looking for the quick satisfaction of vengeance after 9/11.21 Such a spectacle, however, was difficult to come by. Afghanistan’s geographic distance, the inability for reporters to adequately cover the war on the ground, the mujahideen’s minuscule numbers relative to the US military, and their evaporative nature as guerrilla fighters to disappear and remain invisible, all made credible evidence of victory a near impossibility for the United States. To this end, hundreds of bodies were transported from Afghanistan and elsewhere to Guantanamo in order to provide to the world the spectacle of American military might and their ability to vanquish any threat or any body that posed a threat.
We might say that the military are not only interested in being Power, and exercising power, they are very much interested in displaying power. Defeated and docile detainee bodies serve that purpose. But by July 2005 the military no longer had docile bodies on their hands, they had unruly and unmanageable bodies to deal with. The military, however, would do everything in its power to keep those resistant bodies from being seen, or even known about.

The military’s first way of dealing with the escalating resistance movement was with silence. They issued no press releases through American Forces Press Service announcing the hunger strike. They didn’t bother relaying information about the strike to the media. They didn’t send notification to detainees’ lawyers telling them that their clients were in some cases being hospitalized and in serious medical jeopardy on account of a major hunger strike. The military made absolutely no revelations of any kind to the outside world. There was only silence.

It wasn’t for lack of opportunities either. Between June 21, when the hunger strike began in Camp 5, and the hunger strike’s peak at the end of July, there had been a consistent media presence at the base. Even more, there were at least two visits made to Guantanamo by congressional delegations. Yet, despite being the premiere American governing body tasked with oversight and investigation, not a single shred of information about the hunger strike was forthcoming from these elected officials after their visit to Guantanamo. In fact, it seems that the military was keeping the hunger strike under wraps from both the Congress and the media.

The first Congressional visit was made by a 16-person bipartisan delegation of Senators as well as Representatives from the House Armed Services Committee. On June 25 they arrived at Guantanamo followed by a large press corps for a 7-hour “fact-finding mission”. After inspecting the camp not a single congressman mentioned the hunger strike or the possible reasons why detainees would have launched their protest. The opposite. Legislators on both sides of the aisle agreed that conditions at the camp and treatment of detainees had vastly improved. More than a
few Republicans stated that allegations of detainee mistreatment were completely unfounded, based on what they observed during their 7-hour tour of the facilities. Representative Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Texas) told the Associated Press, “What we’ve seen here is evidence that we’ve made progress.”

In an interview on CNN following her tour, Representative Marsha Blackburn (R-Tennessee) went so far as to say that not only had things gotten better at Guantanamo and allegations of detainee mistreatment been totally unfounded, but that there had been no suicides or strikes at Guantanamo. This despite the fact that the military itself was forced to acknowledge only months earlier that scores of suicides had been attempted at the base. This despite the fact that hunger strikes had been widely reported by the media and acknowledged by the military in the three years that Guantanamo had been open. And this despite the fact that detainees in the very facility Marsha Blackburn was visiting, in the very cells and interrogation rooms she had looked in, were hunger striking in an effort to resist the daily mistreatments they experienced. Yet even though the hunger strike was just underway in Camp 5 while elected officials visited the camp there was no acknowledgment that it was happening.

No revelations regarding the hunger strike were offered two weeks later either when an 11-member congressional delegation toured the camp on July 11, to once again independently investigate prison conditions and allegations of detainee mistreatment. Similar to the previous congressional visit, the legislators issued Guantanamo a clean bill of health after a 6-hour tour of the facilities. Evidence of mistreatment were deemed unsubstantiated, and prison conditions were deemed consistent with Geneva Conventions. And again, despite having access to prison facilities, personnel, and military officials, the hunger strike was not acknowledged, even though by July 11 the protest had started consuming the entire camp. Nor is there evidence that the protest was even made known to the legislators and media during the visit. In fact, C-SPAN sent a media crew to follow the delegation and capture what they witnessed. In the hour-long documentary that C-SPAN
made from the trip we see the congressional delegation observing all the facilities and getting debriefed by military officers and guards about nearly every aspect of the camp’s operation and the detainees’ day-to-day experience. Yet at no time is it disclosed that a large proportion of the detainees are currently on hunger strike. In other words, the military officials and personnel who were made available to the legislators, all the way from the camp’s general and top-brass down to the guards who walked the cellblocks, were managing the detainees’ growing protest by concealing it from the outside world, especially those charged specifically with uncovering such things.

It was another group of visitors to Guantanamo, though, that showed the degree to which the White House and Pentagon was willing to go in order to keep up appearances while keeping the detainees’ ongoing hunger strike both silent and invisible. According to the New York Times, in June and July, during the very height of the growing resistance movement, the Bush administration flew a number of retired military officers to Guantanamo on a private jet normally reserved for Vice President Cheney. They were tasked by the Department of Defense with serving as authoritative “military analysts” for major media outlets. But there was nothing objective about the kind of analysis they would provide for the media. In fact, the objective was specifically to generate favorable news coverage about Guantanamo.

Now de-classified emails reveal that the Pentagon referred to this team of military analysts as “surrogates” and “message force multipliers”. That is, by echoing the Pentagon’s talking points, but disguising them as their own opinions, they would give those talking points more weight and more airtime. The New York Times, in the Pulitzer-Prize winning investigative piece that brought the Pentagon’s “military analyst” program to light, referred to the operation as a “media Trojan horse — an instrument intended to shape terrorism coverage from inside the major TV and radio networks.” Another term for it would simply be propaganda.
On June 24, as the hunger strike was beginning to spread in Camp 5, ten military analysts arrived at Guantanamo for a guided tour where they would then take to the airwaves to share their evaluation of camp operations. Like the congressional delegations, they were afforded very little time with which to make their survey. According to their itinerary they spent less than four hours total at the actual facility - 90 minutes at Camp Delta viewing the medical station, an unoccupied cell block, and an interrogation, 35 minutes at the now-dilapidated Camp X-Ray, 10 minutes viewing Camp 5, then an hour-long lunch with troops. This hardly seems enough time “inspecting” the camp to warrant some of the claims they went on to make. Also, similar to the congressional delegations, they gave a positive report based on what the military allowed them to see. More insidious, though, is that the Pentagon had already shaped what they would say.

Consider this example from Col. Jack Jacobs appearing as MSNBC’s military analyst, here describing Guantanamo’s Camp 5:

*It’s the state of the art facility. The cells are very, very good indeed. The detainees have the capability to talk to other detainees and inmates. They can do things like play checkers with them and so on, even in the higher security blocks. It’s a very nice facility, to be honest with you. If you’ve got to be in prison, it’s not a bad place to be.*

Not only is his “analysis” straight from the Pentagon’s official press release about Camp 5, but this “nice place to be” is the exact place where detainees had vowed to starve themselves for the exact reason that Camp 5 is the worst place to be. Even more, it’s a facility where detainees are denied precisely the things that Col. Jacobs is celebrating - their ability to talk to one another, interact with one another, have recreation time together. Camp 5 is designated as Guantanamo’s dedicated solitary confinement facility, but he’s portraying it for a national audience as some kind of luxurious communal space that should be celebrated. Needless to say, Col. Jacobs’ messaging on MSNBC and other news outlets was, according to internal emails, considered by the Pentagon to be one of the “Highlights” of the military analyst operation. But that could hardly come as a surprise given that
Col. Jacobs was one of the retired military officers who often participated in the Pentagon’s media strategy sessions, where messaging and talking points were workshopped.33

The Pentagon was quite pleased with the operation. The military analysts’ tour of Guantanamo successfully generated handfuls of interviews, op-eds, television appearances, and soundbites, which is exactly as they had hoped for. As one of the Pentagon’s directors of the program wrote to the military analysts just prior to their departure, “Thank you for all that you all continue to do to spread the word about the great deeds and sacrifices of our men and women in uniform.”34 Furthermore, the Pentagon was not only interested in the amount of “news” the analysts could generate, they were interested in the kind of message they provided. To that end, they considered the tour to Guantanamo successful as well. Analyzing the overall coverage produced by the analysts, the Pentagon noted, “Themes were consistent with last week’s topics.”35 In other words, the analysts successfully repeated the main messages that had been worked out by the Pentagon in earlier media strategy sessions.

There’s no indication that any of these military analysts were made aware of the protest occurring at Guantanamo during their tour. And if they were aware, they certainly didn’t bother passing along that information to the outside world or let it inform their perceptions and “reporting” about the camp and the treatment of prisoners there. But of course, a propaganda machine this streamlined hardly had room for variation. In fact, The New York Times reported that in order to make sure that Pentagon’s military analysts didn’t stray too far from the script, they paid the private firm Omnitech Solutions hundreds of thousands of dollars to systematically monitor what analysts wrote in publications or said in their tv or radio appearances. Such meticulous watchdogging not only ensured that the analysts provide the “correct” talking points, it forced them to comply to the Pentagon’s predetermined script even if they knew the intelligence was untrue or unfounded. Which is to say, presuming the military analysts did find faults at Guantanamo or did
catch wind of the hunger strike during their tour of the facilities, they would be hard-pressed to make note of it for fear of reprisal from the Pentagon, which might jeopardize their access or their career or both, a fear many of the military analysts later confessed to.36

Bolstering the Pentagon’s military analyst propaganda machine was their all-out PR blitz both during and directly before detainees launched their hunger strike. In a head-spinning reversal of past practices the Pentagon all of a sudden began making rare disclosures about Guantanamo in attempts to show that they were operating a model facility with humane treatment for prisoners. They released figures showing that they spent $2.5 million a year to provide meals that were culturally appropriate for the Muslim diet.37 This amounted to $12.68/day per prisoner, which they boasted was significantly more than was being spent on prisoners in U.S. penitentiaries. The Pentagon also revealed plans to build a new, state-of-the-art, brick and mortar prison complex at Guantanamo (Camp 6) for the cost of $30 million. This would replace the quickly-rotting shipping containers that were currently in use (Camps 1-3). The new complex, like Camp 5, would decrease the number of troops required to guard the prisoners and assure critics that the Bush administration was doing everything possible to create humane conditions.38 Along these lines, on the 4th of July military officials at Guantanamo announced that they had instituted a new pilot-program to assist detainees. They were offering educational courses for compliant detainees, including literacy classes in various languages and mathematics.39 (Rosenberg, 7-4).

The military’s PR campaign to cover over the detainee hunger strike didn’t work in the end. The imposed silence was broken when on July 20, 2005 two Afghan detainees recently released from Guantanamo gave a press conference in Kabul upon their arrival home. Habir Russol and Moheb Ullah Borekzai revealed for the first time to the outside world that a weeks-long hunger strike was consuming the camp. Although they admitted they had not participated themselves, they estimated 180 detainees were striking to protest routine mistreatment and lack of legal justice.40 Borekzai
would also confirm that the Koran was mistreated on a number of occasions by guards and interrogators who would throw their holy book to the ground.\textsuperscript{41} The Afghan detainees had successfully blown the lid off the military’s secret. As news of the hunger strike began being picked up by all the major news outlets, who hounded camp officials for specifics, the military was forced to concede that they could no longer make invisible the resistant bodies of detainees hunger striking and performing acts of defiance.

They tried, though. The military attempted multiple methods of denial and misdirection to undermine and delegitimize the detainees’ hunger strike. Initially, once Borekzai and Russol informed the press, the military denied any knowledge of the hunger. Pentagon spokesman Navy Lt. Cmdr. Flex Plexico told the Associated Press that they were unaware that a hunger strike had broken out at the camp, which seems more than a little disingenuous given that the resistance movement was close to a month old at that point and it involved anywhere from a third to half of the detainees at the camp.\textsuperscript{42}

Once the military was forced to concede that detainees were hunger striking, because they could no longer credibly deny it, they attempted to minimize the resistance. Camp commanders assured the press that the hunger strike wasn’t a widespread phenomenon and that at most only 52 detainees were participating. Furthermore, they added that it was only “a temporary effort” by “some” detainees and therefore wasn’t that serious.\textsuperscript{43} Rather than admit that the weeks-long resistance had won popular support among detainees and had already exhibited the power to completely derail camp operations and military strategy, camp officials tried to spin the event to the press as nothing more than a passing outburst by a few rogue elements that would quickly blow over.

At the same time, camp officials tried to redirect the narrative and shift blame away from themselves. In what would become a recurring theme and endless talking point for the military
anytime hunger strikes occurred, camp officials attributed detainee resistance to indefinite detention. Hunger strikes were a way for detainees to “protest their continued detention”, they said. In other words, their resistance had nothing to do with camp conditions, like the draconian use of solitary confinement, or an oppressive class system, or disgusting food and water, or lack of recreation and physical exercise, or any number of the aspects of detainees’ conditions of confinement that bordered on, if not met the exact criteria for, cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment. Neither, suggested the military, did the detainees’ hunger strike have anything to do with their mistreatment, like being brutalized by Gitmo’s riot squad when detainees refused to obey a command or rule, or being punished with solitary confinement for misbehavior, or being humiliated, or having their religion disrespected, or enduring harsh interrogation methods that bordered on, if not met the exact criteria for, Torture. In short, the military wanted to make it seem as if detainee resistance had nothing to do with anything the military was or was not doing, it had everything to do with what lawmakers, and the president, and the courts, were or weren’t doing. None of the camp commanders or military personnel at Gitmo could really do anything about indefinite detention. They couldn’t say how long a detainee would be at Gitmo for. That was above their pay grade, and they used this to their advantage. They used it to shift blame and focus elsewhere.

The final effort was to delegitimize the hunger strike itself, while reframing it in a way that actually helped the military’s strategy of continuing to pursue their war on bodies that needed to be punished, disciplined, and controlled. Camp officials would tell anyone who would listen that hunger strikes were a strategy taken right from the Al Qaeda handbook. By this they meant that hunger strikes were mentioned in “The Manchester Manual,” a document discovered in 2000 inside a Manchester home of an alleged Al Qaeda member, after British police raided the house. According to American military and FBI, the document is an official Al Qaeda manual for waging war. While the manual lays out military tactics for recruiting members, remaining in hiding, and
waging war, there also exists a section dedicated to how one should conduct himself if captured and imprisoned. Point number 7 of Lesson 18 in the Manchester Manual does mention hunger strikes, but it states only: “It is possible to resort to a hunger strike, but it is a tactic that can either succeed or fail.” That’s all it says. For Guantanamo officials to use this this quote as verification that detainees had taken their inspiration for their hunger strike from this manual, and that therefore they were Al Qaeda, simply doesn’t stand to reason. In fact, it is a failure of reason that doesn’t pass the smell test. The act of hunger striking isn’t proof that one is a member of Al Qaeda, anymore than hunger striking means that one is in league with the Irish Republican Army, or British suffragettes, or Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress. Obviously camp officials didn’t take into consideration that hunger striking had been used by American soldiers too, as when Lt. Col. Ronald Storz and the ten other American POW’s used the tactic to resist prison torture in Vietnam’s Hanoi Hilton during the late 1960s. Al Qaeda is not the sole proprietor of hunger striking as a resistance tactic within prisons. Yet, here were decorated military officials using the detainees’ hunger strike as proof that they were in fact terrorists, enemy combatants, and Al Qaeda members. Such flawed logic signaled that the military was truly at the end of their rope when it came to controlling the detainees’ growing resistance movement.

It was late July and the detainees’ resistance movement had arrived at critical moment. For more than a month detainees they’d used their bodies to resist. For more than a month they’d refused to comply with their captors and interrogators. For more than a month they’d collapsed, blacked out, fainted in exhaustion from starvation. For more than a month they’d pushed the medical facilities past capacity. For more than a month they’d built a movement that had the capacity to make the military’s strategy buckle under the force of their collective action. And now that the secrecy of the hunger strike had been punctured, the military was forced to deal simultaneously with the internal pressure applied by starving detainees and the external pressure
applied by a hungry media. Everything was forcing the military to bend. So, in the waning days of July, Guantanamo officials decided on a new strategy, one they had never tried because they’d never been forced to. That new strategy was negotiation.

According to The New York Times Magazine’s investigative piece written by Tim Golden about the Summer 2005 negotiation process, it was Col. Michael Bumgarner, commanding officer of Gitmo’s detention operations, who decided to negotiate with detainees over their demands in order to quell the hunger strike and restore order.47 That Col. Bumgarner was a new officer at Guantanamo, having been transferred to the camp only three months prior, might explain why he was willing to try something more novel than the military’s “tried and true” practice of disciplining and punishing. That he also had experience operating a prison, serving as a military police officer for two decades, and teaching courses on corrections at a Military Police school, might also go to explain why he was willing to go out on a limb and try and attempt negotiations.48 And going out on a limb is exactly what it was, because there is every indication that his strategy to end the hunger strike didn’t have the full support of his fellow officers or Guantanamo’s chief commander Maj. Gen. Hood.

The name of the game was strategic influence. Bumgarner had that. At an intimidating 6’2” and 250 pounds, the 45-year old former football star from North Carolina commanded attention and respect everywhere he went.49 That he held the rank of “Colonel” only swelled his stature. But if Bumgarner was going to draw the hunger strike to a close he needed to find among the detainees an equally towering figure, someone who not only held leverage in the camp but someone who might match his mathematics of magnetism. And Bumgarner was in luck. Such a man existed among the detainees at Guantanamo. His name was Shaker Aamer, the one they called “The Professor.”

Aamer, a British resident captured in Afghanistan by the Northern Alliance whilst working at a Muslim charity, was among the first detainees to arrive at Guantanamo. His cutting intelligence
and eloquent command of language and reasoning are what earned him the title “The Professor.”
At 5’11” and 200-plus pounds he also had a genuinely formidable presence, a quality that didn’t diminish when his frequent hunger strikes caused him to sometimes lose more than a quarter of his weight. And while these characteristics alone made him a well-suited to negotiate on behalf of the detainee population, it was his huge heart and undying advocacy that made him the perfect detainee representative.

Shaker Aamer was “born to be a leader,” said former Bahraini detainee Abdullah al-Noaimi, who spent time housed on the same block as Shaker Aamer. By all accounts, this wasn’t an exaggeration, and many detainees agreed. Aamer acted as a leader for many of the detainees, and they treated him accordingly. He organized every block he was ever housed in, disciplining his fellow detainees in the art of resistance and acting as a cohesive unit. He would break the 48-cell blocks into four units of 12 prisoners, with each unit having a representative. When so much of Guantanamo was trying to make the men feel alone and isolated, Aamer had tried to teach his brothers how to self-govern, stay disciplined, feel that they were part of a whole. His organizing wasn’t a mere exercise either, or a way to pass the time, it served the function of preparing them to take a united stand. Sometimes that united stand was resistance for the sake of resistance, as when he organized his camp to refuse their routine medical weigh-ins, an exercise with no utilitarian point other than to express uniform noncompliance as a cohesive group, which was always an extraordinary feat in a place like Guantanamo.

His influence, activism, and organizing skills were unique at Gitmo. As former detainee Omar Deghayes stated, “He was always forward, he would translate for people, he'd fight for them, and if he had any problems in the block he'd shout at the guards... until he would get you your rights.” His role as chief advocate, though, often put him in a precarious position, opening him up to frequent punishment by the military on account of his influence and leadership. According to
Omar Deghayes that’s why after more than twelve years in detention Aamer is still locked away in Guantanamo despite being cleared for release by both the Bush and Obama administration, “because he's very outspoken, a very intelligent person, somebody who would fight for somebody else's rights.”

It seems the military, for their part, wouldn’t disagree with that assertion either. According to his Detainee Assessment Brief, the military believes he has the ability to “summon support from over one half of Camp Delta’s detainee population” for any particular cause, which is why he has been designated a “High Level Threat.” That “threat” has not dissipated in his now more than twelve years locked away in Guantanamo, as his reputation and influence among detainees is reportedly still high enough to encourage detainees even now to continue hunger striking.

In the waning days of July 2005 Col. Bumgarner decided to use the “threat” of Shaker Aamer to his own advantage, by bringing the camp-wide hunger strike to a close. When Bumgarner arrived at Aamer’s cell to discuss working together and hammering out a compromise Aamer had already been on hunger strike for more than a month. His body was weakening even if his resolve to continue the protest was strengthening. But accounts from both Aamer and Bumgarner say that after multiple in-person sessions of conversation, Aamer began to feel that Bumgarner was a person he could trust to make the requisite changes to improve conditions and bring Guantanamo more in line with the principles of the Geneva Convention. While it’s safe to presume that Aamer didn’t believe Bumgarner could single-handedly reverse course or free the detainees, it seems he had faith enough to believe that Bumgarner would be responsive to detainee input and make the camp at the very least more hospitable than it was currently.

On July 26, 2005 after a month without food, Shaker Aamer ended his hunger strike. He did so in exchange for being moved from the duldrums of Camp Echo to the detainee clinic. There he would not only receive medical attention for his deteriorating body, but he’d also begin his new
duty, convincing detainees to put their hunger strike on pause while the military made improvements. Aamer’s new role as chief negotiator began with the detainees who had been hospitalized, presumably the most hardcore among the hunger strikers since they’d allowed themselves slip close enough to the edge of critical self-harm to warrant medical treatment.

According to Aamer’s lawyer, Clive Stafford Smith, he was unsuccessful in persuading the hospitalized detainees to end the strike.\(^5\) They rejected the “assurances” the military offered, as they had nothing to base them on other than three years of ill-treatment and deceit in one form or another. They were tired of words. They were tired of talk. They were tired of promises. They were tired of assurances. What had it gotten them thus far? Even if they had wanted to believe, the memory of Gitmo is long, and the portrait is larger than most can see. For those who had endured more than 1000 days in the custody of US forces, the military’s promises didn’t hold much weight, even if their assurances were being backed up by the great Shaker Aamer.

Detainees needed concrete proof. They had spent years waiting on people to uphold their word, waiting for promises to hold true, waiting for words to give way to action. The fact that words and promises never gave way to action is probably what led them to start the hunger strike in the first place. If no one would take action on their behalf then they’d action themselves. Conditions and treatment weren’t going to magically improve just because they wanted them to. The military wasn’t going to have a change of heart and abandon their war on, against, and through the body. That’s not how power operates. After three years of enduring a war on their bodies it’s safe to say that most detainees had come to realize this. They say Power concedes nothing without a demand. But the truth is that Power concedes nothing, demand or no demand, anything it concedes in one area is only used to bolster more power in another area. Power simply had to be undermined, challenged, and resisted, in any way possible, for as long as possible.
Maybe some detainees knew this instinctively, because a number of them reportedly didn’t want to give up the hunger strike. They wanted to continue resisting. These determined hunger strikers had come a long way in their campaign. The fact that their determination forced the military to bend only meant that the strike should continue, for if the military could bend perhaps it could break. So, try as he might, Aamer was unable to persuade a number of hunger strikers to suspend their resistance, even if momentarily. In fact, according to Clive Stafford Smith, who represented numerous detainees at Gitmo, the hospitalized hunger strikers not only didn’t suspend their hunger strike they actually doubled-down on the militancy of their struggle by refusing medical treatment and pulling IVs out of their arms.54 Having been unsuccessful in the hospital, Aamer next visited Camp 5. There Aamer would hopefully have more luck convincing detainees to give up the hunger strike. As the site where the resistance began Camp 5 was a strategic location for drawing the protest to a close. Given that detainees in Camp Delta went on hunger strike in solidarity with their brothers in Camp 5, it stood to reason that if they halted the strike that maybe the rest of Guantanamo follow.

Aamer spent the evening traveling to each cellblock in Camp 5 speaking to detainees he had determined could be key players in the temporary truce. As someone who’d spent three years paying close attention to camp dynamics, and had spent many man-hours organizing detainees for numerous actions in various camps and blocks, Aamer knew exactly who he needed to speak to, and he knew exactly how to frame the proposed truce. Around Camp 5 Aamer went, bending down in front of the cells of a few influential detainees, speaking to them through their food-tray slots in the iron door. When Aamer finally convinced Saber Lahmar, an Algerian Islamic scholar arrested in Bosnia, and Ghassan al-Sharbi, a Saudi national, he knew his work was done in Camp 5. And he was right. As the word went out throughout Camp 5 that night, detainees agreed to press pause on
the protest to see if the military would indeed hold up their end of the bargain. By the next morning, Wednesday July 27, the hunger strike in Camp 5 had ceased.

On that next day, Col. Bumgarner escorted Aamer to all the other camps. Although given Aamer’s reputation it probably appeared to the detainees that it was Shaker who was escorting Bumgarner around the other camps. That the military had agreed to allow Aamer to be merely handcuffed rather than fully restrained only boosted his stature. As he went from camp to camp he was met with cheers and applause. According to Bumgarner, Aamer was “treated like a rock star.”

Shaker proposed to detainees in the other camps that they end their hunger strike just as their brothers in Camp 5 had agreed to do. In exchange, he told them, the military and Bumgarner specifically would see it to it that Guantanamo be brought in line with the Geneva Conventions and that any grievances regarding treatment or camp conditions would be resolved within a matter of weeks. Detainees in Camps 1, 2, and 3, having heard the argument and the plan of action laid out by Aamer agreed to begin eating again, but like the other detainees who consented to end the protest, they remained skeptical of the military’s ability or even desire to deliver on its promises.

Aamer then visited Camp 4, the privileged minimum-security camp that many detainees had abandoned as an act of solidarity. There Aamer spoke with Mullah Zaeef, a former Taliban ambassador. Aamer and Zaeef had been former neighbors in Camp 1 and built a certain level of rapport. Aamer spoke to Zaeef of improved conditions at the camp as well as his newly proposed idea of forming a prisoners’ committee made up of designated detainee representatives. This “Prisoners Council” would create a sustainable infrastructure among the detainees for handling grievances and seeking a redress of action. Even though the union Aamer was trying to hypothesize and articulate was guaranteed as an absolute right given to POWs under the Geneva Convention, it had never been a viable option for detainees because their military handlers did everything to break up unity and cohesion among them. Now that the hunger strike had started to buckle many of the
military’s pillars of control, it also created the conditions of possibility for something like a Prisoners Council. Needless to say, Mullah Zaeef agreed that winning these kinds of concessions would be worth ending the hunger strike over. Camp 4, like all the other camps, agreed to halt the hunger strike. And Camp 4 detainees, like detainees elsewhere, remained skeptical of whether a truce on their end would result in improvements at Guantanamo. According to Zaeef and Aamer, that was part of the risk inherent in quitting the protest. As Zaeef noted, “We thought maybe they [the military] were becoming softer in their policies. Or we thought maybe they were trying to trick us. But we thought that we should see which one it was.”

By the evening of July 28, thanks to two days of Shaker Aamer hustling around the camp conducting shuttle diplomacy, most hunger strikers agreed to take a collective pause to see if the military would hold up their end of the bargain. According to Col. Bumgarner it would become known as the “Period of Peace”. Detainees agreed to be compliant with the military during this phase of arbitration, which meant no physical altercations with guards, no throwing their now infamous bodily fluid “cocktails” at guards, and generally obeying camp rules and procedures. Yet, even though detainees agreed to the terms, there was also the implicit understanding among all parties that if conditions didn’t improve that detainees would return to hunger striking.

Col. Bumgarner and the military decided to deal first with the issues that were easiest to reconcile. That meant first and foremost dealing with the food and water situation, which detainees in all parts of the camp had voiced was substandard at best, repulsive at worst. The military responded by guaranteeing detainees three bottles of water per day, so that they didn’t have to rely solely on the filthy water that streamed from the rusty taps inside their cells. Detainees would also be given hot sauce with their meals to ensure that their food had at least some kind of flavor. The military also agreed to provide better meals overall, food with actual taste, not just food that was “culturally appropriate.” In fact, according to Bumgarner and other officials at the camp, input from
detainees about diet and weekly meal plans became the foundation for what the military ultimately instituted as the new standardized meal plans. Small victory, certainly, but the fact that these men were denied the basic creature comforts of access to decent food, meant that any improvements were major improvements.

Small victories also carried a weight of significance so heavy that it was practically immeasurable. Take British detainee Omar Deghayes. On July 29, after the military agreed to revise the classification system and bring all detainees back to Level-1 status, Deghayes said he received a comb for the first time since April 2002. For 39 months he had gone without the ability to comb his hair. For 39 months he had gone without the ability to comb his beard. For 39 months he had gone without the ability to conduct that most basic human function, personal care. The hunger strike had won Deghayes at least a shred of human dignity. And after 39 months of having shreds of his dignity stripped away from his body, his mind, and his soul, putting a comb through the snarls in his matted hair meant getting back shreds of himself he may have thought were lost and gone forever.

The military’s other early concessions must have been received similarly. For instance, Col. Bumgarner issued a new order to his guards to stop referring to the detainees as “packages” when they were transferred to and from their cells. It was a basic recognition that the men weren’t objects, but human beings. The military also provided the detainees clocks on the walls outside of their cells so that at the very least they would know the time, an important fact given that much of the torture techniques used by interrogators in the past had been temporal disorientation, having them moved at all hours of the day, never keeping a consistent circadian rhythm. The military also pledged to stop transferring detainees between the hours of 11pm–5am, allowing detainees more of an opportunity to actually get some sleep, thus essentially shutting down the informal “frequent flier” program that had been utilized by guards and interrogators for years to induce sleep deprivation in
the men. Similarly, where lights had remained on in cells 24 hours a day, Col. Bumgarner ordered that now only one dim light would be turned on during the hours of 11pm-5am. The resistance movement had forced the military to renounce some of the methods used to control their bodies - light, time, sleep.

Perhaps the most significant policy improvement the military made, was the assurance that respect for the Koran and religious rites would be recognized and implemented. Of course detainees had been given a number of assurances over the years that their religion would be respected. Every time it wasn’t respected, however, the detainees were given an apology and assurance that there wouldn’t be a “next time”… until the next time. So for detainees, such assurances were an old song and dance that they had no reason to trust. This time, however, Col. Bumgarner instituted a number of concrete resolutions that would go towards safeguarding the detainees’ ability to engage in their religious practice without disturbance or violation. The military implemented the use of brightly colored traffic cones placed on each block during prayer time, which acted as a kind-of “do not disturb” sign for the guards. In another attempt to keep the detainees’ prayer time from being interrupted, the military also agreed to cease playing the “Star Spangled Banner” near prayer time. The song, assured the military, would only be played over the camp’s speaker system no more than three minutes before the detainees’ call to prayer. Similarly, the loud and large industrial fans that were stationed on each block in every camp were to be turned off during prayer time. Col. Bumgarner did his best to turn words into deeds, to prove that the military intended to uphold its end of the bargain.

Not everyone at Guantanamo, however, liked what Bumgarner was doing. Bumgarner later told the New York Times that the new provisions and privileges he was awarding detainees totally infuriated interrogators and staff working with the Joint Intelligence Group. Interrogators believed they were the ones to control all aspects of detention, since detainees’ detention conditions and
treatment were linked to their level of cooperation with interrogators. In other words, concessions to detainees, even to quell the hunger strike, undermined interrogation efforts and the authority of interrogators. Of course this only reinforced the notion that detainees were to be treated according to the bare standards of human decency.

The concession that was the most controversial from the military’s point of view was Col. Bumgarner allowing Shaker Aamer to create a Prisoners Council among the detainees. This was something normally guaranteed to Prisoners of War under the Geneva Conventions, but the Bush Administration and the Pentagon had already determined that they were going to pick and choose what parts of the Geneva Convention they wanted to implement, and until the hunger strike a Prisoners Council was never even an option on the table. And it wasn’t as if the Geneva Conventions’ language on the matter was obscure and open to interpretation. It was rather straightforward. Article 79 of the Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War states quite clearly, “In all places there are prisoners of war…the prisoners shall freely elect by secret ballot…prisoners’ representatives entrusted with representing them before the military authorities.” Article 80 states, “Prisoners’ representatives shall further the physical, spiritual and intellectual well-being of prisoners of war.” And Article 81 states, “Prisoners’ representatives shall be permitted to visit premises where prisoners of war are detained, and every prisoner of war shall have the right to consult freely his prisoners’ representative.” In short the Geneva Conventions Articles 79-81 allow for the selection of prisoner representatives, for those representatives to meet openly, and for those representatives to serve the overall well-being of the prison population by representing them and presenting their concerns to the detaining authority. Allowing for the creation of a Guantanamo prisoners council was the most substantial step the military had taken thus far in, if not upholding the literal letter of the law, at least upholding “the spirit of the Geneva Conventions”, which they had promised to do in January 2002 when the camp was opened but had
thus far failed to do in any number of ways. And while the detainees had every right to complain
that such a council hadn’t been implemented sooner, they were nonetheless going to take advantage
of the opportunity they had now to establish one.

The system devised by Shaker Aamer in consultation with other detainees was relatively
uncomplicated. Each camp would have a designated representative who would serve as their
primary spokesman. These six chosen members would then serve as the primary body responsible
for addressing, negotiating, and rectifying detainee grievances. These primary representatives were
bolstered by a designated team who worked below them, which was comprised of a detainee
representative from each block in each camp. Block representatives would gather grievances and
brainstorm possible demands, then present them at a collective meeting for all block representatives
in the camp. These would then be given to the Camp-level designates who would meet with others
on the council at the negotiating table, presuming the process got that far. The council the prisoners
had constructed was a basic vertical-style representative Democracy. It was rudimentary, it was
practical, it was easy to understand, and it was more or less in keeping with the spirit of the Geneva
Conventions. More importantly, however, was the fact that this newly constituted Prisoners Council
provided the detainees an opportunity to act collectively and have violations and grievances handled
collectively. Until now the only collective response available to them was through direct action in
hunger strike. What they’d done with the Prisoners Council was to form the infrastructure for
something that resembled a union of sorts, a union that would ensure collective response and
collective action to problems that arose within the camp, without having to resort to wasting their
bodies away in starvation.

The Guantanamo Prisoners Council was made up of six highly-respected leaders among the
detainees. The first among them was Shaker Aamer, the man responsible for making the Prisoners
Council a reality. Next was Saber Lahmar and Ghassan al-Sharbi, the two prominent detainees
Aamer spoke with in Camp 5. Also among the Council was Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef from Camp 4. The other two council members were Ala Muhammad Salim, an Egyptian detainee who served as a well-respected religious leader among the men, and Adel Ali Fattough al-Gazzar, an Egyptian humanitarian aid worker with the Saudi Red Crescent who was among the first detainees to receive an amputation upon arrival at Guantanamo. These six men were saddled with the incredible task of making Guantanamo a hospitable place and ensuring detainee treatment was humane. After more than three years it was apparent that no one else was going to make these things a reality, not their lawyers, not human rights organizations, not the International Committee of the Red Cross, not the U.S. Congress, and certainly not the Bush White House. They were going to win their own respect, they were going to chip away at the military’s power using the only people who they could rely on - themselves.

The first meeting of the Prisoners Council took place on August 4, 2005. The six detainee representatives gathered in the exercise yard at Camp 1, a place familiar to each of the men since they had all been among the first detainees transferred from Camp X-Ray to Camp 1 during the early months of Guantanamo’s opening. Seated around two picnic tables the six men exchanged information among themselves about the goings-on of each camp. Eventually the Council addressed military officers who joined them in the meeting. Noticeably absent, however, was Col. Bumgarner. One by one the Council relayed to the officers how conditions could be improved, and what adjustments needed to be made in terms of treatment. Some of the men reportedly went on to demand more than mere improvements to their detention situation, insisting too that they needed the opportunity to appear in a legitimate court and have their cases reviewed and tried. Of course the military never tired of letting everyone know that such issues were out of their hands, and that there was nothing they could do about detainees’ legal limbo. But of course the detainees were not ignorant about their politico-legal situation either. After three years of imprisonment under U.S.
control at Guantanamo, it’s safe to say they had a pretty good understanding of Power — how it functioned, where it emanated, and how it circulated. They knew the military could not by itself change their legal status or give them trials in the American court system, but they also knew that their military captors had access to the lawmakers who could make fair trials a reality, at least more access to them than the detainees ever could ever have. So while it was certainly important for the Council to address the core issues of their conditions of imprisonment, it was also important that ensuring their humane treatment didn’t come at the cost of ignoring their legal status.

Hisham Sliti was a small man who didn’t pose much of a physical threat, but was nonetheless a handful for his military captors. According to the military’s Detainee Assessment Brief, his overall behavior had been non-compliant and hostile to the guard force and staff,” and by 2008 had chalked up 388 reported disciplinary infractions for his noncompliance. On the morning of August 5, Sliti gave a whole lot of resistance to guards as they attempted to bring him to an impromptu interrogation. Sliti pleaded with the guards not to be moved, contending that the interrogator who wanted to suddenly question him was not his regular interrogator. Sliti was correct, the lead interrogator seeking to question him that day was a civilian contractor working either for the CIA or other unknown government agency, a man the detainees took to calling “King Kong” on account of his size, attitude, and demeanor during interrogations. Not wanting anything to do with “King Kong,” Sliti refused to leave his cell in Camp 5. Eventually he was convinced by one of Camp 5’s Prisoners Council representatives, either Saber Lahmar or Ghassan al-Sharbi, to attend his interrogation session but simply not say anything to his interrogator. In other words, Sliti was advised to perform his noncompliance, but in a manner that wouldn’t force a confrontation with the military, who were being especially careful not to cause a disturbance that would jeopardize the “Period of Peace”. And with that the guards ushered Sliti to the interrogation room to meet “King Kong”, who was accompanied by an interpreter and an FBI agent.
The events that transpired next became the matter of some folklore at the camp, and gave way to no less than ten different sworn testimonies from FBI agents, Gitmo interrogators, and detainees.\textsuperscript{71} \textsuperscript{72} \textsuperscript{73} It seems that Hisham Sliti upon being seated at the table in the interrogation room began to further express his dissatisfaction with the choice of interrogator. In spite of, or maybe even because of, the fact that he was handcuffed around the wrists, chained at the waist, and chained to the bolt in floor by his ankle chains, Sliti became physically agitated and verbally belligerent, shouting at the interrogation team that he was unwilling to cooperate. At some point during the ensuing argument with “King Kong” over his refusal to cooperate, Sliti somehow managed to kick the leg of the table, sending it in the direction of the interrogation team. “King Kong” then pushed the table aside and a yelling match erupted between all parties, with Sliti standing up and spitting multiple times at his interrogators. “King Kong” responded by picking up a chair and throwing it at Sliti, striking him in the face. He followed this by shoving an unplugged mini-fridge at Sliti, hitting him with it as well. One of Gitmo’s Emergency Reaction Force team members burst into the room and immediately subdued Sliti, who was already lying on the floor. After a guard and medic treated a large gash over Hisham Sliti’s eye, they escorted him back to his cell, but not before removing every single item in the cell as punishment for the altercation.

While it seems that there is some dispute between Sliti and the military over the order of events, who initiated the altercation, and what kind of justification or intention lay behind King Kong’s use of force, neither party denies that Hisham Sliti was struck by a flying chair and mini-fridge, and was dragged out of his interrogation bloodied and bashed. In the end the details didn’t matter, because the result was the same. The so-called “Period of Peace” was thrown to the wind the moment an interrogator, notorious for his roughness, decided to throw furniture at a detainee. News that Hisham Sliti had been accosted immediately traveled from one camp to the next. In a matter of hours the entire detainee population was incensed. For many, the negotiations the
The severity of detainees’ discontent over Sliti’s beating may be why Col. Bumgarner decided to attend the Prisoners Council meeting the next day, August 6. Having just had his strategy for resolving the hunger strike almost completely undermined by interrogators, Bumgarner went out of his way to appease the council representatives. “You’ve got my attention,” he told them, “tell me what the grievances are, and we’ll work through them.” Shaker Aamer immediately insisted that if the military wanted to treat the council as leaders and as equals during negotiations that their handcuffs and chains needed to be removed. Bumgarner complied with the demand and the council’s restraints were removed. By all accounts the remainder of the meeting went well, with both sides relatively satisfied. Bumgarner, again eager to please on account of the prospects of Hisham Sliti’s beating triggering another uprising, promised multiple improvements. He promised to acquire and circulate more religious books, aside from the Koran, in the prison library. He agreed to ensure that the food continued to remain adequate, and that their religion continued to be respected. Col. Bumgarner also finally pledged to have a government official come to Guantanamo to speak with detainees about their legal status and their future.

While the Prison Council representatives may have felt somewhat satisfied with the relative progress of negotiations, a significant number of detainees were disillusioned by the military’s failure to keep its promise of peace. They resolved to take action themselves and forego waiting on a negotiation process that they felt was always bound to be undermined and delegitimated. So on Sunday August 7, a day after the Council’s second meeting and two days after Sliti’s beating, detainees in Camps 2 and 3 reignited their protest by launching a rolling hunger strike.

It was against the backdrop of a renewed hunger strike that the Prisoners Council gathered on August 8 to have what would end up becoming its final meeting. In the recreation yard of
Camp 1 the six representatives gathered alone to conduct their business. The urgency of their work couldn’t have been greater. They had to come up with a strategy to win quick but lasting concessions from their military captors, not just promises of things to come; and they needed to do so quickly, as their fellow detainees were, justifiably, becoming restless. The experiment in democracy initiated by Shaker Aamer, even if it could only ever be “democracy” in quotes, was under serious strain.

After initial salutations the six representatives sat down around a single table to discuss a game plan. After a number of minutes a camp official interrupted their session. He insisted that the military be allowed to listen in on their conversation, demanding that translators be present in their meeting and that the conversation be tape recorded. The council members refused, saying that they needed to meet in private before presenting further suggestions to camp authorities and their discussions needed to remain confidential. This was a basic point of process for any negotiations. Two opposing sides meet alone to strategize, and then they come together in the middle to work through the issues in the manner in which each has strategized. Now, all of a sudden, the military wanted to deny the Prisoners Council this most basic tenet. They could meet privately, but they weren’t allowed to meet with any privacy. Once again, everything was at the military’s discretion. Everything was up to their interpretation. Everything was on their terms. Just as they had decided what parts of the Geneva Conventions would apply, they were deciding what parts of a negotiation process would apply. But despite the military’s insistence, the six detainees of the Prisoners Council would have none of it.

Using the pens and notepads they had been issued for their meeting, the council members opted to communicate with each other via the written word, circumventing the officer’s instructions. If the military wanted to listen in on their meeting they could listen all they wanted, but the meeting would be conducted in silence. After a number of minutes of council members passing notes to
another around the table, the officer decided he’d had enough. Guards were ordered in to break up the meeting and seize the notes, with the rationale that the sharing of notes between detainees constituted a risk to camp operations. As the guards tried to rip the notes away from the Prisoners Council, the detainees put the notes in their mouth, chewed them up and swallowed them. They were then re-shackled, dragged out of the meeting area, and immediately escorted back to their respective camps. The meeting was over.

It didn’t take long for news of the incident to reach Gitmo’s commanding officer, Gen. Jay Hood. He had never been a fan of the experiment and had doubted its necessity and its efficacy from the very beginning. By all accounts he wanted an end to it. Detainees defying orders, irrespective of whether they were selected council members or not, was all the ammunition he needed to shut it down. So he did just that. He ordered that the council be disbanded and negotiations be dissolved immediately. Gen. Hood also told Col. Bumgarner that he was no longer allowed to meet with any of the council representatives. The experiment in democracy was over. Not only was it over, the official line for some time would be that it never existed in the first place. When asked by the Boston Globe a week later about rumors of a committee of detainees negotiating to resolve the hunger strike, Gitmo officials denied its existence, stating that no detainee committee had ever formed, but that, “Camp leadership routinely receives and addresses concerns from detainees consistent with the spirit of the Geneva Conventions.”

Of course the members that made up this supposed non-existent committee surely wished the effects of their participation were non-existent. For his part in helping organize the hunger strike and lead the Prisoners Council, Shaker Aamer was punished severely. He was placed in an isolation cell in Camp Echo, where he would remain for a number of years. The other five council members received similar treatment, either shipped to isolation in Camp Echo, Camp 5, or the various isolation blocks in Camp 3. All, that is, except for Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, the former
Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, who was ordered to be released. Although he was by far the senior most Taliban official held at Gitmo, the Pentagon and State Department repatriated him back to Afghanistan under pressure from Hamid Karzai and the new Afghan government who were trying to score political points in the lead-up to their national elections. As lawyer Clive Stafford Smith was astutely pointed out, the fact that Zaeef of all people was released, while the lowest of the low-level Taliban recruits and those with the most indirect of indirect associations with the Taliban remained caged, exposed just how purely political and nonsensical the whole saga of Guantanamo actually was. Chalk up another instance of injustice at Gitmo; the tally was growing exponentially. And the prisoners council that was created to blunt that exponential growth, even reduce it, had just been disbanded, delegitimized, and punished.

The accumulation of instances betrayal on the part of the military over the period of only a few days - the beating of Hisham Sliti, the undermining of the Prisoners Council, the termination of the Prisoners Council, the punishment of council members - enraged the prison population. Camps 2 and 3 had already declared a resumption to the hunger strike, but now their outrage couldn’t be restricted to mere acts of noncooperation. After more than three years of suffering injustices and abuse they had reached their boiling point. Detainees in Camps 2 and 3 led a small uprising the likes of which hadn’t yet been seen at Gitmo. They tore up their cells, ripped parts free from their metal toilets and used them to rip open the meshed metal separating each cell. If they couldn’t escape outright, they were at least going to destroy the very cages of their confinement. Guards were promptly ordered out of the camp, while ERF squads and armed Marines set up a perimeter around the camps. The military cut off water and electricity for a full 24 hours, forcing a stand-off with the rebellious detainees. Col. Bumgarner came with a megaphone and an interpreter to speak with those inside, but the detainees didn’t listen, nor did they send anyone out to talk with him and negotiate. They held their ground, it was their prison now. Eventually ERF teams were deployed to
subdue the uprising and escort detainees out of the camps and into solitary confinement disciplinary cells. It took weeks to repair Camps 2 and 3 after the uprising.\textsuperscript{79}

They were in an impossible situation, and each passing day, each passing week, each passing month and year it felt more and more impossible. Each interrogation session it felt more and more impossible. Each late night move from one cell to the next it felt more and more impossible. Each disciplinary infraction met with a trip to a disciplinary cell it felt more and more impossible. Each minute stranded alone in an isolation unit it felt more and more impossible. Each minute without hearing from their family, not knowing if their family even knew where they were, it felt more and more impossible. Each visit from a lawyer who could offer only distant hope but no immediate remedy it felt more and more impossible. The detainees, after three years of indefinite detention, mistreatment, humiliation, and torture, had nothing left to lose. Nothing left to lose. For a select few, they had only something left to give…and that was their life.
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Chapter 3

What followed in the wake of the Prisoners Council’s dissolution, the beating of Hisham Sliti, and the uprising in Camps 2 and 3, was nothing less than an all out escalation of detainee resistance. For the next nine months Guantanamo would play host to some of the most intense forms of organized confrontation that the camp would ever encounter. There was no convincing detainees that the military could be trusted, could be reasoned with, could be negotiated with. They could only be pushed back against. They could only be coerced and compelled to give in. They could only be forced to buckle under the immense pressure of an organized and sustained movement of detainee resistance. That couldn’t happen through plea bargaining, dialogue, or asking nicely. It could only happen through direct action. If detainees were going to win any form of due rights, if they were going to win dignity and respect, if they were going to win access to a fair and impartial court system, if they were going to win their liberation, if they were going to seize the agency and autonomy of their own bodies back from the clutches of the military, then they were going to do so using any means necessary. Any means necessary. And being caged in a place like Guantanamo Bay where means were scarce meant that “the means” would be limited to their wit, their courage, and especially and most importantly their bodies.

That started first and foremost by detainees resuming their hunger strike in early August, 2005. But this time with a difference. Whereas in previous hunger strikes the end game was not necessarily starvation to the point of death, even though that is always a probable scenario in any hunger strike, that was not the case now. Now all bets were off. After three years of enduring disrespect, inhumane conditions, and Torture, many of the men caged at Gitmo had embraced death, either as an escape from their incarceration or as the price of emancipation for themselves
and their brothers. With the renewed hunger strike detainees were resolved to push their bodies to the very brink of destruction, because it was becoming more apparent that only through bodily destruction that bodily empowerment was possible.

Lawyers for detainees knew that many of their clients had reached a point of no return with regards to their determination, and they feared that the outcome of the renewed hunger strike may include death. “They truly feel they have nothing left,” insisted attorney David Remes, whose Yemeni clients were among the hunger strikers, “I’m not sure what the end point will be, but I do predict there will be death.” Clive Stafford Smith, who was one of the first attorneys to make public the renewed hunger strike after a visit to his clients at the base in August, felt similarly. “I am worried about the lives of my guys because they are a pretty obstinate lot and they are going to go through with this and I think they are going to end up killing themselves,” said Stafford Smith.

Such statements from legal representatives weren’t unfounded exaggerations. They echoed statements from detainees themselves. Omar Deghayes, who’d been a major participant during the June-July hunger strike, was among those who’d resolved to take back up the fast and see it through to its lethal end. “Look, I'm dying a slow death in this place as it is,” said Deghayes to his lawyer, “I don't have any hope of fair treatment, so what have I got to lose?” Binyam Mohammed, an Ethiopian political refugee who was living in the U.K. prior to his capture and detention at Gitmo, was in the same camp as Deghayes, quite literally. When 60 detainees in Camp 5, the origin point for the entire ordeal, simultaneously recommenced their hunger strike on August 11, Mohamed was among them. Writing a personal statement to record his thoughts and intentions prior to embarking on his second hunger strike, he stated in a very straightforward manner, “I do not plan to stop until I either die or we are respected.” Lacking faith in the military’s ability to ever respect detainees, he added pessimistically, “People will definitely die.”
In his statement Binyam Mohamed also placed the efforts of his fellow detainees in the pantheon of prison martyrs from struggles past. He cited Bobby Sands and the nine other IRA prisoners who in 1981 took up a hunger strike inside Northern Ireland’s famous Maze prison, eventually dying in their effort to end the illegal detention of their fellow Irishmen. The faint parallels of their struggle to detainees caged at Gitmo was not lost on Mohamed. “He had the courage of his convictions and he starved himself to death,” wrote Mohamed recalling Bobby Sands, “nobody should believe for one moment that my brothers here have less courage.”

His allusion to Bobby Sands in relation to the plight and resistance of detainees at Gitmo is remarkable for a whole host of reasons. First, it demonstrates that detainees did not manifest the hunger strike tactic out of thin air as if they had invented it. At the very least some detainees understood that it had been used by prisoners in various global, political, and historical struggles. That’s not to suggest, either, that detainees selected the hunger strike in for the sole reason that it was a method used with varying degrees of success by other actors in the past. Rather, the knowledge that it was a legitimate, tried and true form of direct action was one reason among many that led to detainees implementing it as their signature form of resistance at Gitmo.

Second, Binyam Mohamed’s allusion to Bobby Sands quite explicitly places the detainees on par with an internationally recognized and valorized martyr, thus elevating the significance and righteousness of their struggle, even if only in their own minds. This ideological maneuver, situating oneself in relation to “great” figures or “great” campaigns for justice is quite common in social movements, past and present, as it serves as inspiration for helping people realize their potential and their power to create great change. For the detainees, such an ideological maneuver might have been especially important, since a hunger strike the magnitude of which they were undertaking required a good deal of motivation to support the requisite endurance for sustaining not just the long suffering of protracted starvation, but sustaining their resistance more generally. Similarly, the
allusion to Bobby Sands also fortifies their commitment to the cause by breaking the imposed sense of isolation they experience as part of their detention. While their organized and well-coordinated movement already operated as way to build solidarity spatially — through cells, through blocks, through camps — the ideological maneuver also builds solidarity temporally, by reaching back into the past in order to build solidarity with actors in historical struggles. Finally, the allusion to Bobby Sands seems to be a phenomenon that carries on a long tradition within the historical repertoire of hunger strikes specifically. When Binyam Mohamed invokes the legacy of Bobby Sands and the IRA prisoners it is at least in part because he believes, correctly or incorrectly, that Guantanamo detainees share something in common with them. This commonality may not be perfectly analogous, but there is a recognition and acknowledgment that they share similar forms of oppression, similar kinds of enemies, and thus the necessity to employ similar methods to combat that enemy and oppression. This has been a characteristic of hunger strikes since their inception nearly 150 years ago.

As historian Kevin Grant has shown in his thoroughly-researched scholarship of the genealogy of the hunger strikes and their dissemination across geographic and political boundaries, the modern-day hunger strike has its roots firmly in the Russian revolutionary movement of the late 19th century where it then circulated to 20th century England and the far reaches of the British Empire before letting loose upon the world. Grant also shows that hunger strikes don’t just travel for neutral reasons, they’re appropriated for particular ends. When early 20th century British Suffragettes appropriated the hunger strike from late 19th century Russian political prisoners, they did so at least in part because they saw something of themselves in the Russian radicals who actively opposed the Tsarist regime. When Irish and Indian nationals used the hunger strike to oppose British imperial rule in the 1920s and 30s, they did so at least in part because they were convinced that their decolonial cause was not dissimilar to Suffragette women challenging British authority in
the belly of the beast. When South African prisoners incarcerated at Robbens Island chose to stage their hunger strikes, they did so at least in part because they saw their war to end an apartheid state as similar to Ghandi and Indian nationals’ resistance in their decolonial project of liberation. And when Bobby Sands and IRA prisoners starved themselves to death in 1981, it was at least in part because they saw something of themselves in the early Irish hunger strikers who began the effort to liberate Ireland from British rule in the 1920s. In this light, that Binyam Mohamed would see something of himself in Bobby Sands is not surprising in the least. In fact, it’s perfectly in keeping with the logic embedded in the historical repertoire of hunger strikes. The only questions was, would Binyam Mohamed or any of his fellow detainees meet the same fate as Bobby Sands and the IRA hunger strikers of 1981.

Upon renewing the hunger strike many detainees began wasting away quite rapidly, determined to take the protest to its deadly completion just as Binyam Mohamed and others had promised. The evidence of their determination was their depleted bodies. They were losing an incredible amount of weight in a short period of time. Lawyers for the men were fearful for their clients’ health and horrified by the spectacle of their deterioration. Attorneys David Remes and Marc Falkoff complained in court to a US District judge that their clients looked “gaunt and unwell.”7 Attorney Thomas Wilner declared that his client Abdullah Al Kandari, a former member of the Kuwait National Volleyball Team, was, “pale” and “bleary-eyed.”8 Another Kuwait detainee, Abdulaziz al-Shamari was characterized by Wilner as being “skin and bones,” and unable to keep balance without assistance from a medical walker.9 Lawyers also described some of the hunger strikers as so exhausted they could barely talk.
The descriptions weren’t just hyperbole from sympathetic lawyers either. The characterizations were born out by hard data. In 2007 the Pentagon released a document entitled “Measurements of Heights and Weights of Individuals Detained by the Department of Defense at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.” The document registered each detainee’s weight from the moment of their arrival through December 2006. The weights were taken in monthly intervals except in some cases where detainees were hospitalized or under medical supervision on account of extreme weight loss, and in those cases the entries are registered in weekly or daily intervals. Using the document as a chronicle of the renewed hunger strike, one can see in ghastly detail just how profound the effects of prolonged starvation were on the human body, and just how much emaciation some detainees suffered as part of their resistance.

For instance, Binyam Mohammed, mere months after penning his letter expounding on the dedication of his brothers, dropped to 138 pounds. This was a man who was nearly six feet tall, and whose average weight in detention when not on hunger strike was 150 pounds or more. However, like many detainees who coupled their hunger strike with broader resistance and defiance, Mohamed refused to regularly participate in the military’s mandatory weigh-ins. So in his case, and in the cases of others, his weight may have been drastically lower than was ever recorded. But plenty of recorded examples exist showing with undeniable proof how drastically detainees’ weight dropped.

Take Shaker Aamer, the man responsible for spearheading the Prisoners Council. Aamer was a large fellow, standing 5’11.” When he arrived at Gitmo he weighed 208 pounds, and throughout his detention he generally weighed between 200 and 210 pounds, weighing in once at a hefty 226 pounds. But in September 2005 at the height of the renewed hunger strike he dropped to 160 pounds. That’s almost a quarter of his body weight carved out and offered to the collective cause.
Murtadha al Said Makram, a 29-year old Saudi Arabian national who was eventually transferred home in 2007, was considered one of Gitmo’s “hard-core hunger strikers” for his long-term commitment to hunger striking and losing a percentage of body mass nearly unparalleled. At 5’8” he regularly weighed between 150 and 160 pounds when he wasn’t on hunger strike, which was a normal Body Mass Index for his height and age. Upon participating in the first hunger strike of the summer Makram’s weight dropped to 120 pounds before dipping again in August to 102 pounds. That’s already a third of his normal body mass. But as he continued the hunger strike his weight continued to decline. By September he was down to 98 pounds, by October 97 pounds. His condition worsened with each passing month of his protracted hunger strike, so that by December 2005 he weighed in at a paltry 91 pounds, before sinking all the way to a truly frightening 87 pounds in January 2006. This was a man who had at one time during detention weighed 163 pounds, and now almost half of him had disappeared through the course of hunger striking.

Three other detainees are significant in this manner as well. Mani al-Utaybi, Yasser al-Zahrani, and Ali Abdullah Ahmed were among a small group of men who took back up the hunger strike in August and never really gave it up, despite the brutal battering their emaciated bodies endured. They were determined to take their strike to its cruel conclusion and risk death.

Ali Abdullah Ahmed was a 35-year old citizen of Yemen who weighed 172 pounds when he arrived at Guantanamo. Before joining the renewed hunger strike in August, Ahmed weighed 162 pounds, a weight more or less consistent throughout his detention. But by September he weighed 131 pounds, and by December he was 122 pounds. By January 2006 he was down to 120 pounds, meaning he had lost a quarter of his body mass.

Mani al-Utaybi, a 24-year old citizen of Saudi Arabia, weighed only 114 pounds when he was transferred from Afghanistan to Gitmo, already quite underweight for a man who stood just over 5’8”. A healthy Body Mass Index for a man his size would have been 139-169 pounds, a range he
never achieved throughout the entirety of his detention, as he averaged about 120-125 pounds when he wasn’t hunger striking. But that weight dropped precipitously during the June-July hunger strike, in which he weighed in at 102 pounds. He dropped to 95 pounds in August, again to 89 pounds in September, before stabilizing from October through January at a still emaciated weight in the low 90s.

Yasser al Zahrani, was a 21-year old kid from Saudi Arabia who was always relatively slight of frame. He stood 5’6” and came to Gitmo weighing a meager 118 pounds. Before he began his hunger strike with other detainees at the beginning of summer he weighed 141 pounds, which was near his average weight whilst in detention. By the end of July he had dropped to 128 pounds. By the end of September he was down to 108 pounds, a full twenty pounds in two months. By the end of October he slid down to 99 pounds, and by the end of November he was down to a frightening 89 pounds. He stayed near that weight for another two months. This kid, who came to Guantanamo as a teenager, had lost more than a third of himself throughout the course of his hunger strike.

While all these examples are extreme, they are not exceptional. A report compiled by journalist Andy Worthington that analyzed the full statistics from the government’s data found that at least 11 detainees in total fell to a hundred pounds or less throughout the hunger strike. Handfuls more plunged to the low hundreds. The records don’t lie. The majority of the hunger strikers suffered significant weight loss and health complications throughout the duration of the struggle. They were dedicated to intensifying their resistance, but that came at a price. They quite literally paid for it in pounds of flesh, wasting away in some cases to the point of near death.

The increased intensity of the renewed hunger strike and the increased stakes of the renewed hunger strike were rivaled perhaps only by the increased size. By all accounts the hunger strike which began in the first week of August saw many more participants than the June-July protest.
Day by day more and more detainees pledged their bodies to the cause, rejoining the strike in various coordinated ways. Getting an accurate count of just how many detainees were participating, however, was a matter of deep contestation.

The military’s tally differed drastically from the one provided by detainees and their legal representatives. At the strike’s supposed peak in mid-September the military reported that there were 131 detainees participating in the hunger strike.\(^\text{12}\) Even by this estimation, 131 would’ve constituted a quarter of the detainee population.

Detainees put the figure much higher. Their lawyers, relying on information and assessments gathered during their visitations to the base during the first few weeks of the strike’s resumption, were able to calculate with some accuracy numbers much higher than the military would ever acknowledge. In the Center for Constitutional Rights’ press release on August 31, which was the first public notice that the hunger strike at Gitmo had resumed, lawyers put the number or participants at more than 200, and growing.\(^\text{13}\) Considering the hunger strike grew exponentially from mid-August to mid-September, which even the military acknowledged, this would mean that during the strike’s so-called peak around September 15 not only would there have been more than 131 detainees participating, as the military contended, but that conceivably, and realistically, well-more than half of the detainee population was engaged in mass starvation.

The discrepancy between each side’s figures stems in large part from the lack of agreement on what exactly constituted a hunger strike. The military’s definition, which was quite detailed and programmatic, was systematized in their GTMO Medical Standard Operating Procedure, a lengthy document outlining every authorized policy for dealing with all detainee health and medical situations at the camp. The section dealing with hunger strikes, titled “Voluntary and Voluntary Total Fasting and Re-Feeding,” was first drafted and implemented in October 2003 before it was revised on August 11, 2005.\(^\text{14}\) That the military revised and modified their policies at the exact same
time that detainees renewed and intensified their hunger strike was not mere coincidence. Indeed, the military would later freely admit to the New York Times a few months later that the increased threat to camp operations posed by the escalating hunger strike impelled them to review their policy for dealing with hunger strikes and modify their strategy.  

This perceived threat may or may not explain why in the 2005 Medical SOP the military sorts detainees’ rejection of food into three distinct classifications. The first of these is what the military calls “Voluntary Fasting.” This occurs when a detainee takes water but not food for a period of 72 hours (9 consecutive meals), and “communicates his intent to JTF-GTMO personnel” as to the purpose of his fast. The second category is “Voluntary Total Fasting”, which is the same as above but includes taking neither food nor water. The final category “Hunger Striker,” refers to, “a detainee who communicates his intent to JTF-GTMO personnel to undergo a period of voluntary or total voluntary fasting as a form of protest or to demand attention from authorities.” Furthermore, while the designation is based on a detainee’s “intent, purpose, and behavior”, it is also ultimately up to the determination of the camp commander and medical staff. In other words, a detainee may meet the military’s criteria of a “hunger striker” but still not be officially labeled as such if camp officials so choose.

Interestingly, according to the Medical SOP, one of the specifications that might make a detainee a “voluntary faster” as opposed to a “hunger striker” is if he is suffering from “severe depression with suicidal intent” on account of his fast. This, it would seem, opens the door to the military assigning hunger as the cause of a detainee’s depression, as opposed to his indefinite detention and ill-treatment, while also using the suicidal intent embedded within the logic of hunger strikes as a way to delegitimize detainee’s hunger strike and relegate it to a lesser category. It is not only likely but born out by a survey of historical examples that a prisoner can simultaneously experience depression and still want to engage in hunger strike as a political act, or have suicidal
intentions that are part and parcel of his method of protest and not necessarily a product of his depression.

Still, the fact remains it was the military who got to make delineations between the various levels of hunger strike participation, thus setting the entire parameters upon which the hunger strike was measured, counted, and reported on. Because the military was almost always the only source for the media when it came to assessing the size of the growing hunger strike, given that journalists had no access to detainees, the “official” count the military provided and publicized was always reported as the actual official count, sans scare quotes. Not unexpectedly, the criteria detainees used to assess who was participating in the hunger strike was quite different.

The base metric the military employed for determining who was fasting, whether as a “voluntary faster”, “voluntary total faster”, or “hunger striker”, was nine consecutive missed meals. Only after three days of refusing food would a detainee’s fast even come to the attention of camp officials and be counted. But not all detainees who considered themselves hunger strikers missed nine consecutive meals. They enacted defiance and participated in the hunger strike in various ways.

Some detainees chose to forego only two meals each day. In these circumstances a detainee could participate in the hunger strike for weeks or months but never come on to the radar of the military, since it didn’t meet the official rubric. Often this was the case for older or infirm detainees who couldn’t risk the health complications associated with extended starvation. Some detainees chose to fast only for a few days at a time, coming off the hunger strike, and then going back on when they’d recuperated. Here a detainee could be hunger striking but resume eating precisely before he would reach the 9-meal threshold, thus avoiding being counted by the military as an official participant. Missing only two meals a day or skipping meals intermittently was also the case for certain detainees who simply wanted to participate in the strike by showing solidarity with their brothers who had dedicated themselves to performing more long-term starvation, those literally
risking their life for the cause. Still other detainees may have skipped nine consecutive meals or more but done so secretly, relying on the stealth and guile learned by prisoners everywhere. It’s also likely that not every detainee felt obligated to report their intention to the military, some may have intentionally lied to their captors, seeing no need to cooperate in the military’s systematized process of tabulation. A detainee may have missed nine or more consecutive meals but lied about or never made his intentions known to military personnel, thus failing to be counted, as one of the benchmark’s for a “hunger striker” is that his intent is to protest.

All of these instances show that it was possible for detainees to choose their own level of participation in the hunger strike and participate in the protest without making it into the military’s “official” count. This should come as no surprise though, as mass movements and collective action are always comprised of invisible numbers, obscured actors providing logistical, moral, or spiritual support, who may or may not be on the front lines, or in the phalanx of marching persons, or in the swarm and swirl of the assembled crowd at any particular moment during any particular “official” counting of bodies, but who may in fact be operating behind the scenes, out of sight, inconspicuous, but nonetheless participating. Such is the name of the game in any mass movement. The movement’s “mass-ness” precludes it from being measured with any absolute accuracy. The detainees’ renewed hunger strike was no different. For this reason, it may have been more on target to say, as did Kristine Huskey, a lawyer who made numerous trips to Gitmo in August and September of 2005, that the hunger strike was comprised of nearly 90% of the detainee population.16

The military, of course, had every incentive to raise the threshold of what qualified as a hunger striker. If camp officials are the ones charged with determining who is resisting their them, then its unsurprising that they would make it appear as if there is less defiance occurring in the prison, not more. Providing a lower recorded number of hunger strike participants to media outlets, which camp officials did more or less daily once the protest was made public, serves a few different
functions. Most obviously, it minimizes how widespread the protest actually is. It makes it appear as if the grievances that detainees are expressing through their hunger strike have no legitimacy, or certainly have no popular support among the wider detainee population, as if the “official” hunger strikers are simply a small group of rogue agitators. It also fails to take into account the various ways one could participate in the hunger strike without missing nine consecutive meals, thus making monolithic the detainees’ very nuanced form of resistance and noncooperation.

Publicizing a lower recorded number of hunger strikers also allows the military to give the impression to national and international audiences that they have the protest under control. Even more, camp officials providing an “accurate” tally each day to inquiring press, whether it was 87 hunger strikers on September 9, or 128 on September 13, or 131 on September 15, gives the impression that the military had a handle on the situation, since it was something they could measure, calculate, chart, and pin down with exactness. This is where precision performs as an operation of Power. Data as a display of dominance. Details as a managerial practice.

Of course the reality was quite different. The military hardly had a handle on the hunger strike at all, and there were more than a few in the Bush administration who were unsettled by how successfully detainees challenged authority and sabotaged camp operations with their protest. In fact, in mid-September multiple senior law enforcement and Pentagon officials came forward to The New York Times, on condition of anonymity, to express how “increasingly worried” they were about the detainees’ intensified resistance.17 Contrary to the positive impression portrayed by the military, there were in fact grave doubts inside the beltway about their ability to draw the hunger strike to a close. They had tried numerous times, and in numerous ways, all to no avail. Official figures and public perception be damned, internally the military was expressing concerns, and they every right do so, because the size and severity of the renewed hunger strike was cause for concern.
Regardless of the military’s manipulation of the numbers, whether they ever had an accurate count, or if indeed it was as suggested by detainee lawyers that nearly 90% of the detainee population was participating in the hunger strike in some form or fashion, there was no disputing the fact that shortly after mid-September the protest started to lose steam. Six weeks after restarting the strike the number of detainees refusing food started to fall drastically, as more and more of them began coming off their fast. The reasons were multiple.

One rationale, which was quite understandable, was that engaging in starvation for such an extensive period of time simply became too physically and emotionally taxing for some detainees, whose bodies and psychological state were already compromised by the conditions of their confinement and more than three years in indefinite detention. Sustaining a protracted strike or resistance of any kind is always difficult, but a hunger strike is especially challenging simply by virtue of the incredible physical toll it takes on the body, a body that each day of starvation loses more and more energy.

But there were other reasons for the decline in participation. The drawing down of the hunger strike might also have been attributed to the military’s divide and conquer strategy. As the strike picked up steam throughout August and early September camp officials tried everything they could to break the solidarity that been forged. This included implementing policies in which they provided new perks to non-striking detainees, enticing detainees with rewards and privileges that could only be attained if one quit the strike and became compliant. These included extended exercise time in the recreation yard, in which detainees would also receive added refreshments such as Gatorade and energy bars. It also included a special pizza night, as well as an organized soccer tournament for detainees privileged enough to return to Camp 4, where the trophy was 2-liter bottles of Pepsi. There’s no way of knowing whether such cheap tricks were successful in dissuading some detainees to give up their hunger strike, but it certainly shows how desperate the
military had become in their effort to regain control over these unruly bodies. They’d sunk so low that they were resorting to Pizza Hut and Pepsi.

Along with the new and expanded entitlements for those who chose to end their participation in the strike came increased punishment for those who persisted. Rules became stricter on the blocks, and privileges, which had always been taken away arbitrarily, were now revoked almost entirely, cause or no cause. Remaining hunger strikers, once they were determined by the military to in fact be “hunger strikers”, were segregated from the population and transferred to isolation blocks, in an effort to reduce the influence hunger strikers might have on the rest of their brothers. cSimilarly, the camp guards were ordered to discourage detainees’ ability to communicate with each other through walls, air ducts, and cell doors, which they did by blasting large industrial fans to drown out potential conversations.19 But the single biggest reason detainees began quitting the hunger strike en masse after mid-September was the new method of force-feeding the military implemented to break the will power of individual detainees and crush the resistance as a whole.

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When the military began force-feeding hunger strikers in September 2005 it wasn’t the first time they’d done so at Guantanamo. Camp officials had always chosen to medically intervene when hunger striking detainees became dangerously malnourished or dehydrated, or more to the point, when hunger strikers threatened camp operations. It wasn’t something they’d done often or with regularity, but they did have a track record of administering a force-feeding regimen to recalcitrant fasters.

During Gitmo’s first ever hunger strike from February - March 2002, commanders utilized IVs to rehydrate and deliver nutrition to detainees who’d begun flirting with death on account of their refusal to eat or drink, reportedly going through countless bags of medically prescribed saline solution to nurse detainees back to health.20 During that first hunger strike the military also
introduced the nasogastric tube as a means to force-feed detainees. In this form of force-feeding a plastic tube is inserted into the body through the nostril, where it is then pushed down the esophagus and into the stomach. Once the tube is successfully in the stomach, and not say, in the windpipe or lungs, as sometimes happens, liquid nutrition of some kind is pumped through the tube into the body.

When this method of force-feeding was first implemented at Gitmo it was apparently reserved only for so-called “hard-core” hunger strikers, those who’s fasting drew them close to critical condition medically. Rather than force-feeding all hunger strikers, the method was only used on two particularly determined detainees at the tail-end of the February - March 2002 hunger strike. But in a slip-up that could only have come during Gitmo’s infancy, because such an admission would never be acknowledged again, camp commanders told journalists that they wouldn’t permit detainees to starve because they wanted them “fit and cooperating with interrogators seeking intelligence.” In other words, they admitted that force-feeding was specifically devised as a way to assist the military strategy of controlling detainee bodies and making them compliant. Although this has always been the intent of the military’s force-feeding regime, they would change their talking points after that, so that statements such as, “We give detainees the flexibility to choose to eat or not to eat, but when they refuse meals to a point where they could jeopardize their own lives, we are obligated, as a nation committed to the humane treatment of any human being, to intervene,” which was offered to the New York Times by camp officials in 2002, became the “official” rationale that would carry over into the 2005 renewed hunger strike.

The force-feeding regime implemented by the military in August and September 2005 when hunger strikers started losing drastic amounts of weight was different in significant ways from the 2002 model of force-feeding. It was used en masse, and with modifications that were certain to discourage, demoralize, and dehumanize detainees to the point of abandoning their resistance, all
while molding their rebellious bodies back into compliance. At the same time that this is true, so much of the military’s force-feeding methods were modeled on historical precedents, precedents that reached back at least a century.

It’s safe to say that whenever and wherever there are hunger strikes force-feeding usually follows. Just as the genealogy of hunger strikes dates back to the late 19th and early 20th century, a genealogy of force-feeding to break those hunger strikes goes back that far as well. To understand how the U.S. arrived at a policy of force-feeding hunger striking detainees at Gitmo, we have to turn to the history of the British suffragette hunger strikers.

The first suffragette hunger strike was undertaken by 45-year old Marion Wallace Dunlop on July 5, 1909. As a member of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), a militant organization founded in 1903 by Emiline Pankhurst to campaign for women’s right to vote in parliamentary elections, Dunlop was arrested and convicted for stenciling a passage from the country’s Bill of Rights onto a wall of the House of Commons. Arrested, sentenced, and jailed in North London’s Holloway prison, she launched a hunger strike in protest of her classification as a common criminal, demanding instead that she be recognized and treated as a political prisoner. After more than three days of hunger striking she was eventually released by prison authorities who wanted to avoid the scandal of a female inmate starving to death in custody. Prior to her release, however, the State had threatened to force-feed her as a way to break her hunger strike.

They threatened all the time to pump milk through my nostrils, but never did. They kept my table covered with food, which I never touched. I only drank water. My pulse was felt many times in the day and I laughed at them all the time, telling them I would show them the stuff the suffragette was made of.

The “stuff” suffragettes were made of was resiliency and courage, and it was contagious. Scores of other jailed militant suffragettes followed Dunlop’s lead and launched hunger strikes of their own to challenge their imprisonment. Like Dunlop too, their new weapon of protest won them government-ordered release after a number of days of starvation.
In September 1909 all of that changed. After more than two months of imprisoning and then releasing hunger striking suffragettes, the State’s threat of force-feeding became more than a threat, it became a policy choice. After mounting pressure from King Edward VII and members of parliament Home Secretary Herbert Gladstone ordered prison officials to implement a regime of force-feeding for any suffragettes who hunger struck.26 That policy stayed more or less in tact for five years, as hundreds of women were force-fed in English, Scottish, and Irish prisons from 1909 to 1914, when the practice was suspended due to the outbreak of World War I.

As a way of justify the force-feeding intervention on suffragette hunger strikers the British government referred to it not as force-feeding, but as “hospital treatment” or “medical treatment.” (Pankhurst, “Unshackled”, 140) This sly use of semantics set a precedent that would be used by other States for more than century after, including the U.S. with respect to detainees at Gitmo, which was to medicalize, and thus legitimize, what was clearly a strategy of coercion to break the bodies and spirits of protestors. The British government also institutionalized a rationale which would become paradigmatic for States looking to justify force-feeding hunger strikers, which was to proclaim that it was used solely as a life-saving measure. When on September 29th, 1909 Home Secretary Gladstone announced to the House of Commons and the British public that it was the government’s “duty” to force-feed the women as a way of preserving their life, as opposed to, say, giving into the demands of the hunger strikers, it was as if his declaration echoed unchanged down a corridor of decades until it landed smack dab in Bush administration policies at Gitmo.27 Yet, despite the British government’s framing of force-feeding as little more than a harmless medical treatment used only to save lives, a number of doctors across England were enraged by the decision of the State to forcibly feed hunger strikers. In fact, as suffragette historian J.F. Geddes has shown, hundreds of health professionals at the time petitioned the British government to suspend the
policy, while many more refused to partake in the procedure, since there was a lot of documentation showing that force-feeding caused intense pain for the subject and in some cases even death.\(^{28}\)

There were primarily two methods of force-feeding used by British prison authorities on suffragettes, orally or nasally. In oral feeding a metal or wooden gag was pried into the mouth and then screwed open to keep it ajar. A description provided by suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst of the instrument’s application shows just how brutal the gag was.

*I felt a steel instrument pressing against my gums, cutting into the flesh, forcing its way in. Then it gradually prised my jaws apart as they turned a screw. It felt like having my teeth drawn…I held my poor bleeding gums down on the steel with all my strength…Day after day, morning and evening, came the same struggle. My mouth got more and more hurt; my gums, where they prised them open, were always bleeding, and other parts of my mouth got pinched and bruised.*\(^{29}\)

The gag often cut the gums and lips of the women, as Pankhurst so vividly describes. In other cases women reported that the gag would sometimes break the women’s teeth.\(^{30}\) Once it was inserted though, a thick rubber tube was inserted down the mouth into the throat and down into the stomach. In the nasal feeding method of force-feeding, the gag was bypassed and a somewhat thinner rubber tube was passed up the nostril and then down the throat into the stomach.

In both methods the suffragettes were physically restrained by a team of orderlies, who pinned the women down to their beds when they physically resisted the force-feeding. In both methods too, once a hunger striker was sufficiently restrained, liquid food was poured from a jug into a funnel attached to the oral or nasal tube. The nutritional ingredients were usually a mixture of milk and Bovril, a syrupy meat extract popular in Britain. Many of the women vomited continuously during the force-feeding. And just as with force-feeding at Gitmo, a misplaced tube sometimes caused the liquid nutrition to be poured into the hunger strikers’ windpipes and lungs. Not only did this induce choking and drowning, but the aspiration of food could, and did, carry the real danger of causing pneumonia, pleurisy, and in some cases fatality.\(^{31}\)
There was no getting around it, force-feeding was a medically-risky procedure that inflicted a great deal of harm. Yet somehow the British State, and every State thereafter that has faced opposition in the form of hunger strikes, argued with a straight face that force-feeding was little more than a routine form of medical treatment employed in the great humanitarian cause to save lives. And thus force-feeding became the method par excellence for breaking hunger strikes, not only because the brutality of it forced strikers to give up their resistance, but it was also ambiguously “medical” enough to seem legitimate and achieve a certain kind of cover from criticism.

Once perfected in England, it didn’t take long for force-feeding to take hold in the United States. No longer reserved for patients in asylums who were simply unable to eat, the U.S. government followed the British lead and began using force-feeding to snuff out various hunger strikes. In a preview of Bush administration policies in the “War on Terror” at Gitmo and elsewhere, force-feeding was used almost exclusively by the government on those it considered at the time to be enemies of the state — radicals, anarchists, socialists, communists, and pacifists to name but a few; in short, those “enemy combatants” from bygone eras.

Catholic pacifist Bobby Salmon, for instance, was a conscientious objector during World War 1. Imprisoned for his political beliefs and his refusal to join the war effort, he began a hunger strike in July 1920 in a military prison outside Salt Lake City, Utah. Protesting his jailing and demanding release, he compared his hunger strike to his Irish Catholic contemporaries hunger striking in British prisons at the time. Salmon shared their fate too. Two weeks into his hunger strike he was force-fed by his U.S. military jailers. A few years after Salmon’s force-feeding the famous Anarchist Nicola Sacco, who was convicted and executed in a highly contested case for armed robbery, was threatened multiple times with force-feeding after hunger striking for weeks in protest of his imprisonment. Force-feeding by the State was once again used during World War 2 on American conscientious objectors. Pacifists at a military prison in Danbury, Connecticut staged a
135-day hunger strike to integrate the racially segregated dining hall. The hunger strike succeeded, and even spread to other prisons across the country where conscientious objectors were incarcerated, but not before some were force-fed by federal prison officials. So the concept of force-feeding hunger strikers isn’t exactly foreign. It has very much been a part of the State’s arsenal to extinguish resistance from those it deemed enemies of the state.

As these above examples show, the concept of force-feeding hunger strikers has a rich history, one that isn’t exactly foreign. It’s absolutely been a part of the State’s arsenal to extinguish resistance from those it defines as enemies. But how do we understand force-feeding? How do we understand it in relation to the military’s ongoing war on/through/against the detainee body? And how do we understand it in relation to the detainees’ continual undermining of military strategy while empowering themselves through the formation of an alternative corporeality shaped by their agency and resistance? What does it mean to be force-fed?

One way to try to understand force-feeding is to look at how it is experienced, which requires analyzing its relation to language. How do detainees talk about force-feeding? What words do they use to describe it? What gets intentionally or unintentionally omitted from their descriptions? These questions are helpful for arriving at an understanding of force-feeding, especially given that we have no way of observing the body or the process.

On the other side of the force-feeding equation how does the military talk about force-feeding? What kind of language do they deploy? As one would presume, detainees and Guantanamo officials talk about force-feeding in vastly different terms. By and large detainees talk about force-feeding as a traumatic event, and the language they employ follows from that. Government and military officials, on the other hand, talk about force-feeding strictly as a medical event, and the language they use follows from that as well.
To get a sense of exactly how detainees talk about force-feeding it’s useful to examine their written descriptions. The fact that not very many testimonies of detainees’ force-feeding experience are available may tell us something immediately about force-feeding. First, that the act of force-feeding is so difficult to relive and write about that detainees are reluctant to do so lest they re-traumatize their bodies in the process of conjuring it from the deep recesses of their memory. It may also tell us that detainees were reluctant to discuss force-feeding for fear of reprisals from their captors for disclosing the pain of the process, which is a strong possibility given that the military monitored all outgoing communication. Regardless of the reasons, there exist few publicly available testimony of the force-feeding experience. However, testimonies do exist, and I’d like to pay particularly close attention to two of them.

In April 2013, during the height of Gitmo’s most recent camp-wide hunger strike, Samir Naji al Hasan Moqbel, a Yemeni detainee who’d been held without charge since 2002, gave a first-hand account of the military’s force-feeding procedure to his lawyers via telephone. The transcript of Moqbel’s account was then edited and published as a New York Times Op-Ed. It was the first time that a major national news outlet had published a first-hand account by a Guantanamo detainee of his force-feeding experience, and it caused an immediate firestorm in the media and inside the halls of government. It is worth quoting at length.

*I will never forget the first time they passed the feeding tube up my nose. I can’t describe how painful it is to be force-fed this way. As it was thrust in, it made me feel like throwing up. I wanted to vomit, but I couldn’t. There was agony in my chest, throat and stomach. I had never experienced such pain before. I would not wish this cruel punishment upon anyone."

During one force-feeding the nurse pushed the tube about 18 inches into my stomach, hurting me more than usual, because she was doing things so hastily. I called the interpreter to ask the doctor if the procedure was being done correctly or not. It was so painful that I begged them to stop feeding me. The nurse refused to stop feeding me. As they were finishing, some of the “food” spilled on my clothes. I asked them to change my clothes, but the guard refused to allow me to hold on to this last shred of my dignity.

When they come to force me into the chair, if I refuse to be tied up, they call the E.R.F. team. So I have a choice. Either I can exercise my right to protest my detention, and be beaten up, or I can submit to painful force-feeding.*

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Moqbel’s op-ed horrified many people, and the outrage was brought all the way to the feet of President Obama who in front of hundreds of reporters and cameras was confronted with questions directly about his orders to force-feed hunger striking detainees. What some readers of the op-ed may have failed to realize was that the force-feeding described so horrifically by Moqbel was a military practice that had been perfected over the course of eight years, ever since its implementation during the renewed Gitmo hunger strike of August and September 2005 after the dissolution of the Prisoners’ Council. Not surprisingly, because of this Moqbel’s account echoes descriptions made by detainees who’d been force-fed during this time. The humiliation, and pain, the dehumanization were common experiences among Gitmo hunger strikers.

One description in particular made by Sami al Hajj, the Al Jazeera journalist sounds very much like the op-ed printed in the New York Times. However, al Hajj’s account was never circulated as widely. He described his force-feeding experience like this:

…On Wednesday a doctor came in and asked me how I was. ‘Please take me out of here,’ I said. ‘I want to go back to my cell.’ He ordered them to give me 600ml of Ensure and a bottle of water through the tube, along with something else. I was very tired. Nothing comes out anymore when I go to the toilet.”

…I in the morning they use my left nostril, in the afternoon, my right. The pain of putting the tube up my nose depends on the shift. As it goes in, at first you are gagging on it. As it goes down, they blow air into it to hear where it is. They put a stethoscope near my heart to listen - I am not sure why. I prayed to Allah when they first did that!

…Three times they have inserted the tube the wrong way, so it has gone into my lungs. They put water into it, and it made me choke. Water started coming out of my nose. Another time, they did not seem to care.

They used the same pipe (I can see it is the same number) for about two weeks at a time. It makes me nauseous to see the same one going in each time. Sometimes the guards come by and knock the pipe when it is in my nose. It is very painful.

Most say nothing at all to me. Never once has one of them said ‘I’m sorry’ when they have hurt me, or said, ‘I hope this doesn’t hurt.’ Even when they put it in my lung.

…They hold you for an hour in the chair after being fed, to make sure you don’t throw up. If I do throw up on myself, which happens frequently, I am given no clean clothes, and I cannot even clean myself, since they keep the water turned off when we get back to out cells.

My stomach is causing me all kinds of problems. Now I am experiencing constipation and diarrhea alternately - for roughly three days each at a time. I feel dizzy and in danger of collapse when I stand up.39

The accounts by Moqbel and al Hajj are the reality of the force-feeding measures the military began implementing en masse in August and September 2005. Re-using the same feeding tubes, lax
sterilization practices, not providing sedatives to blunt the pain in the nasal cavity or esophagus or stomach, multiple tube reinsertions daily, or not taking the tube out to allow for sleep, all of this was the name of the game for the military. If the detainees were determined to die via starvation, then the military would counteract by making that attempt as excruciating as humanly possible.

As an entry point into understanding force-feeding I’d like to examine the first line of Moqbel’s testimony. “I will never forget the first time they passed the feeding tube up my nose,” reveals a lot about the body’s experience. He provides an insight here into just how significant the violation is and how much weight force-feeding carries. It is something that will never be forgotten. It is something that will always be remembered, and not in a pleasant way, since he makes clear throughout the rest of his description just how unpleasant force-feeding is. No, there are not pleasant memories, this is a different kind of never-forgetting. This is trauma.

The tube enters the body. At some point in the force-feeding process the tube will eventually be pulled out. But the tube is not the only thing to enter the body. The sensation of the tube, its sight, its feel, will also enter the body. And yet, unlike the physical object of the tube removed from the body, at no point in the course of Moqbel’s life will the sensation and memory of the tube’s entrance ever be extracted. Force-feeding then is not just some temporary measure to provide nutrition. It is a permanent and immeasurable infliction of trauma that will last a lifetime. It is a kind of inscription on the body, even into the body. While the other strategies of the military to control, discipline, and manage detainee bodies, may be said to be strategies that are physical, because they act on and through the body, but do not physically touch the body (i.e. isolation, surveillance, classification system, sensory deprivation, offenses to religion, etc.), force-feeding is the one strategy of subjugation that is absolutely physical. All the strategies for producing a docile body may be seen as a bodily inscription, they are mechanisms that move into the body and write upon it, but the entry into the body’s confines in other strategies of war are more invisible, more
imperceptible, not tactile. Force-feeding makes absolutely clear that the force of the military is entering the body. This is significant, both in that it is a form of signifying and powerful.

That significance begins the moment the threshold of the detainee’s bodily confines are breached. In this case when the tube passes up the nose. This is when force-feeding becomes a bodily violation. To be sure, there are a whole host of violations that accompany the force-feeding process, not merely the insertion of the tube. The detainee is often roughed-up by Gitmo’s ERF squad and dragged from his cell if he resists orders to visit the hospital. Then he is brought to the hospital where the feeding machine, the restraint chair, and the tubes are displayed in front of him, carrying on a century’s long tradition of torture practice where the tools and devices of the torturer’s craft are visibly displayed in front of the victim so as to instill fear and allow the imagination to torture itself with the potentiality of pain and suffering. Then the detainee is pinned down to the restraint chair and strapped in tightly and roughly by guards, straps scraping flesh.

All of these are certainly violations in their own right, however, the insertion of the tube is a very specific violation, which carries with it a very specific form of trauma. This may be why Moqbell doesn’t say “I will never forget the first time they dragged me from my cell to the hospital to be force-fed,” or, “I will never forget the first time I saw the feeding machine and feeding tubes”, etc. He says, “I will never forget the first time they passed the feeding tube up my nose.” In other words, the significant trauma occurs when the integrity of the body is compromised, when the bodily borders are breached. We can say, then, that force-feeding is a significant bodily violation because “that which is not me” and “that which I do not want inside me” enters “me” without consent and through force.

The insertion of the tube, that transgression of bodily space, is the moment when that act of force-feeding is etched into neural pathways, sensorial memory, bodily memory forever. The violation in no small way shapes who he is and who he will forever be/become. In short, it shapes
an identity. Force-feeding then is a strategy of power, no different from other strategies deployed by the military, such as discipline, or torture, or confinement, or isolation, or display, or concealment, all of which aim to “produce” a body, a body that can be managed, controlled, coerced, and cajoled into compliance. In the same way that solitary confinement is not a benign detention technique, and indefinite detention is not a benign legal determination, and forced nudity or cavity searches are not benign safety precautions, and camp visits are not benign guided tours, force-feeding is not some benign medical procedure. It is a strategy to produce a compliant body, a drafted body, a docile body. Where the detainees’ hunger strike is undertaken precisely to challenge this means of production used by the State, the State counters by introducing a new mechanism to defeat their challenge and reinstitute their control over the process of production. Where the detainees’ hunger strike is undertaken precisely to produce a body by themselves, of themselves, and for themselves, a body with agency and maneuverability in a physical/legal/political situation where such agency and maneuverability seem limited if not impossible, the State counters by destroying the detainees’ means of production through the introduction of a more powerful mechanism, entering the body directly, penetrating it with an unmediated Power.

There is no avoiding the fact that force-feeding is a penetration, and thus there is no avoiding the way that as such it conjures a sexual violation. Moqbel’s testimony already points to this. He states, “As it was thrust in, it made me feel like throwing up.” Thrust in. There’s no getting around that phrase. Moqbel doesn’t want this bodily encounter. He resists the tube. He doesn’t want it inside him. We can be assured that he’s said “No,” or made clear to the military that he doesn’t want to be violated. And yet, despite his pleas, despite his dissent, the tube is “thrust in” anyway.

As with other aspects of hunger striking and force-feeding some historical context is helpful here too. Suffragettes, in their writings, speeches, and public testimonies, often equated their force-
feeding experience with rape. The term “rape,” however, was never explicitly used. Other terms were used in its place to signify the same act. Suffragette historian Caroline J. Howlett has shown that in early 20th century England the term “outrage” was synonymous with “rape.” What we would today call “rape” or “sexual abuse” would during the suffragette era been connoted with the term “outrage.”36 Knowing this, one recognizes that the term is deployed regularly by suffragettes in their descriptions of being forcibly fed.

As Howlett shows, this is almost exclusively the case for suffragette hunger strikers who represented themselves as having resisted the doctor’s insertion of feeding tubes, whether nasally or orally. There the term “outrage” is used repeatedly in such testimonies. Whereas suffragettes who passively complied with the force-feeding process, or who for various reasons, including some which were politically strategic, exhibited no resistance, often described force-feeding as an “operation.”37

Mary Leigh was the first suffragette to be force-fed when the government instituted the policy in September 1909, and her account of the ordeal was one of the first to be published. She used the term “operation” to characterize the doctors’ spoon feeding methods of force-feeding. However, when she endured the nasal-gastral tube method, where she was held down and had a tube forcibly inserted into her, she could only describe this as “outrage.” Fellow hunger striker Ethel Moorhead, who achieved national notoriety not only for her militancy but for being the first Scottish suffragette to be force-fed, used rape terminology in her description as well. “I was carried back to my cell feeling that I had been physically and spiritually outraged,” Moorhead stated.

The correlation between force-feeding and rape is perhaps most illustrative in the writings of Sylvia Pankhurst. Pankhurst, whose mother Emmeline founded the Women’s Social and Political Union and whose sister Christabel was a prominent figure in the suffrage movement, was also a militant suffragette. Jailed on numerous occasions for her activism, she undertook several hunger
strikes while imprisoned and was force-fed a multitude of times, resisting so forcefully on some occasions that it left her shoulders bruised from struggling against the male hands that weighed her down. In an article penned for McClure’s magazine in 1913, Pankhurst draws the comparison of force-feeding to rape when she writes, “But infinitely worse than any pain was the sense of degradation, the sense that the very fight that one made against the repeated outrage was shattering one’s nerves and breaking down one’s self-control.” When one reads the rest of her account of force-feeding it’s easy to see why Pankhurst uses the term “outrage” so unequivocally, as so much of her description elicits the image of a sexual violation.

I felt a man’s hands trying to force my mouth open. I set my teeth and tightened my lips over them with all my strength. My breath was coming so quickly that I felt as if I should suffocate. I felt his fingers trying to pry my lips apart - getting inside - and I felt a steel gag running around my gums and feeling for gaps in my teeth.

I felt I should go mad; I felt like a poor wild thing caught in a steel trap. I was tugging at my head to get it free. There were two of them holding it. There were two of them wrenching at my mouth. My breath was coming faster and with a sort of low scream that was getting louder. I heard them talking: “Here is a gap.” “No; here is a better one - this long gap here.”

Then I felt a steel instrument pressing against my gums, cutting into the flesh, forcing its way in. Then it gradually prised my jaws apart as they turned a screw. It felt like having my teeth drawn; but I resisted - I resisted. I held my poor bleeding gums down on the steel with all my strength. Soon they were trying to force the India-rubber down my throat. I was struggling wildly, trying to tighten the muscles and to keep my throat closed up. They got the tube down, I suppose, though I was unconscious of anything but a mad revolt of struggling, for at last I heard them say, “That’s all”; and I vomited as the tube came up.” They left me on the bed exhausted, gasping for breath and sobbing convulsively.

Of later force-feedings Pankhurst writes:

A passion of revolt seemed to swell within me, and I heard myself saying things which grew louder and louder until they filled the air with sound [...] I heard myself crying out that this torture had been going on year after year, and that woman after woman had been broken and destroyed. I heard myself crying: “No, no, no! I won’t have any more of it! I won’t have any more of it!”

With a visceral description such as this, with an embodied experience of violation as detailed and articulate as this, it’s difficult not to read Pankhurst’s force-feeding as anything other than a kind-of rape.

Such a reading is aided in no small part by the very gendered relation of the struggling woman who cries “No” and the clearly-identified male who tries vigorously to force his instruments
inside of her. For some, the gender dynamic so evident in the act of suffragette force-feeding is what places it squarely within the territory of sexual violation. Feminist scholar Jane Marcus makes exactly that argument when she states of the suffragette hunger strikers, “to expose themselves deliberately to the bullying and brutality which accompanied their demonstrations and to suffer the searing pain of hunger striking and forcible feeding was to make explicit the sexual dimensions of state-condoned misogyny, to point out to the public and to themselves that their common experience as women was unmistakably the experience of rape.”

Of course, how could it be otherwise? The women’s suffrage movement as a whole was a “sex war.” In fighting for the right to vote, women were fighting for self-determination against an incredibly sexist State, governed by men for men, who denied women the participation in politics based solely on the criteria of gender. Gender dynamics were no different in the act of force-feeding. It was male politicians and elites who were inflicting structural violence on the bodies of women. It was male policemen following orders from the state to inflict violence on female bodies in the street. It was male magistrates who imprisoned female bodies. And it was male doctors who inflicted state-sanctioned violence on female bodies in the feeding chair. Seen this way, force-feeding was a gendered battle in the larger sex war, which is in part why rape terminology was so readily deployed to describe the act.

Suffragette force-feeding was a nonconsensual penetration of the female body. More than that it was quite clearly an inscription on the female body, where the inscription was gender and gender normativity. To oppose the State, to smash and burn property, to physically assault police officers, to hunger strike against prison wardens, to defy doctors’ orders, to take on the apparatus of patriarchy with their resistant female body, as suffragettes in early 20th century England did, and did with justifiably furious passion, was considered very “un-lady like.” In fact, the very act of voting, which the State wanted so desperately to deny women, was “un-lady like.” Force-feeding, then, was
the act of re-inscribing the proper gender role onto the bodies of women, putting women in their place, using the method of dominant male penetration and sexual violence.

But does something of this sexual violation and gendered violation exist within the force-feeding method practiced on hunger striking detainee bodies at Gitmo? Might we also have grounds to qualify force-feeding at Gitmo as rape? Rape, of course, is not strictly about sexual gratification. It is, however, always about power relations. In that sense, we might understand the force-feeding process as rape, which solidifies the relations of power between the military and the detainee body via violations that are sexualized and gendered.

For detainees at Gitmo force-feeding exists within a field of experience permeated with sexual violations. Even though the violation is specific and unique, force-feeding is not a de-contextualized attack on the body. To be sure, it is different from the other means of war the military uses to attack the body, like isolation, or surveillance, or classification systems. The bodily context for force-feeding may instead be the military’s use of forced nudity, invasive cavity searches, and various strategies that emasculate the men.

The use of forced nudity was a practice the military had implemented from the earliest days of Guantanamo. In fact, for many detainees forced nudity was one of their first experiences upon arrival. Detainees arrived to Gitmo chained, hooded, and masked, fresh from transport flights from Afghanistan or some other undisclosed location. They were then stripped naked by their captors and visually inspected by soldiers once nude, before being taken to the shower, and then probed in the anus. Asif Iqbal, a British detainee released in 2004, provides a description of the process:

“Everything was taken off, all my clothing except for the goggles and the shackles. The shower was very brief, it didn’t give me an opportunity to wash properly. After the shower I was taken over to a table and told to bend over (I was naked). Again somebody prodded up my anus. I don’t know what they possibly could have thought I had hidden since I had been completely shackled since the last cavity search.”

The “last cavity search” Iqbal refers to here were the ones that took place in Afghanistan before they were loaded onto the plane for Guantanamo. There too, US soldiers would strip the detainees,
perform cavity searches, and then place them in orange uniforms and shackle them inside the plane. Soldiers and camp officials waiting for the new batch of bodies would have known that the arriving detainees, who’d been shackled from head to foot and doggedly watched by soldiers during all aspects of their transport, had no way of hiding something. Yet, they perform the forced nudity and cavity searches anyway. Of course, the military’s justification for such invasiveness was “national security,” but given the sheer impossibility of hooded, goggled, and shackled men sneaking something nefarious onto or into their bodies in such circumstances meant the forced nudity and cavity searches were actually used to humiliate detainees. This was a deduction made by Shafiq Rasul, another British detainee released in 2004, who described his experience at in-processing this way:

“I was then led to a shower. While I was in the shower, a soldier pressed me firmly against the wall using a riot shield or ERF shield. This meant that I was pressed against the wall with a dribble of water dropping on my head and couldn’t wash properly. I also had my goggles on in the shower. After this I was walked naked to another table where a cavity search was conducted. This was both painful and humiliating. Having been subjected to the same search before we left Kandahar and having been kept shackled throughout the time we were transported, there can have been no purpose to this search other than to further humiliate or punish us. I was taken, naked, to a woman who processed me as Asif describes. I think this was meant to further humiliate me.”

Although these humiliating instances of forced nudity and cavity searches were most frequent at in-processing, they continued to happen throughout the rest of detainees’ time at Gitmo. An anonymous detainee interviewed by Mahvish Rukhsana Khan in her book My Guantanamo Diary recounted, as his eyes welled up with tears, how soldiers had “put their finger inside” him at least fifteen to sixteen times, maybe more. It wasn’t done for medical purposes or to see if he was hiding something. He explained, “There was no purpose other than to degrade Muslim men.”

This detainee’s testimony makes clear that these are not only sexual violations, they are equally gender, cultural, and religious violations as well. The forced nudity and cavity searches are military strategies of attacking the detainee body at the level of identity, degrading his identification as a Muslim and as a man, in attempt to reduce him to pure object of control. That these strategies
are experienced as religious and gender affronts to detainees is not surprising given Islamic cultural traditions of bodily modesty and normative gender behavior and comportment. In short, cavity searches and forced nudity are military strategies to emasculate the bodies of detainees.

Gitmo is also engineered in such a way as to make sure that such methods of emasculation were daily experiences, not singular events. In the early days of Gitmo, when detainees were housed only in the outdoor dog kennel cages of Camp X-Ray, the men had to tell the guards when they needed to use the bathroom, since there were no toilets in the cages, only a bucket used for pissing. A detainee would then be escorted to a nearby portaloo, where multiple guards would take the detainee’s pants down, exposing his genitals. Then they would stand in front of the open door of the toilet watching the man take a shit.

When detainees were later moved to the stable structures of Camps 1 through 3 they didn’t find any respite from the bodily humiliation and emasculation strategies. Although they now had personal toilets, the steel mesh cells allowed guards and fellow detainees alike to observe the men expose themselves as they pissed and shit. Detainees regularly noted how degrading this was to them as Muslim men. All of this humiliation was compounded when the men had to perform or expose their nude or semi-nude bodies in front of female guards.

By attacking the detainee’s privacy and sense of decency, all of which are related to his cultural, religious, and gender identity, these methods of nudity and bodily invasiveness violate the body and actually produce bodily effects that are as significant as they are long-lasting. The nongovernmental human rights agencies Physicians for Human Rights and The Center for Victims of Torture in Minnesota have explained that the function and desired effect of forced nudity is the creation of a power differential between detainees and their captors. Such a power differential is created by inducing immediate bodily shame in the detainee and establishing an environment where the threat of sexual assault, if not the actuality of it, are always present. That the environment of
potential sexual assault has been constructed so perfectly prior to the military’s use of force-feeding is precisely why detainees may experience this new violation as an extension of the other forms of sexual assault they endure. Being forced to strip naked and expose ones genitals and anus, being penetrated by the military’s fingers and instruments, actually primes the body for the experience of force-feeding. These are the formative experiences that allow force-feeding to achieve its meaning and understanding, a meaning that always refers back to sexual violations, which attempt to degrade and strip gender identity, cultural identity, and religious identity from the detainee body. So when Moqbel says that the feeding tube was “thrust in,” he situates the experience of force-feeding within a history and field of sexual violence that’s been perpetrated on his body.

Next, I’d like to look closely at two sentences from Moqbel’s account that discuss bodily sensations he experienced upon entry of the tube, which follow the “thrusting” he endures. He says, “As it was thrust in it made me feel like throwing up. I wanted to vomit, but I couldn’t.” Although these two sentences, “made me feel like throwing up” and “I wanted to vomit”, may seem to be redundant statements, I’d like to make a clear distinction between the two. Each statement makes a different claim about the bodily meaning and the body’s interpretive response to force-feeding. The two claims Moqbel offers in his statement are not unique to him alone, but rather are shared experiences which are backed up by descriptions from both Gitmo hunger strikers and hunger strikers throughout history who’ve endured force-feeding. Moqbel’s two phases “feel like throwing up” and “I wanted to vomit” present the difference between what might be thought of as a body’s autonomic resistance to force-feeding, and a body’s intentional resistance to force-feeding.

In the first instance, I choose to read Moqbel’s declaration “it made me feel like throwing up” as a physiological response to force-feeding. The violation of a tube jammed up the nose and snaked down the back of the throat is not just painful, it oftentimes activates the gag reflex which can and does lead to vomiting. It quite literally makes a person feel like throwing up, and on
occasion that feeling leads to hunger strikers actually vomiting during the course of force-feeding. Detainees, their lawyers, and Gitmo medical staff have all noted instances where a detainee will sometimes vomit uncontrollably at some point in the process. The detainee body on these occasions automatically rejects the military’s feeding-tube. It resists the introduction of the foreign object in the most immediate way possible, by attempting to evacuate it from the body’s confines. The inserted tube sets off a series of extremely quick, almost imperceptible, signals from the body’s central nervous system, activating the gag reflex to choke, spasm, and sometimes vomit as a way to prevent the object from entering the body further. This is the body’s natural defense mechanism, it’s autonomic way of resisting. A second trigger of vomiting often occurs too, when the liquid nutrition funneled through the tube enters the stomach. If the liquid is of a certain temperature or if it poured at an accelerated rate, the body engages in another autonomic response where it also attempts to evacuate the substance from the body’s confines.

Vomiting as an autonomic response to force-feeding has a history, like so much else, that begins with the suffragette hunger strikers. In August 1912 a clinical study conducted by British physicians entitled “Preliminary Report on the Forcible Feedings of Suffrage Prisoners,” published in The Lancet, analyzed the health effects of force-feeding on suffragette hunger strikers. The study examined and interviewed 90 women who’d been force-fed while jailed in British custody. According to the study numerous suffragettes reported that the passage of the tube, in either oral or nasal feeding, was accompanied by severe choking and vomiting. The study showed that gagging and regurgitation were a product of the delivery method of the liquid nutrition. When the liquid was cold, poured in large quantities, and/or poured too rapidly into an empty stomach, the result was not only excruciating pain but frequent bouts of vomiting.46

Some of the suffragette’s ghastly descriptions echoed those provided by Gitmo detainees such as Moqbel and Sami al Haj. For instance, one anonymous suffragette recounted her force-
feeding this way: “The passage of the tube through the nose caused me but little inconvenience this time, but its further passage caused me to retch, vomit, shake, and suffocate to such an extent that in the struggle for air I raised my body til I stood upright in spite of the three or four wardresses holding me down, after which I sank back in the chair exhausted.” Here we see the body’s autonomic resistance take almost total control over the body in an attempt to throw the foreign object and its contents up and outside the body. The resistance in this case is so strong that it imbibes the body with an almost superhuman strength, fortifying it from lying to standing despite the force of medics trying to pin her down.

The vomiting, when it does occur, is equally uncontrollable. Detainees and suffragettes alike have mentioned throwing up on themselves, filthying their clothes, while also occasionally vomiting on adjacent prison officials and medical personnel. In these scenarios呕吐ing on one’s captors often lead to punishment beyond mere force-feeding. Take the story of Lady Constance Lytton, a regular suffragette hunger striker, who in this passage of her memoir recounts the body’s autonomic resistance to force-feeding and the subsequent retribution she received because of it.

*Then be put down my throat a tube which seemed to me much too wide and was something like four feet in length. The irritation of the tube was excessive. I choked the moment it touched my throat until it had got down. Then the food was poured in quickly; it made me sick a few seconds after it was down and the action of the sickness made my body and legs double up, but the wardresses instantly pressed back my head and the doctor leant on my knees. The horror of it was more than I can describe. I got sick over the doctor and wardresses, and it seemed a long time before they took the tube out...I had been sick over my hair, which, though short, hung on either side of my face, all over the wall near my bed, and my clothes seemed to be saturated with it, but the wardresses told me they could not get me a change that night as it was too late, the office was shut.*

The brutal reality of force-feeding described here so vividly by Lytton is an experience shared by many detainees at Gitmo. Sami al Haj, for one, has on numerous occasions described how he was prone to frequent episodes of vomiting during tube feeding, resulting in punishment similar to that chronicled by Lady Constance Lytton. He even writes in his testimony cited above, “If I do throw up on myself, which happens frequently, I am given no clean clothes, and I cannot even clean myself, since they keep the water turned off when we get back to our cells.” Given the
descriptions of Lytton and al Haj and the thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, hunger strikers with similar experiences, it seems hard to fathom how force-feeding could ever be seen as anything other than a method of intense punishment, a punishment, it should be added, that the body seems to have no problems recognizing as an unwarranted violation, a corporeal and existential threat which is met with an autonomic resistance.

The flip-side of autonomic resistance is what I call intentional resistance to force-feeding, which can be read in Moqbel’s statement, “I wanted to vomit, but I couldn’t.” Here again, the method of resistance takes the form of throwing up. But as opposed to his previous sentence “it made me feel like throwing up,” which alludes to the body’s natural reaction to the tube being snaked through the body, “I wanted to vomit” suggests a deliberate, even willful desire to throw up in order to resist the forcible feeding. That intent is unable to materialize in Moqbel’s case, since he says that he couldn’t vomit even though he wanted to. But, in plenty of other cases detainees successfully resist being force-fed by actively and deliberately forcing themselves to throw up whatever nutrients the military forces down their gullets. This is their way of continuing to deny themselves food and sustain their hunger strike. They disallow the military’s force-feeding regimen to break their strike.

This form of intentional resistance finds its precursor too in the suffragette hunger strikes and force-feedings. Suffragettes learned that they could honor their hunger strike, even in the face of forcible feeding, by vomiting up what was being fed to them. In the following passage suffragette Dorothy Pethick echoes the testimony of Moqbel, when she explains that the intentional resistance, wanting to vomit, wasn’t always met with success.

Without being asked whether I would take food naturally, I was set on by the wardresses, flung violently into the chair, one wardress sat on my knees, and the others held me down by the ankles, feet and head. The doctor was exceedingly rough...They had an awful job to dig us back into our cells again, and after that they always brought the feeding equipment to us. We tried to break the process and make ourselves sick every time by putting our fingers down our throats, but it didn’t always work.50
Feminist scholar Maud Ellman has argued that while at the literal level the women’s vomiting was a throwing up food, at the political level their vomiting was a rejecting of the ideology of their oppressors. I find Ellman’s analysis of the suffragettes’ regurgitation convincing, and see it operating similarly in the Gitmo context.

In the case of the suffragettes, vomit was the rejection of the paternalism and patriarchy of the State, as it attempted to control and regulate female bodies and lives without providing even a representational opportunity, in the form of the vote, for women to engage in the governance of their own well-being. This same paternalistic and patriarchal strategy was embedded in the very process of force-feeding itself, where women’s bodies are no longer their own, but are spoken for and acted upon by the State. Every time the women vomit they are throwing up not just food but everything that the State coercively tells them is good for them.

In the case of Gitmo detainees the struggle is quite similar. Force-feeding is but another method for the State to control, discipline, and regulate their bodies. By vomiting detainees are rejecting not just the food but the military’s entire ideological apparatus, an apparatus which takes it as a given that the bodies of detainees are mere objects to be dominated and managed. Where force-feeding is a method to obliterate detainee agency and subjectivity, vomiting becomes a tactic of intentional resistance for detainees, one that is tied to their resistance more generally, whether that’s their refusal to eat, or the refusal to leave their cell and be taken to the hospital, or their refusal to comply with doctors, or their struggle against the restraints, or the jerking of their head to avoid the insertion of the feeding tube. In fact, it is because so few alternatives exist that vomiting becomes one of the best forms of resistance available to them among an extremely limited number of options, in the same way that hunger striking is one of the best forms of resistance available to them among a limited number of options. The body is always the site of contestation, but in these cases the body’s physical processes, not just the body itself, become the medium of resistance.
Whereas force-feeding is the weapon of discipline and domination, vomiting is the weapon of political agency.

Vomiting as a method to combat force-feeding might even be seen as an extension of the bodily fluid “cocktails” detainees throw at guards on the blocks, or the spitting they do on various camp staff. “Cocktails”, as the military has designated them, are generally any concoction of detainee spit, piss, blood, urine, feces, and/or semen. Such bodily excretions then become weaponized, sometimes to attack sometimes to defend. In either case, they make up the tiny resistances that exist daily for detainees in the ongoing battle over conditions and treatment.

In the lead up to the summer 2005 hunger strike cocktails and spitting were the primary forms of disciplinary infractions that occurred on the blocks. In June 2006 the Pentagon released a trove of records, now referred to as “Incident Reports of Disciplinary Violations”, which documented every single incident of “assault, harassment or humiliation of U.S. personnel by detainees at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.” The Seton Hall University Law School produced a report analyzing the government’s data, and found that of the 499 offenses the military recorded, including some that were truly petty and others which caused no injuries to staff, 346 of the violations were for spitting or throwing cocktails. That accounts for 69% of all offenses. In other words, using bodily fluids and excretions to combat their treatment and resist the military strategy to control their body was a popular practice long before the hunger strikes of summer and fall 2005. That bodily practice continued, with a new variation in the form of vomiting, when force-feeding was introduced.

All of these various ways of understanding force-feeding, as traumatic bodily violation, as rape and sexual violation, as that which stirs detainee bodies into acts of autonomic or intentional resistance, are inductive meanings that come from paying close attention to how hunger strikers talk about force-feeding. It should almost go without saying that the military talks about force-feeding in
a very different way. The language they use doesn’t necessarily counter the meanings ascribed to force-feeding by detainees, as much as the military may want it to. In fact, the language the military uses, when read critically against force-feeding as practice and force-feeding as a medical, ethical, and legal concept, actually reinforces the idea that force-feeding is a punitive and invasive bodily violation.

When the military and the State speak of force-feeding hunger strikers they invariably speak of it as a “life-saving measure.” There may be variations of this language, but the framing is always that force-feeding hunger strikers is done to save the detainee’s life. Talking about force-feeding as a “life-saving measure” reveals the manner by which the State attempts to control the meaning of force-feeding in public discourse and public perception. Which is to say, that “life-saving measure” points to the State’s discursive politics, or what may perhaps be more more appropriately thought of as propaganda.

By using the term “life saving measure”, or terms like it, instead of “force-feeding”, the military attempts to skate across any possible criticism. How could anyone possibly denounce an attempt to save life? Such phrases are politico-linguistic strategies to neutralize the actual force of force-feeding, trivialize the seriousness of force-feeding, and make invisible the violence and invasiveness of force-feeding. The very term “force-feeding” is avoided by the military at all costs. From the guards to camp doctors to spokespeople to camp commanders to the halls of Washington the term “force-feeding” is never used to describe the act. In its place are strategic euphemisms, or what Guantanamo lawyer Clive Stafford Smith has called “soldier-speak” or “lying by semantics” to hide what is actually going on at the camp, and what is actually happening to hunger strikers.53

When news of the renewed hunger strike and the subsequent use of force-feeding first broke in early September camp officials and military spokespeople used varied but general euphemisms in interviews and press conferences. At first they told reporters that hospitalized hunger strikers were
merely “receiving nutrition.” When asked directly by The Guardian newspaper whether they were “force-feeding” hunger strikers, Pentagon spokespersons refused to answer, saying only that detainees “are receiving nutrition.” Later that phrase was modified to “fed through medical assistance”, before it was finally refined to “fed through tubes” or “tube-feeding”, both of which were used substantially throughout the month of September.

“Tube-feeding”, of course, isn’t very descriptive. It’s only correct in the technical sense of the term; that is, a tube is the mechanism by which one is fed. This kind of technical terminology erases much of the sensations, experience, and brutal reality associated with the practice. An obvious parallel to the government’s use of the term “tube-feeding” may be their use of the term “walling”, which refers to an enhanced interrogation technique whereby a detainee is grabbed around the neck with a towel and thrown face-first into a plywood wall. Sure a wall is involved in the act, but to call it “walling”, just as to call it “tube-feeding”, obscures the way that piece of technical equipment is put to use, while also doing a supreme disservice to the violating experiences that arise from that equipment’s implementation.

Eventually, “tube-feeding” gave way to one of the most prominent euphemisms the military used for force-feeding, which was to call it “assisted feeding”. Camp spokesman Maj. Gen. Jeffrey J. Weir first used the term in describing the process to the New York Times when the story first broke about the renewed hunger strike. Later, camp commander Gen. Jay Hood told a group of civilian physicians visiting the camp during the strike that the military preferred to call it “assisted feeding”, avoiding the term force-feeding. Emphasizing the feeding as “assisted” erases any sense that detainees feel violated by the feeding, on the one hand. On the other hand, it completely obscures the fact that the feeding happens without their consent. It’s as if the military would like us to believe that they are making a genuine humanitarian effort to “assist” detainees, as opposed to penetrating
and violating their bodies against their consent, and against their expressed wishes not to be “assisted.”

The military’s most humble attempt at neutrality was calling it “involuntary feeding.” Although camp officials would occasionally speak to the media about using “involuntary feeding” on hunger strikers, the euphemism was generally how they referred to it internally. For instance, in Gitmo’s Detention Hospital Standard Operating Procedure, force-feeding is repeatedly referred to as “involuntary feeding” throughout the document. In an article appearing in The Wire, the camp’s own official news magazine for infantry on the island, camp officials stated that they were conducting “involuntary feedings” of hunger strikers, but, they assured the troops, these feedings were, “done humanely and are well within common standards of medical care.”\(^{60}\) In a majority of cases when “involuntary feeding” was used it’s accompanied by clarifications that either state this is done for the sake of the detainee’s life and health or that it’s a common medical practice, both of which attempt to neutralize any form of critical thinking that would lead one to question whether or it’s moral, legal, or ethical to feed someone involuntarily, i.e. against their will. To be sure, calling it “involuntary feeding” does acknowledge the fact that detainees aren’t voluntarily accepting nutrition. But, it also negates the fact that they are literally forced, oftentimes quite violently, into taking liquid nutrition, even though hunger strikers fiercely resist.

Eventually the military settled on strict medical terminology, calling it “enteral feeding.” This was the euphemism used most predominantly in Gitmo’s Detention Hospital Standard Operating Procedure. It’s also the phrase most used, perhaps unsurprisingly, by Gitmo’s medical staff, especially the commander of the camp hospital Capt. John Edmondson, who used the term both in media interviews and in sworn affidavits from detainee court cases.\(^{61}\)\(^{62}\) But as detainees continued their renewed hunger strike in the face of force-feeding week after week, month after month, the phrase “enteral feeding” gained more and more traction among military and government
officials, so that it is now firmly entrenched in the lexicon of Guantanamo. Some nine years later, “enteral feeding” is still the preferred term even now for force-feeding hunger strikers at the camp. In fact, during the most recent hunger strike of 2013 President Obama actually used the term “force-feeding” during a press conference to describe the military’s treatment of hunger strikers at the camp. In an effort to recuperate the narrative, military officials at Gitmo quickly corrected the president’s apparent misunderstanding by stating, “We don’t force-feed right now at Gitmo.” Rather, they assured the media, the military conducts “enteral feeding” of hunger strikers. The correction of the president’s mis-speak shows just how important language is with regards to the military’s force-feeding policy. “Enteral feeding” becomes political terminology precisely because it’s medical terminology. By using medical nomenclature to describe what is essentially a torturous strategy of punishment and control the military draws off any possible criticism, all while legitimizing it for themselves and the public. For how could anyone object to something that sounds so benign, so scientific, so medical?

Of course, this is not a new strategy by any means. It has been in place since the first days that force-feeding was introduced to stamp out hunger strikes. When British authorities began force-feeding suffragette hunger strikers in 1909 the government was loathe to use the term “force-feeding”, since that was the term being used in major media outlets and suffragette literature. The government preferred instead to use “hospital treatment” or “medical treatment” as euphemisms to propagandize their torturous policy.

This linguistic strategy isn’t unique to hunger strikers and force-feeding either. Various governments and regimes use this all the time to retain power or enforce policy. Euphemisms, scientific language, and medicalization of horrific acts allow atrocities and torture to be perpetrated without question all over the world and all throughout history. “Eugenics” was a scientific term used to legitimize racism and brutalize people of color. “Euthanasia” was used in place of human
extermination in Nazi Germany, as was “therapeutic killing”, “killing as healing”, “killing for the sake of the strong and the healthy.”<sup>65</sup> “Ethnic cleansing” is used in place of genocide. “Human experimentation” is used instead of medical torture. All of these examples, and many more not listed, are legitimizations of abuses and abominations using nothing more than language, which can be manipulated to create the illusion of moral, legal, and ethical correctness.

The United States’ entire war on terrorism is a war of linguistics. Or put another way, in executing the war on terror language becomes war by other means, a military strategy the same as any other military strategy used at Gitmo. Euphemisms are used ad nauseam to justify and legitimize the policies and actions of the United States. Military occupation becomes “Democracy building.” Mercenary soldiers and regional warlords become “allied forces.” Illegal surveillance and wire taps become “data mining.” CIA kidnapping becomes “extraordinary rendition.” Torture becomes “enhanced interrogation techniques,” Prisoners of war become “enemy combatants” or “detainees.” Suicide attempts by “detainees” become “manipulative self injurious behavior.” Hunger strikes against prison policies become “voluntary fasts.” Force-feeding fits precisely in this vast pantheon of euphemisms when it becomes “assisted feeding” or “involuntary feeding” or “enteral feeding.”

Ethicist Nancy Sherman has stated that the government’s strategic use of technical, medical, and political euphemisms have made Guantanamo not just a legal black hole but a “moral black hole” where “by design, morality is made to recede.”<sup>66</sup> Sherman argues that such euphemisms enable camp doctors, and arguably all camp personnel, to “insulate their moral consciences” from the cruelty they perpetrate on detainees, at the same time that they disable the general public’s moral conscience and critical understanding of the cruel nature of the acts being perpetrated. The government and military’s double-speak, and its use of technical and medical vocabulary specifically,
make force-feeding seem completely ethical, or at the very least ethically ambiguous, where ethical ambiguity still serves the purpose of deterring potential criticisms.

The military may have presented force-feeding as ethical, or at least ethically ambiguous, by referring to it as “enteral feeding” or “assisted feeding” but this was absolutely not the case. Authoritative medical bodies, such as the World Medical Association and the International Committee of the Red Cross, have adopted various resolutions that rule on the ethical guidelines of hunger strikers and force-feeding. The resolutions are rather emphatic in their determination that force-feeding in nearly every circumstance is a violation of medical ethics. So while the Pentagon, Department of Justice, and White House may act as if the ethics of force-feeding are either ethical or up for debate the medical establishment is pretty unanimous and unwavering in its opinion that it is in fact an unethical medical practice. In order to illustrate just how remarkably force-feeding at Gitmo violated accepted medical ethics I’d like to concentrate on three major medical resolutions in particular - the World Medical Association’s “Declaration of Tokyo” and “Declaration of Malta”, and the ICRC’s “Medical and Ethical Aspects of Hunger Strikes in Custody.” While there are a multitude of other published reports and opinions from medical authorities regarding force-feeding, these three resolutions are the most significant and universally-adopted rulings to date.

The first major ruling in the medical world on the ethics of force-feeding appears in the World Medical Association’s “Declaration of Tokyo”, also known as “Guidelines for Physicians Concerning Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment in Relation to Detention and Imprisonment.” Adopted in 1975, and subsequently revised in 2005 and 2006, the Declaration of Tokyo explicitly prohibits doctors from condoning or participating in any aspect of torture, either directly or indirectly. It also provides guidelines for the ethical obligations doctors might have to perform when in the presence of torture. The two articles that are most pertinent to understanding force-feeding as practiced at Guantanamo are articles Five and Six.
Article Five of the Declaration of Tokyo states: “A physician must have complete clinical independence in deciding upon the care of a person for whom he or she is medically responsible. The physician's fundamental role is to alleviate the distress of his or her fellow human beings, and no motive, whether personal, collective or political, shall prevail against this higher purpose.” These appear to be basis for any medical practice in any situation, civilian or military. However, at Gitmo these ethical coordinates weren’t followed when mapping the military response to detainee hunger strikes.

In the first instance, doctors at Gitmo had no real clinical independence. Only with the most generous interpretation could doctors at Gitmo be said to be “independent.” And with respect to the hunger strikers independence was absolutely not the case. Doctors at Gitmo weren’t nonpartisan, private medical practitioners outsourced to the Pentagon to provide care for detainees. Medical personnel at Gitmo were enlisted infantry and officers of rank. Sure, they were privy to the same medical education, licensing, and ethical codes as any other doctor, but they were also soldiers in the US military who followed a chain of command. And therein lay the dilemma. Follow medical ethics or follow chain of command? Because with regards to force-feeding, and a number of other practices medical doctors developed at Gitmo, it really was a choice between one or the other. Medical ethics and chain of command were often at odds.

The Pentagon made the choice quite easy for doctors, though. Written into the camps’ Detention Hospital Standard Operating Procedure (DH SOP) was language that made clear both doctors’ duty and the chain of command with regards to force-feeding. This passage from the Detention Hospital SOP, makes evident that force-feeding, while administered by the camp’s doctors, was strictly a decision by the camp’s commander.

If during the course of a hunger strike, involuntary re-feeding is required, the JTF-GTMO Surgeon will make specific recommendations to the JTF-GTMO Commander as to the timing and requirement for such voluntary re-feeding. The JTF-GTMO Commander will decide, in writing, whether to order the involuntary re-feeding. If the JTF-GTMO Commander, as the approval authority, makes the decision to authorize voluntary re-feeding of a detainee, he
will immediately inform the Commander, USSOUTHCOM, of his decision. In turn, the Commander, USSOUTHCOM, will notify appropriate Joint Staff and Department of Defense offices of the need to initiate involuntary re-feeding of a detainee.68

So important was the detail that the camp commander serve as the ultimate authority over force-feeding decisions that it had to be repeated in the SOP a page later. “Once again, no direct action will be taken to involuntarily feed a detainee without the written approval of the JTF-GTMO Commander as set out above.”69

Given that the order to force-feed is, strictly speaking, a military decision more so than a medical decision, doctors at Gitmo do not have “complete clinical independence in deciding upon the care of a person,” as is outlined in the Declaration of Tokyo’s Article Five. In fact, doctors at Gitmo really have no clinical independence to speak of when it comes to force-feeding. A camp doctor could theoretically determine that a hunger striker isn’t fit for force-feeding, or she could simply not recommend a detainee be force-fed for any reason, and yet that doctor could still be forced to administer force-feeding to the hunger striker if it was so ordered by the camp commander. Or as another example, a camp doctor may feel obliged to adhere to the medical ethics outlined by the World Medical Association, and outright oppose the use of force-feeding on any hunger strike in any circumstance on the grounds that she is honoring recognized and accepted medical ethics. However, despite her ethical stance she could still be ordered to force-feed a particular hunger striker anyway if the camp commander ordered it. Gitmo’s force-feeding policy, then, not only betrays the clinical independence supposedly bestowed to medical professionals, it places doctors in the complicated position of choosing to honor their profession or their military chain of command. The Pentagon, however, made sure this was never an issue.

In a tour of the camp in October 2005 shortly after the renewed hunger strikers were met with force-feeding, Dr. John Edmondson told a group of visiting civilian doctors, psychologists, and ethicists that even though the military’s force-feeding policy was controversial it wasn’t a huge
concern. The reason why, according to Edmondson, was because medical personnel were “screened” prior to their deployment “to ensure that they do not have ethical objections to assisted feeding.” In other words, the only people serving on the medical staff at Gitmo during the renewed hunger strike were doctors and nurses who were already pro-force-feeding, or who would at least force-feed with no objections. Thus the possibility that Gitmo doctors would ever take issue with or even stand against the camp commander’s order to force-feed, despite ethical codes of their profession, was nullified. There was no real clinical independence being practiced by camp doctors. Such independence in the realm of force-feeding hunger strikers was either jeopardized by the military chain of command and camp policy, or prevented outright by a screening process prior to deployment to Gitmo. In these ways the force-feeding policy at Gitmo was in clear violation of the World Medical Association’s Declaration of Tokyo Article Five.

It was also an a violation of the Tokyo Declaration’s Article Six, which states:

Where a prisoner refuses nourishment and is considered by the physician as capable of forming an unimpaired and rational judgment concerning the consequences of such a voluntary refusal of nourishment, he or she shall not be fed artificially. The decision as to the capacity of the prisoner to form such a judgment should be confirmed by at least one other independent physician. The consequences of the refusal of nourishment shall be explained by the physician to the prisoner.

Although the term isn’t used explicitly, what Article Six is referencing here is a hunger strike. Otherwise the language and directive are quite clear — a hunger striker “shall not be fed artificially.”

The caveat that the prisoner should be capable of making a rationale decision is something to take seriously, since there would be exceptions to someone who has refused to eat out of some mental impairment. In those cases it would seem obvious that the patient isn’t a hunger striker. At Guantanamo it’s safe to say that detainees engaged in the renewed hunger strike were acting rationally, and making a rational judgement as to their health. The very fact that they had a coherent politics to their action, replete with legitimate critiques of their situation, a loose organizational structure, and a series of triggering events that led them to a conscious and quite difficult decision to
starve themselves as a political act (rather than an act driven by some psychosis), makes obvious that hunger striking detainees were unimpaired and rational. Presumably the military could force-feed the hunger strikers, and thus skirt the ethical ban on force-feeding, if they diagnosed detainees as being mentally impaired and irrational patients who were unable to know what was in their individual best interest. However, if that was the case, and detainees were considered by the military and camp medical staff to be mentally impaired or irrational in some capacity, then those detainees should have received treatment for said psychosis, rather than force-feeding. Furthermore, if it was the case that the hunger strikers were mentally compromised then they almost certainly shouldn’t have been punished by placement in isolation, or had their comfort items taken away, or been forcefully extracted from their cells by riot squads, all of which were part and parcel of the military’s force-feeding strategy. However, because the hunger strikers were of sound mind and body in their decision to starve themselves, or at least as sound in mind and body as could be reasonably expected for men who had been held for years in indefinite detention, isolation, and suffered serious abuse, their force-feeding by camp medical staff was in complete disregard to the Tokyo Declarations’ Article Six.

The article also mentions that a second independent doctor should confirm the mental capacity of the prisoner, and that the medical consequences of hunger striking should be explained to the prisoner. In the first instance, a second independent physician was never made available to hunger strikers. Non-military physicians were repeatedly denied access to inspect and examine the prisoners by the Pentagon, despite the numerous requests made by detainee lawyers and the various motions they filed in court for such visitations by independent doctors. As for providing the hunger striking prisoner with information regarding the medical risks of extended starvation, the issue is quite complicated.
According to the Detention Hospital SOP a detainee is supposed to receive a visitation from a medical officer and a translator to explain possible medical complications that could arise due to the hunger strike, at which point a document is signed by both the medical officer and the translator. That document states: “It has been explained to the detainee the grave risks involved with not following the medical advice directing him to eat life-sustaining food and to drink water/ fluids…He understands that his refusal to eat life-sustaining food or drink water/fluids and to follow the medical advice may cause irreparable harm to himself or lead to his death.”

While at first glance this may appear fairly straight-forward, the phrase “follow the medical advice” seems peculiar. It suggests that the “medical advice” doctors at the camp are providing is that detainees should give up their hunger strike, lest they suffer “grave risks.” Yet, advising detainees to quit their protest is not a duty proscribed to doctors in such situations. Nothing in the Declaration of Tokyo, or for that matter any of the various medical ethics documents pertaining to hunger strikers, suggests that it’s the role of physicians to advise, coerce, or scare detainees out of their hunger strike. They need only explain the medical risks, which is quite different from advising them to quit.

That doctors at the camp served as intermediaries to get detainees to give up their hunger strike is made more clear in other sections of the medical SOP. Presuming that doctors aren’t successful at medically advising detainees to quit their hunger strike, the next steps are to prepare them for force-feeding in two distinct ways. First, the SOP states, “The DH medical staff shall make every effort to convince the detainee to accept treatment.”72 In other words, if a detainee refuses to quit his hunger strike then it is the duty of camp doctors to actively and exhaustively persuade detainees to undergo force-feeding. This is then coupled with another directive of camp medical personnel, which states, “DH medical personnel will make every effort to obtain consent from a voluntary faster for treatment.”73 Obtaining consent is an important aspect here, since
without it, doctors are in the very literal sense of the word force-feeding hunger strikers without their permission and against their expressed wishes, in which case misnomers like “enteral feeding” and “assisted feeding” are null and void. Again, camp doctors are hardly acting independently in these situations, since they are actively aiding the military in putting down the detainees’ protest. By advising the men to quit their hunger strike, and then convincing them to undergo force-feeding, and then attempting to obtain their consent to force-feed in order for the procedure to not be considered “force-feeding, medical staff at Gitmo are violating medical ethics outlined in the Tokyo Declaration, first by not practicing clinical independence in their duties, then by forcibly feeding rational hunger strikers against their consent.

Force-feeding detainee hunger strikers was also a violation of the very spirit and raison d’être of the Declaration of Tokyo. The reason the declaration was drafted by the WMA in the first place was because in the mid-1970s doctors from the British Medical Association wanted specific guidelines on the issue of doctor’s relation to scenarios of Torture and Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading treatment. At the time the British government was enlisting physicians to act as observers and participants to interrogations of members of the Irish Republican Army. The interrogation methods used on the IRA in the presence of medical staff were of dubious legality and in some cases tantamount to torture. In order to avoid being an accessory to or providing legitimization to torture a document providing ethical guidelines for doctors in similar scenarios was requested, and thus the Declaration of Tokyo was drafted and adopted. When taking the document as a whole Article Six concerning the treatment of hunger strikers appears out of place. However, according to common medical interpretation and statements from the original drafters of the declaration, adding to the document a ban on force-feeding was absolutely essential to a document concerning torture. The first reason was that force-feeding may be used by authorities as a form of torture under the guise of medical treatment. The other reason was that doctors had case studies where prisoners who
were being tortured chose to hunger strike to protest their torture and inhumane treatment (i.e. situations parallel to Gitmo detainee hunger strikes). In those scenarios the ban on force-feeding was essential because in administering food against the prisoner’s will doctors were effectively reviving the prisoner for more torture. This is exactly the effect of force-feeding at Gitmo. By keeping detainees alive against their will doctors are sentencing detainees to a life of continued indefinite detention, continued isolation, continued punishment and mistreatment, continued harsh interrogation methods, continued disgrace with no hope. All of this amounted to clear violation of established medical ethics outlined in the Declaration of Tokyo.

The Declaration of Tokyo was not the last of the documents to provide ethical guidelines for doctors with respect to hunger striking and force-feeding. In fact, although the Declaration of Tokyo was groundbreaking and specific, many medical professionals felt that it didn’t provide enough guidance to doctors who wanted to perform ethically in their duties as doctors dealing with hunger strikers. After all, the guideline for force-feeding was a mere three sentences in length, a powerful three sentences to be sure, but it hardly accounted for the nuanced situation doctors often had to deal with. Even more, it didn’t address situations where hunger striking took place outside situations of torture, or where torture was difficult to define. All of this eventually necessitated further specification in the form of another document. Thus, the Declaration of Malta was drafted and adopted by the World Medical Association in 1991.

Article Two of the Declaration of Malta builds on the Declaration of Tokyo by reaffirming quite unequivocally that hunger strikers should not be force fed.

*Physicians should respect individuals’ autonomy...Hunger strikers should not be forcibly given treatment they refuse. Forced feeding contrary to an informed and voluntary refusal is unjustifiable. Artificial feeding with the hunger striker’s explicit or implied consent is ethically acceptable.*

Of particular interest is the distinction made in the article between force-feeding, which is absolutely prohibited, and artificial feeding, which may be acceptable.
While the document doesn’t provide further definitions as a way to delineate these two terms, the British Medical Association provided further explanation in a 2006 issue of World Medical Journal, when the Declaration of Malta was being revised. In the journal they note that, “Artificial feeding should not involve coercion,” and that it, “occurs usually at a stage when the hunger striker is no longer fully conscious and too weak to express a view.” Artificial feeding, then, is still administered in the same fashion, usually via nasogastric tube, but it is done strictly to keep a patient alive, presuming he has expressed that consent, and only if the patient is truly near death or in extreme medical danger. This is markedly different than force-feeding, which occurs even when lip-service is paid to it serving a life-saving measure. They state in the journal article:

While claiming to want to save lives, some coercive authorities clearly intend to repress the principle of protest. For example, the authority may decide to force-feed hunger strikers after two weeks of fasting, when there is no immediate medical need to intervene. It may also be decided to feed prisoners who resist by brute force, tying down their limbs and forcibly inserting a nasogastric tube. This coercion is what defines force-feeding.

This explanation describes precisely the kind of feeding that occurs at Guantanamo. Hunger striking detainees weren't administered nutrition once they’d reached a state of near incapacitation or fatality. They were being force-fed after only a matter of weeks, and in some cases days, of renewing their hunger strike. There is no doubt that after even two weeks of starvation detainees are unhealthy, but that’s not the same as being in critical medical danger that requires immediate intervention. Artificial feeding is not a politically calculated misnomer for force-feeding in the way that “assisted feeding” or “enteral feeding” are. It is actually something quite distinct. However, given such definitions and distinctions it is obvious that the military was force-feeding detainees, which was squarely in violation of the medical ethics outlined in Article Two of the Declaration of Malta.

Articles Four and Five of the Declaration of Malta once again raise the issues of clinical independence and balancing dual loyalties to professional ethics and institutional authority. Article Four states, “Physicians with dual loyalties are bound by the same ethical principles as other
physicians, that is to say that their primary obligation is to the individual patient.” Article Five states, “Physicians must remain objective in their assessments and…not allow themselves to be pressured to breach ethical principles, such as intervening medically for non-clinical reasons.” I’ve already discussed how the notion of clinical independence was compromised in a number of ways at Gitmo, from everything from being screened prior to working in the camp hospital, to being a military officer, to following a chain of command with military orders contrary to medical ethics. What’s interesting is that much of the legal justification for the force-feeding policy at Gitmo came from Federal Bureau of Prison (BOP) guidelines, where doctors similarly have to balance a dual loyalty to professional ethics and prison officials who are their employing authority. Regardless of how much the Pentagon claimed that the force-feeding practiced by doctors in Gitmo was similar to the force-feeding practiced by doctors in prison, the major incongruity lay exactly in the area of clinical independence and dual loyalties.

In American prisons, according to BOP guidelines concerning hunger strikes and force-feeding, the decision to force-feed a hunger striking prisoner is first and foremost a medical decision made by a doctor, not a warden or prison official. The guidelines are unambiguous in this regard. “The decision to force treatment upon the inmate is a medical decision, preferably by a written physician’s order,” the guidelines state.80 Or elsewhere, “Only the physician may order involuntary medical treatment.”81 In other words, in the context of American prisons, the buck begins and ends with a doctor making an independent clinical decision, quite unlike Gitmo where the buck starts and stops with the camp commander. This is not to suggest that the BOP’s force-feeding policy was entirely aligned with either the Declaration of Malta or the Declaration of Tokyo, but in the regards of clinical independence, there was at least a firewall built into the policy to prevent prison officials from forcing doctors into performing unethically. In this way not only is Guantanamo’s force-
feeding policy out of sorts with the medical ethics detailed in the Declaration of Malta, but even out of sorts with the BOP force-feeding policy it was supposed to parallel.

There is no doubt that military doctors at Gitmo were split among their dual loyalties to professional ethics and military command. However, it’s not as if they didn’t have the ability to make a choice. At every step along the force-feeding process they absolutely had a choice not to follow orders that were unethical. In fact, as the Declaration of Malta says, doctors at Gitmo actually had an ethical imperative NOT to follow orders that were unethical. Granted, choosing to follow one’s ethical guidelines in opposition to orders from authority is not an easy choice. In fact, it is an incredibly difficult choice. Choosing to oppose the directives of a ranking military officer, in whose command one serves, in favor of honoring the wishes of a patient who is supposedly one’s sworn enemy, who’s supposedly a diabolical terrorist of the highest magnitude, would have been difficult in a way few people can possibly imagine. However, the fact that the choice was difficult is not an excuse to act unethically. Furthermore, doctors perhaps more than most workers in any other profession are tasked routinely with making difficult decisions. The entire medical profession is predicated on the ability to make difficult decisions, but always ethical decisions. Every day they show up for work, and with every patient with whom they interact, they are asked to make difficult decisions ethically. Duty to employer is not a justification to violate established medical ethics. Duty to chain of command is not a justification. Duty to country is not a justification. The “Nuremberg defense” is not a legitimate defense. It stands up neither in court nor in ethical reviews. Difficult as it may have been, doctors at Gitmo always had the opportunity to exercise their agency and act ethically rather than militarily.

Some Gitmo medics later regretted their inability to do just that. At least one doctor came forward after the fact to publicly apologize for choosing chain of command over ethical obligations he knew he was responsible to perform. In a an exercise of truth and reconciliation for himself and
his victims of torture former Gitmo military physician Daniel Lakebacher wrote a strong
denunciation of his participation in force-feeding at the camp.

I do want to make it widely known that I offer no defense for my actions. This is not meant to imply that such an
acknowledgment in any way mitigates my guilt, but considering the ongoing nature of these abuses, I am convinced that
it is both right and important that I speak out against them. To this end, let me be clear that I am guilty of having
helped to confine men to cages without possessing any form of evidence that would justify their incarceration. Worse, I
did not object to seeing some of those men strapped into chairs and force-fed through tubes inserted from their noses into
their stomachs. Bear in mind that such "feedings" were not administered multiple times a day as a result of ongoing
medical problems, but because many men had lost their will to live and had therefore stopped eating. This form of
extreme apathy toward continuing one’s life is sadly understandable when a human being is effectively deprived of
almost all liberty. In this context, forced feedings cannot be seen as a compassionate lifesaving act, but as a most
extreme attempt at total domination of another human being. How can it be anything other than torture to keep
someone alive against their will while indefinitely isolating them in a barren cage? I witnessed these most heinous acts,
and at the time, I neither did, nor said, anything. I did not object because I believed these means could be justified by
the end result of obtaining information or preventing the prisoners from rallying support through martyrdom. I was
wrong in my actions, and I was wrong in my reasoning.\textsuperscript{82}

Some camp medical staff actually made the difficult decision to choose professional ethics over
chain of command whilst still serving at Gitmo. In 2007 a Guantanamo spokesperson told the
Associated Press that there had been instances at the camp where a few physicians refused to
participate in force-feeding due to ethical obligations.\textsuperscript{83} Although the exact number of doctors
who’d refused to administer force-feeding wasn’t revealed, there was at least precedence for doctors
at Gitmo to choose medical ethics over chain of command.

Interestingly, it was exactly a doctor’s refusal to obey prison authorities’ order to force-feed
prisoners that gave rise to the Declaration of Malta itself. In 1989 twenty political prisoners were
admitted to the Johannesburg Hospital after engaging in a nearly two week-long hunger strike to
protest their treatment and conditions of confinement. The political prisoners had been indefinitely
detained without trial by the apartheid State, held incommunicado, and subjected to sensory
deprivation, all of which are quite similar to the conditions of detainees at Gitmo. Using the
Declaration of Tokyo as his guide, physician Dr. William Kalk reasoned that such detention
conditions constituted mental torture.\textsuperscript{84} This reality forced him to cite the Declaration of Tokyo
again by refusing to force-feed the hunger strikers. Even more, he refused to release them back to

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indefinite detention once they had recovered from the effects of their hunger strike.\textsuperscript{85} This became known in the medical community as “Kalk's Refusal.” Afterwards, the South African Medical Association requested that the WMA further clarify doctors’ responsibilities with regards to hunger strikes and force-feeding, since much of Kalk’s decisions regarding treatment were based on interpretations of medical ethics rather than specific guidelines. The resulting document was the Declaration of Malta.

While the declaration certainly provides nuanced guidelines for dealing with hunger strikers, the recurring theme throughout the document is that force-feeding, unlike artificial feeding, should absolutely not be administered under any circumstances. Furthermore, a doctor cannot use the desire to save life as justification to force-feed. This point is mentioned repeatedly. Article Three states, “Avoiding 'harm' means not only minimising damage to health but also not forcing treatment upon competent people nor coercing them to stop fasting,” adding, “beneficence does not necessarily involve prolonging life at all costs.” Elsewhere, it’s declared in Article Eleven that, “It is ethical to allow a determined hunger striker to die in dignity rather than submit that person to repeated interventions against his or her will.” Obviously, allowing a patient to die via hunger strike is an extremely difficult series of events to watch unfold without feeling the need to intervene, but the Declaration of Malta accounts for even these scenarios. Article Seven states, “If a physician is unable for reasons of conscience to abide by a hunger striker's refusal of treatment or artificial feeding, the physician should make this clear at the outset and refer the hunger striker to another physician who is willing to abide by the hunger striker's refusal.” In essence, the Declaration of Malta is nothing less than exhaustive in its analysis of various scenarios in which force-feeding may be tempting for doctors, but it is also nothing less than exhaustive in its emphasis that force-feeding is not an ethical choice. That is brought home in the final article of the declaration, which states:”
Forcible feeding is never ethically acceptable. Even if intended to benefit, feeding accompanied by threats, coercion, force or use of physical restraints is a form of inhuman and degrading treatment. Equally unacceptable is the forced feeding of some detainees in order to intimidate or coerce other hunger strikers to stop fasting.

Unfortunately, this description of how not to treat hunger strikers is actually the blueprint of exactly how the military treated hunger strikers at Gitmo. Force-feeding was accompanied by force when detainees had to be dragged from their cells by the ERF squad to the hospital. Force-feeding was accompanied by restraints in the form of cuffing and shackling detainees to the hospital gurney, and those mechanisms of restraint would only get more painful and elaborate as the hunker strike progressed. Force-feeding was not just accompanied by coercion but was itself a form of coercion, especially insofar as it intimidated other detainees to quit their hunger strike lest they be force-fed as well. In all these ways, and so many more, the force-feeding policy at Gitmo was in violation of the ethical guidelines laid out so comprehensively in the Declaration of Malta.

The third most important document for clarifying medical ethics with regards to hunger strikes and force-feeding comes from the International Committee of the Red Cross. The document “Medical and Ethical Aspects of Hunger Strikes in Custody and the Issue of Torture” was drafted in 1998 by Hernan Reyes, a doctor and Medical Coordinator for Health and Detention for the ICRC. In the document Reyes attempts to distinguish the various types of hunger strikes that happen in the prison context, as well as the different categories of fasters, of which hunger strikers are one. Also examined in the document is the correlation between force-feeding and torture. Whereas in the Declaration of Tokyo the connection between force-feeding and torture was implicit, if unstated, Dr. Reyes is quite explicit in the ICRC paper about the torture of force feeding. “Doctors should never be party to actual coercive feeding, with prisoners being tied down and intravenous drips or esophageal tubes being forced into them,” writes Reyes in his summary, adding, “Such actions can be considered a form of torture, and under no circumstances should doctors participate in them, on the pretext of ‘saving the hunger striker’s life’.”

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This qualification of force-feeding as Torture is significant because it is the first time that the term torture is used explicitly by medical authorities to characterize force-feeding. In the Declaration of Malta only the terms cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment were invoked, and while those terms still constitute major human rights violations and illegal acts they don’t necessarily carry the same discursive weight as capital “T” Torture. But the significance of qualifying force-feeding as torture is more than a linguistic maneuver, it opens the door for doctors who force-feed to be considered violators of human rights and prosecuted for crimes against humanity. In other words, force-feeding is a violation of medical ethics, but it is also so much more than that. It can be considered Torture. In the context of Gitmo this means that camp doctors now take their place next to interrogators, camp commanders, guards, lawyers who drafted “legal documents” for interrogation and detention policies, and Pentagon and White House officials, as professionals who either condoned, made permissible, or performed acts of Torture.

It was because of the ICRC document, as well as the Declaration of Tokyo and the Declaration of Malta, that the United Nations was able to weigh in on the matter of force-feeding at Guantanamo. In a February 2006 report that comprised nearly 18 months of investigation, five special U.N. Rapporteurs concluded that the U.S. military’s force-feeding of detainee hunger strikers, especially when combined with indefinite detention and harsh interrogations, “must be assessed as amounting to torture.” Their in-depth investigation of the camp and its policies proved that not only were Guantanamo doctors in violation of medical ethics but they were in violation of international law and conventions on human rights and torture as well. The U.N. report helped open the floodgates for numerous human rights organizations and medical organizations to come out against force-feeding at Gitmo.

In March 2006 The Lancet published an open letter signed by more than 250 renowned doctors representing seven countries from the World Medical Association urging the U.S. to honor
the standards of ethics agreed upon by doctors across the globe. They demanded the United States military immediately abandon their force-feeding policy in accordance with medical ethics and international law. Drafters of the letter published in The Lancet also suggested that the American Medical Association initiate disciplinary proceedings against members who participated in force-feeding at Gitmo, including and especially the commander of the camp hospital Dr. John Edmondson. No such actions were taken of course, and the force-feeding policy remained in place despite the urgings from medical organizations and human rights groups.

Gitmo’s policy of force-feeding hunger striking detainees hasn’t been rescinded or even altered much in the nine years that have passed since it was instituted in August and September 2005 during the detainees’ renewed hunger strike. International criticism by doctors and medical groups hasn’t changed either, because, of course, medical ethics regarding force-feeding haven’t changed. Year after year doctors have come out individually or en masse in opinion articles, in essays, in letters to lawmakers and military officials, in books, and in political demonstrations, to oppose the American military’s use of force-feeding. These doctors and organizations are not fringe actors. They represent a global medical consensus that holds that force-feeding a patient against his will is absolutely a violation of medical ethics, and in many cases constitutes torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. So, as much as camp commanders, camp doctors, the Pentagon, the Joint Chiefs, the Department of Justice, the Bush White House, and later the Obama White House, would like to make people believe that force-feeding was justifiable, legal, and ethical, especially by using newspeak terms such as “assisted feeding”, at the end of the day they were dead wrong. They could make as many arguments as they’d like, try to find as many loopholes as they’d like, provide as much justification as they’d like, the fact of the matter was that every time they called in a riot team to forcefully extract a hunger striker from his cell, strap him down against his will, penetrate his body with a plastic tube up the nose without his consent, pump him full of nutrition against his resisting
body and cries to stop, the United States was not only violating a detainee’s body, his sense of autonomy, and his dignity, they were violating well-established, well-reasoned, and globally accepted standards of medical ethics.
References


5 Ibid.


9 Ibid.


19 Ibid.


22 Ibid.


26 Ibid., 104.


31 Geddes, “Culpable Complicity,” 83.


36 Howlett, “Writing on the Body?,” 10.

37 Ibid., 10.


40 Ibid., 92.


43 Ibid., 22-23.


47 Ibid., 550.


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Sylvia Pankhurst. *Unshackled* p.140)

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Department of Defense, “Voluntary and Voluntary Total Fasting and Re-Feeding,” 3.

Ibid, 4.

Okie, “Glimpses of Guantanamo.”


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86 Reyes, “Medical and Ethical Aspects of Hunger Strikes.”


Chapter Four

The force-feeding, for all of its might, didn’t break the renewed hunger strike though, not completely anyway. Many detainees held strong in their resistance, resolved to see the movement through to the end, and their own end if need be. However, the coming of Ramadan caused a wrinkle in their resistance. The holy month would begin on October 4, 2005 and last until November 4, and there were at least some among the remaining strikers who wanted to suspend the strike during Ramadan out of religious observance.

Their movement had come so far, and they’d already risked so much. They had been hunger striking for more than a month. Some, who’d refuse to give up during the so-called “Period of Peace” with the Prisoners Council, had been striking for well-more than a month. And many, despite the military’s force-feeding, were falling into hazardous levels of health. The peril of their bodies was putting the military in a bind, which could, if detainees continued, force them to bend, even break. That was the hope anyway. Detainees were putting themselves in grave danger by continuing the fast, but at the same time they were putting the military in danger of digging graves, fast.

Ramadan presented a critical juncture. Would detainees choose to end the hunger strike to honor their faith, or would they continue in order to defend their faith and their humanity? In the end, a compromise was struck. Detainees agreed to designate a small cadre to carry the hunger strike forward through the holy month.¹

Throughout the month of October the number of hunger strikers fluctuated between 25 and 30. This was far less than the number of detainees who were participating in the renewed hunger strike in August and the beginning of September. The military wasted no time proudly trumpeting that they’d reduced the number of strikers to a manageable few who could be “closely monitored.”²
The only problem was that these manageable few who were being closely monitored were a core group steeled in their resolve to continue by any means necessary. Intimidation had not broken them. Isolation had not broken them. Punishment had not broken them. Force-feeding had not broken them. Indeed, of the 25-30 who were still hunger striking, nearly all of them were being force-fed. Some had endured many weeks straight of having a feeding tube shoved into their emaciated bodies.

It was enough to give the International Committee of the Red Cross pause. They conducted a 10-day visit of the base to meet with the remaining hunger strikers and discuss the likely health impacts of their continued fasting. Afterwards, the ICRC was not hesitant in voicing their concerns. “We are worried,” said ICRC spokeswoman Antonella Notari, “the situation is serious and we are discussing it with US authorities.”

Such discussion didn’t seem to matter much to the military. They weren’t interested in dialogue or amicable resolutions. No, they were well past that point. They were interested only in crushing detainee resistance. To that end they made alterations to their force-feeding regime, alterations aimed at making the hunger strike absolutely unbearable. As if the current technique of force-feeding wasn’t already invasive enough, already cruel enough, already humiliating enough, already painful enough, already torturous enough, the military would now calibrate it to completely discourage detainees from continuing their activism.

According to detainees who were force-fed during this period, the first thing that changed was the size of the feeding tube. According to Emad Hassan, a detainee who’d been fasting since the inauguration of the renewed strike on August 8, doctors began using Number 14 tubes, whereas before they were using Number 8 tubes. These numbers refer to the diameter of enteral feeding tubes, which are measured in French units; meaning the tube previously used on detainees was 8 french units (or 2.64mm) while the new tube was 14 French units (or 4.62mm). A difference in a
few millimeters of diameter might not mean much on paper, but in the nostrils of detainees it meant a great deal. Emad Hassan said that the larger, thicker tube barely fit inside his nostrils, and forcing it to fit caused a great deal of pain. Yousef al-Shehri, another detainee who’d been participating in the strike since the July of 2005, estimated that the new tube was about the thickness of a finger. He had no qualms qualifying the tube as an object of Torture, saying that the tube was so thick he couldn’t breathe when it was inserted, and that it caused nose bleeds, swelling, and inflammation. This was made all the more terrible by the fact that, according to numerous detainees, the military doctors often used no anesthesia or sedative during the insertion of the tube.

The next modification the military made to the force-feeding regimen was removing the tube after each feeding, and then reinserting again for the next feeding. When the military first started force-feeding detainees they left the tube in until the detainee was discharged from the clinic or agreed to start eating again, and only then would it be removed. In fact, camp rules were designed specifically to ensure that detainees didn’t remove their feeding tubes but kept them visible at all times, draped over their shoulder. With the new practice, the tube would be pushed in twice a day and pulled out twice a day, forcing detainees to suffer four instances of excruciating pain daily. It’s difficult to understand what the medical justification would be for such a maneuver, especially since Gitmo’s chief medical officer had reportedly explained to detainees initially that the feeding tube had to be left inside of them at all times to avoid medical complications to the nose, throat, and stomach. The constant removal of the tube was not only more painful, but resulted in constant bloody noses. Hassan stated that it “caused blood to flow like cutting a vein.” Yousef al Sherhi reported that several detainees fainted from the process and blood loss.

Along with the use of larger tubes and their constant removal and insertion, the military also amended where they placed the remaining hunger strikers. For the first month and a half the military had been content with transporting all of the critical hunger strikers to the camp’s medical facility,
where force-feeding would take place. This meant that the twenty to thirty remaining hunger
strikers were able to see each other, communicate with one another, check in with another, and
encourage one another to continue. Hospitalizing them, despite the military’s desire for isolation,
assured that none of the detainees felt alone in their struggle. Indeed, the military’s medical
intervention actually helped establish and maintain a sense of camaraderie among the men.
Realizing this was the case, the military revived a strategy they had used a few months prior during
the July hunger strike. They placed hunger strikers in solitary confinement. The force-fed detainees
were split in two groups, some remained at the hospital while others were taken to the disciplinary
isolation blocks in Camp 3. Those who were isolated in the cages of Camp 3 would still be force-
fed, but now medical teams would bring the equipment to their cell to perform the forcible feeding.9

The military’s new heavy-handed revisions to their force-feeding strategy had three
unwanted consequences for them. First, as news of the increasingly brutal force-feeding measures
leaked out of the prison and into the media, it also leaked into the courts. When lawyers presented
testimony from detainees about the new force-feeding regime in front of US District Court judge
Gladys Kessler her response to the government was stern and straight-forward: “The allegations are
very serious and certainly describe treatment that is needlessly painful, abusive, and extremely
inappropriate in terms of needlessly causing further deterioration to the mental condition of the
detainees.”11 Judge Kessler eventually ruled in late October that the government must 1) notify a
detainee’s legal team prior to his being force-fed; 2) provide lawyers with access to their client’s
medical records; and 3) give updates on a detainee’s medical condition whilst he undergoes force-
feeding.12 It didn’t curb the State’s force-feeding practice, but it certainly created accountability
measures.
The second unwanted consequence for the military was that their brutal force-feeding methods won the ire of human rights groups who started to bring increasing pressure to bear on the US government. The United Nations had made repeated efforts to gain access to the camp since it first opened, but with news of the government’s new methods for breaking the detainees’ hunger strikes calls for access to Gitmo were increased. In late October the Bush administration finally granted an invitation to the UN, but with one significant caveat. The UN’s human rights experts and rapporteurs could visit Gitmo, but under no circumstances would they be given access to detainees, either for the purposes of independent interviews or inspection of mistreatment.\(^{13}\) Of course this only led to more pressure from foreign governments and other human rights groups, calling for an independent review of the military’s treatment of its captives.

The final consequence of the military’s revamped force-feeding methods, was that it had the exact opposite effect of what they wanted. As opposed to breaking the hunger strike through beefed-up brutality, the extra-punitive additions to force-feeding actually strengthened the detainees’ resolve and resiliency. The military’s mentality of more force and more punishment, perhaps not surprisingly, backfired. Detainees had been poked, prodded, patrolled, punished, reprimanded, roughed up, separated, repressed, tortured psychologically, and tormented physically for more than three years. They could endure it, because they had endured it, painful as it was, cruel as it was. Detainees knew abuse. That storm had come. They’d weathered it. They were steeled, and still standing.

The small cadre of 25-30 remained committed and steadfast throughout the month of Ramadan. They would not be deterred. If punitive measures and increased force was all that the military had, if this was their best card to play, then they had tipped their hand long ago, and it could no longer do anything for them. Whether the military knew it or not they had conditioned the detainees the same way they had conditioned their own elite troops. They’d done to detainees
exactly what they’d done to cadets at the various SERE schools - expose individuals to so much hurt and heartache, debase and degrade them, barrage them with so much physical and psychological stress, that those individuals become immune to it, even feed off it and become stronger because of it. It was a method of destroying the body in order to develop antibodies. What had happened in the laboratories of military academies was now happening in the camps of Guantanamo, detainees were developing antibodies. The very techniques that the State had reverse-engineered to break detainees had now been reverse-reverse-engineered by detainees themselves.

And so the hunger strike stood strong. When Ramadan ended on November 4 a number of detainees who’d suspended their participation out of religious observance rejoined the hunger strike. Among those new participants was Shaker Aamer, the man who had led the now-defunct Prisoners’ Council. Like so many who had joined the hunger strike in July, or joined the renewed hunger strike that began in August, Aamer was dedicated to hunger strike until the death. In a meeting on November 2, 2005 Shaker Aamer had his lawyer, Clive Stafford Smith, write down what was essentially an epitaph.

“I am dying here every day. Mentally and physically this is happening to all of us. We have been ignored, locked up in the middle of the ocean for four years. Rather than humiliate myself, having to beg for water here in Camp Echo, I have decided to hurry up a process that is going to happen anyway...It is a matter of personal dignity...It is a matter of religious belief and personal dignity...I would like to die quietly, by myself.”14

Aamer was not alone in his sentiments. Many of the remaining hunger strikers, too, had made explicit their intention to starve themselves until they died or until justice was served. Liberty or death. Hunger striking was the last road left, and it led to either destination.

Three detainees determined to die, Majid al-Joudi, Yousef al-Sherhi, and Abdul Rahman Shalabi, gave their official last will and testament to their lawyer, fully anticipating that they would starve themselves to death. Shalabi, who had to be transported to the meeting with his legal team via wheelchair, because he was so frail and weak from his months-long hunger strike, told his lawyers, “after four years in captivity, life and death are the same.”15
Giving more than his last will and testament, Kuwaiti detainee Fawzi al-Odah actually asked his lawyers to assist him in his death. He requested that his lawyers file an injunction in US court on his behalf to have a judge order the military to suspend his force-feeding, and simply allow him to die. “He is willing to take a stand if it will bring justice,” said his lawyer Thomas Wilner.  

According to Wilner, filing such a motion required a psychological assessment performed by an independent doctor. It also required the approval of al-Odah’s family. Obtaining a non-military doctor who could be granted access to Gitmo for the purposes of such an assessment was next to impossible; in fact, it was impossible. Even more though, Fawzi al-Odah’s father, Khalid, refused to give his consent to have his son’s feeding tubes removed. But al-Odah pleaded with his father to allow him to perish bravely and on his own terms. He even went so far as to tell his lawyer to liken his decision to his father Khalid’s own bravery as a US-trained Kuwaiti pilot and underground resistance fighter during Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in the early 90s. “Tell my father I’m trying to be a hero like him,” appealed al-Odah, “and if he was here he would do the same as I am doing.”

Fawzi al-Odah was probably correct. A good many people, his father included, would probably choose to hunger strike, even to the death, after enduring nearly four years of Gitmo’s daily horrors. What was so incredible about the renewed hunger strike in Fall of 2005, was that it inspired those who weren’t even detained at Guantanamo to go on hunger strike. The resistance movement had done more than just build connections between the men, regardless of the barriers of isolation, regardless of the barriers between cells and different camps, regardless of differences in language, and culture, and ethnicity, and nationality. The hunger strike by the end of 2005 was building connections with people outside of the prison walls, people who launched their own hunger strikes in sympathy or in association with the men locked away in Gitmo.

In early December Nadja Dizdarevic, the wife of detainee Hadj Boudella, launched a hunger strike of her own back home in Bosnia. Her husband was one of the “Algerian Six”, six Bosnian
men born in Algeria who, after heavy-handed pressure from the United States, were arrested by the Bosnian government. After a full investigation and trial in Bosnia’s Supreme Court the six were declared innocent and ordered to be immediately released. Instead, US forces with the aid of Bosnian special police snatched the men out of the back of the courthouse and flew them to Gitmo. Nadja Dizdarevic spent the next years of her life not only raising four young children as a single mother but mounting high-profile national campaigns to pressure the Bosnian government to free her husband and the other five men who had been illegally kidnapped. She staged multiple protests, made numerous media appearances, lobbied Bosnian and international governments, and even took her husband’s case to the European Court of Human Rights to pursue criminal charges against Bosnian officials who had a hand in her husband’s illegal rendition to Guantanamo. And on December 8, 2005 Nadja Dizdarevic launched a hunger strike to free her husband and show solidarity with the hunger strikers at Gitmo, one of whom, Lakhdar Boumediene, belonged to the “Algerian Six”. After a week of fasting she collapsed on the steps of the Presidency. She was hospitalized for weeks and eventually quit her hunger strike in order to recover.

December also saw a group of American activists stage a fast for detainees at Gitmo. Twenty-five members of the Christian anti-war group Witness Against Torture traveled to Cuba to take President Bush up on the offer he made earlier that summer when he invited anyone who wanted to have a look at how Guantanamo functioned to go down and see for themselves. Unable to get Pentagon clearance for the flight to the military base, the activists flew to Santiago, Cuba, and from there trekked 66 miles over five days until they reached the military checkpoint gates of Gitmo. Upon reaching the gates they began a week-long fast for justice, honoring the detainees and their suffering through their own act of collective moral witness, while protesting the government’s mistreatment of the imprisoned men. Although by 2005 there had been many rallies
and protests world-wide against the injustices at Gitmo, this was the first collective action taken to
the very doorstep of the camp.

One of the Witness Against Torture members was Frida Berrigan, whose father Philip
Berrigan was a former Roman Catholic priest and major anti-war activist in the 1960s and 70s who
undertook many lengthy hunger strikes during his imprisonment for anti-war activities. Suffice to
say, she knew about hunger strikes, and she knew what they meant. She knew there were historical
moments when the body had to be mobilized into resistance. Ruminating on the use of her own
hunger striking body resisting in concert with bodies of detainees, she wrote the following in her
blog during the encampment at Gitmos’ gates:

What does humanity look like when our only tool for persuasion, for power, for being heard, are our own
bodies? When I think about why I came here, I remember hearing about the hunger striking men in Guantanamo,
and coming to an awareness that this act of deprivation and suffering was their only way to be heard. All they could do
was offer up their bodies. It was an act of extreme desperation, but also an act of extreme hope-- that someone would
answer.

As I have struggled to bend my cravings for food into cravings for justice, I am in dialogue with my body.
Being dependent on the body is such an unamerican predictament. Americans write letters to congress and the editor,
we write checks, we hire lobbyists and pr firms, we employ people and utilize services. We do everything to keep from
using our bodies to make a difference.
For me, this whole journey has been about exploring what it means to have and use a body.22

The 30 to 35 detainees who remained steadfast in their hunger strike knew what it meant to have
and use a body. They’d been using it for months to protest their detention and resist the military’s
stranglehold on their lives. Ever since detainees decided they would no longer stand for the austere
isolation of Camp 5, ever since they organized each other and spread the hunger strike from camp to
camp, ever since they coordinated a Prisoner’s Council to democratize the camp, ever since that
council was forcibly disbanded, ever since Hisham Sliti had a refrigerator thrown at him by an
interrogator, ever since they regathered their strength and their numbers and their commitment and
renewed the hunger strike, ever since they fiercely resisted the penetration of force-feeding tubes,
they had used their bodies to make a difference. Ever since they got off the plane at Guantanamo
they’d been using their bodies in some capacity, either as resistance or self-defense or retaliation, using their bodies to destroy their bodies, one refused meal at a time, but also using their bodies to empower their bodies, one refused meal at a time.

By December 2005 some detainees had been fasting every day straight since August. Others had been fasting on and off since the end of June. Some had recently rejoined the hunger strike at the conclusion of Ramadan. There was certainly a core-group of a couple dozen committed to continuing the hunger strike in spite of the military’s brutal new amendments to the force-feeding regimen, which they were being subjected to every day, twice a day. And although they’d persevered through the increased force of forcible feeding and shown the military that they weren’t about to cave in to ever-increasing oppressive measures of punishment and torture, the military was not done masterminding new oppressive measures of punishment and torture.

In mid-December the military began taking away the last remaining “comfort items” from hunger strikers housed in the isolation blocks of Camp 3. According to long-term hunger striker Fawzi al-Odah this included shoes, blankets, and towels. No longer having anything to cover themselves at night while they slept or during the day when the air conditioner ran on high meant that it became extremely difficult for the hunger strikers to stay warm. Retaining body heat was already made difficult by the fact that through the hunger strike detainees had lost significant amounts of weight and body fat. It didn’t take much for them to be chilled to their now-exposed bones. Taking away blankets, towels, and shoes ensured that they would now also be facing extreme cold on a daily basis.

Military officials also saw to it that both the speed and volume of liquid nutrition forced into detainees increased. Hunger strikers said that doctors began using more cans of Ensure mixed with more bags of water to pump through the feeding tubes. When the increased liquid was combined with the larger feeding tubes, it meant that much more food was all of a sudden coming in much
more rapidly. In some cases the excessive speed and quantity caused bouts of vomiting or diarrhea. Hunger strikers complained about this new adjustment to force-feeding, and asked doctors to slow down the entire process. But doctors refused. In a sworn affidavit submitted by Capt. John Edmondson, physician and commander of the camp hospital, the doctor stated that quicker force-feeding allowed for detainees to spend more time back in their cells as opposed to more time in the hospital if they were to undergo a longer feeding session.\(^{24}\) It was the kind of rationale that sounded as if Gitmo’s medical staff had only the detainees’ best interests in mind when they pumped them full of more food at a faster rate, as if they were doing them a favor. What Dr. Edmondson failed to mention, however, is that this new program greatly pained the detainees, and they’d been vocal about that pain. Isa al-Murbati said that two large bags of fluid had been pumped into him so quickly that it felt like “knives in the stomach.”\(^{25}\) How could such pain be in his best interests? Clearly the accelerated feeding was felt and understood by detainees as another punishment strategy by the military, and it’s hard to see how it could be otherwise given that the military chose to ignore the detainees’ call to slow down the process on account of the undue suffering it caused. As always, this new adjustment to force-feeding served the military’s interests, not the detainees’. The quickened pace of feeding no doubt was a way of alleviating hospital and guard staff who were already taxed from having to force-feed so many detainees at once, a job they hadn’t anticipated or been prepared to handle. The new change to force-feeding served the dual purpose of easing the strain on military personnel and coercing detainees to give up their protest.

Another seemingly benign alteration to the force-feeding regimen that had intolerable consequences for detainees was the addition of laxatives to the liquid nutrition. According to Fawzi al-Odah, in December detainees began noticing that their liquid formula was now being mixed with some new ingredient which caused diarrhea.\(^{26}\) In an interview with his lawyers around this time Emad Hassan noted that detainees would ask to go to the bathroom during the feeding, on account
of the new additive, but they were refused. Some ended up defecating on themselves during the feeding. In some cases they would not be given a clean uniform, and other times the military would put adult diapers on the men during the process.\textsuperscript{27} Years later when recalling this humiliating situation Emad Hassan said that to this day it was still difficult to talk about. “I could not think someone who called himself human did this to me.”\textsuperscript{28}

But the military had done this to him. And however inhumane it might have been, and there was no getting around the fact that forcing detainees to lay and sit in their own shit during force-feeding, in the same way they had been forced to lay and sit in their own vomit, was an egregiously inhumane and degrading way to treat another person, the military absolutely knew what they were doing. Granted, some kind of laxative had been added to their nutritional supplementation precisely because detainees had complained for months that force-feeding was giving them constipation. However, the moment the added laxative went from being a supplement that ailed a condition to an episode of humiliation and discomfort is the moment that the use of laxatives went from a medical measure to a measure of punishment and retribution.

This unknown laxative could have been either Reglan or Magnesium Citrate, or both. Both of these medications were listed in the 2013 Standard Operating Procedure for force-feeding at Gitmo, which is the only full SOP for force-feeding publicly available. According to that manual both medications are used “to enhance gastric motility.”\textsuperscript{29} Magnesium Citrate is a saline laxative, often used to clean stool completely from the intestines prior to a surgery. The side-effect of such a potent laxative is, as one might suspect, persistent diarrhea, a side-effect so unwanted that one might imagine a doctor under normal circumstances would discontinue its use rather than insist upon it’s continuation despite complaints from the patient, as doctors at Gitmo did. Reglan, despite it’s listed use in the Gitmo SOP as assisting in “gastric motility,” is used primarily as an acid-reflux inhibitor, although it also works to empty the stomach into the intestines by causing muscle contractions in
the upper digestive tract. The side effects of Reglan, like Magnesium Citrate, include diarrhea. However, unlike Magnesium Citrate, the other side effects are severe and in some cases permanent. The list of side effects include anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, seizures, Parkinson’s-like effects, an irreversible neurological muscular disorder known as Tardive Dyskinesia, and Neuroleptic Malignant Syndrome which is fatal. The drug is so dangerous that the FDA ordered manufacturers to carry a “black box” warning, the FDA’s strongest warning, on its label stating that the drug should be discontinued after three months.

Why doctors at Gitmo would prescribe a medication with so many established risks and side-effects is difficult to comprehend. On the other hand, when considering the other clinical uses of Reglan it becomes quite easy to comprehend why it was issued to hunger strikers. Reglan is used to prevent vomiting and nausea in patients. In fact it is often prescribed as an anti-vomiting anti-nausea drug for cancer patients undergoing radiation therapy. Used this way, it is very probable that the drug was introduced into the liquid nutrition of detainees precisely to prevent them from vomiting, which was a huge concern among the medical staff and camp officials at the time.

In November and December especially, detainees had taken to deliberately vomiting after their feedings in order to reject the nutrition and further resist the military’s strategy of breaking the hunger strike. It was a problem that the military hadn’t yet figured out how to deal with. In fact, Capt. Stephen G. Hooker, who at the time had just recently taken over as the chief medical officer at the camp, said that detainees were “sabotaging the feeding efforts” to the point where they, “had become significantly malnourished (less than 75% of the Ideal Body Weight) and were at great risk of serious complications.”

The use of Reglan, although listed as a way to help with constipation, may have served the alternative purpose of combating the detainee’s attempt to sabotage the military’s force-feeding strategy. In which case, it is an instance of prescription medication used as tool of punishment and
control. If so, then this is another case of medical intervention used for the sake of punishment and prisoner management rather than anything having to do with health or a patient’s best interests. But this wouldn’t be the last time prescription medication was used as weapon in the war for Guantanamo, and neither would it be the military’s last line of defense in vanquishing the hunger strike and ending the sabotage of deliberate detainee vomiting.

These new attempts at breaking the hunger strike - removal of “comfort items” to freeze out the men, increased speed and volume of liquid nutrition, and the use of laxatives - caused the core group of hunger strikers to dig in their heels even more. These new forms of repression may have even led to more detainees joining the hunger strike. Just a few days after some of the punitive measures were purportedly implemented the number of hunger strikers doubled. On December 25, 2005, in an unbelievable display of solidarity, 46 detainees re-joined the core group of fasters. This meant that 84 detainees were now on hunger strike at Guantanamo. This was now the largest the protest had been since September when the military first introduced force-feeding en masse.

The growth of the hunger strike at the end of December may also have been due to the fact that the men were coming up on the four year anniversary of Gitmo’s opening. This wasn’t insignificant. It was major. Four years. They’d been in US custody for four years. No trial. No legitimate legal proceedings. No real access to their families. Four years. Harsh interrogations. Isolation. Occasional manhandling and beatings. Religious disrespect. Four years. Loss of hope. Forgotten hope. Hope regained. Fighting for hope. Hope at one’s fingertips, just out of reach, but grasping, grasping. Four years. It’s doubtful any of them ever expected to be there that long. When they stepped off the airplane, had the earmuffs taken off their head, had the blacked out goggles taken off their head, had the hoods taken off their head, opened their eyes and took in the island desert scenery sprawled out before them…when they were stripped, forced to stand nude in front of female officers, photographed, had their anal cavities searched, testicles touched, arms stabbed with
vaccinated needles...when they were given a number for a name, ushered through the gates, escorted through an arena of razor-wire fences, placed on a hot slab of concrete in a dog kennel, with a sliver-thin foam for a mattress, an arm for a pillow, an orange jumpsuit for a blanket, blinding stadium lights for a moon and stars, a bucket for a toilet, and not a fucking clue in the world WHERE in the world they actually were...when that, that, and all of that happened...they probably hadn’t anticipated that this would be their life for the next four years. But at the end of December when detainees chose to double the size of the months-long hunger strike, whether they had anticipated it or not, four years of detention at Gitmo was fast upon them. And it may have outraged some just enough to warrant starving themselves, breaking down their own bodies, risking their own lives, and facing the godforsaken force-feeding torture that their captors were certain to mete out to them.

The hunger strike may have doubled for different reasons though, or at least additional reasons. That detainees chose to swell the ranks of their protest on December 25 specifically may be more than mere coincidence. It is very likely that detainees chose Christmas Day as a way to directly challenge the faith and religion of their captors.

When President Bush declared on September 16, 2001 that the war on terrorism was a “crusade” he knowingly or not invoked the imagery and vitriol of a religious war. In many ways it was difficult to tell whether it was mere rhetoric. Indeed, the ways in which the “war on terrorism” has not been a religious war, or at the very least a direct war on Islam and Islamic peoples, is difficult to discern. At Gitmo, it felt very much like a religious war. Detainees had put up with numerous instances of religious disrespect, everything from prayer disruption, to Koran desecrations, to their inability to observe holidays properly, to verbal slanders of their faith, and beyond. One would be hard pressed to convince detainees after four years of detention that their religion was not a primary target of the military. Thus, choosing the most supreme of all Christian holidays to undermine camp
operations and expand the resistance may have been an intentional maneuver on the part of the hunger strikers.

Regardless of the intention, by December 2005 it was apparent to both sides that hunger striking was the single-most formidable and unmanageable method of protest that could be enacted. Even without massive participation it disrupted camp operations, challenged guard staff, confused and unnerved camp officials, and overstretched medical personnel. Top to bottom it made the military’s job more difficult. Soldiers and medical staff were already stressed just trying to handle and force-feed a group of 30 to 35 hunger strikers. Now they were looking at the prospect of having to feed upwards of 80, and for all they knew the hunger strike could continue to grow exponentially. When the hunger strike doubled on Christmas Day Gitmo personnel were all of a sudden forced to deal with a major crisis, precisely at a time when they probably wanted nothing more than to just go home, celebrate the holiday and faith with each other, with friends, with family. In other words, the military was kept from enjoying and celebrating exactly what the detainees were kept from enjoying and celebrating. And just as the military had kept detainees from doing that, whether it was on Ramadan or Eid al-Adha, the detainees were now determined to keep the military from doing it on Christmas holiday. It was a high stakes game of tit for tat, push and pull, strategy and tactics, reversals and double-reversals. And the military, it seemed, was losing. At the very least they certainly weren’t winning, and insofar as they weren’t winning they were losing. Not only was the hunger strike not snuffed out even though the military had thrown everything but the kitchen sink at it, but the hunger strike had grown and was threatening to keep growing.

It was at this point that the military introduced a game-changer. The specter of a newly rejuvenated hunger strike and thus a whole new set of possibly ungovernable bodies forced the military’s hand, and that hand would indeed become a force, great force, a barrage of force, more force than any they had attempted to use to stamp out the resistance thus far. New strategies hadn’t
worked. New methods hadn’t worked. New punishment and forms of coercion hadn’t worked. What the military needed, and they knew it, was a new weapon, a new weapon in the battle on/through/against the hunger striking body. In December 2005 the military unveiled that weapon. They ushered in a piece of machinery that would forever alter the history of Gitmo. It was a single apparatus that would change the stakes on both sides, a new technology with which to produce the body, and a new struggle over who controlled the means of production, as well as what kind of body that mechanism produced. This device was called the “Emergency Restraint Chair.”

Early in December, weeks before the hunger strike doubled in size, camp officials had sought after something, anything, that would help them turn the tide in their war on the detainee body. To that end, the Pentagon invited three consultants from the Federal Bureau of Prisons as well as a forensic psychiatrist to come down to Guantanamo. This team of consultants toured the facilities, discussed the current hunger strike and force-feeding protocols with medical personnel, and reviewed the various methods camp officials had used to deal with the hunger strike thus far. According to Capt. Stephen G. Hooker, who’d recently taken over as the chief medical officer at Gitmo, the team of consultants were unanimous in recommending that the military begin using restraint chairs for the purposes of force-feeding. Upon their advice, the Pentagon ordered five restraint chairs on December 5, and had them shipped to Gitmo.

They ordered the “Emergency Restraint Chair” from an Iowa sheriff named Tom Hogan, who’d invented the device in his garage. Advertised as a “padded cell on wheels” the Emergency Restraint Chair was a mobile contraption with a formidable number of straps and buckles that made it look less like a “padded cell on wheels” and more like a medieval torture chair, or even an electric chair. The restraint chair was simple enough as a chair, it had a somewhat padded back rest and seat, but the rest of the chair was a configuration of metal and plastic, straps and bars. Anchored below the seat of the chair was a metal footrest, which connected via I-beam to two small wheels in
the rear of the chair. At the top of the padded backrest was set bicycle handles so that a detainee could be pushed and wheeled around. Jutting out from the chair were metal armrests, on top of which set cheap pieces of u-shaped plastic for the elbows and forearms to fit in. Then there were the various straps and buckles, which were nothing more than airplane seatbelts that could be cinched extra tight. There were two straps for each ankle, then a lap belt to wrap around the waist, then wrist straps, and finally two shoulder straps that came from behind the chair and fit over the chest and shoulder girdle.

According to the manufacturer’s instructions the Emergency Restraint Chair “safely restrains a combative or self destructive person” and “reduces the need for additional personnel.” The website for the chair also states quite clearly that prisoners should not be strapped in the chair longer than two hours, and that it “should never be used as a means of punishment.”

That the chair not be used for punishment or torture was a big concern for manufacturer Tom Hogan. “I pray that our chair is not used for torture, or torturous means,” he told a local Iowa news station upon hearing how it had been employed for the purposes of force-feeding at Gitmo.

But of course Hogan had know way of knowing exactly how the military would put his device to work when he sold them the initial five units, but it certainly wasn’t used to the manufacturer’s specifications, since the chair was being used precisely as a form of punishment for hunger strikers, and many of the men were left tied down to the chair longer than the recommended two hours. Later, when it became public that the military was using the Emergency Restraint Chair at Gitmo and stories came out about exactly how it was being used at the base, Tom Hogan not only did away with the slogan “it’s like a padded cell on wheels” on his website and printed literature, but he changed the name of the device to the Safety Restraint Chair in an attempt to rebrand his invention as something other than a torture device.
Why consultants from the Bureau of Federal Prisons (BOP) would recommend the use of restraint chairs for use at Gitmo is puzzling. With the exception of isolated cases at the Federal Supermax Prison in Florence, Colorado restraint chairs appear not to be used for the purposes of force-feeding in United States federal prisons. In the Federal Bureau of Prison Policy on Hunger Strikes there are no guidelines for the use of restraint chairs with forcible feeding. In fact, there is no mention of “restraint chairs” in the official policy whatsoever. Not only that, there is absolutely no mention of “restraints” at all for the use of force-feeding.\(^39\)

Even where the use of restraints are mentioned in Federal Bureau of Prison policy they appear to be used quite differently than how the restraint chair is used at Gitmo. According to federal guidelines prison staff are only authorized to use restraints, “to gain control of an inmate who appears to be dangerous because the inmate is assaulting another individual, destroying government property, attempting suicide, inflicting injury upon himself or herself, or displaying signs of imminent violence.”\(^40\) Furthermore the use of restraints can only occur “when the warden determines that this method is the only means available to maintain control of an inmate.”\(^41\) When restraint chairs are mentioned in BOP guidelines they are not listed as being intended for the use of force-feeding or any other medical purpose. The policy here is pretty specific. “The BOP’s use of restraint chairs is intended only for short-term use, such as transporting an inmate on or off of an airplane.”

While force-feeding certainly occurs in US prisons, has been upheld in courts, and has been outlined in officially codified regulations by the Bureau of Federal Prisons, by all accounts these force-feedings do not occur with the assistance of restraint chairs. This makes it more than a little misleading to use force-feeding as practiced in US prisons as the basis by which force-feeding at Gitmo is determined to be “lawful”, as it was both by the Bush administration and later the Obama administration in their official reviews.\(^42\) And yet, the Pentagon used the supposed parallel to force-fe
feeding in BOP guidelines anyway in order to authorize the use of restraint chairs at Gitmo, declaring that their use on detainees was “not inhumane.” This was an unusual turn of phrase, “not inhumane”, since it didn’t necessarily qualify the restraint chairs as “humane” either, it merely placed, like so many other terms and concept at Gitmo, it in some categorical netherworld.

In order to bolster the restraint chair’s characterization as lawful and “not inhumane” the military couldn’t acknowledge that the chair was being used as a form of punishment. Neither could it acknowledge that its purpose was to break the hunger strike. Other justifications were provided instead.

The military’s publicly stated reasons for using the restraint chairs were at best schizophrenic, at worst downright deceitful. Either way, the rationale was muddy. The initial explanation given to the media, once the New York Times broke the story some six weeks after the fact, was that the restraint chairs were brought in to prevent detainees from vomiting after the feeding process. This deliberate tactic of vomiting to resist the force-feeding strategy was what chief medical officer Stephen G. Hooker had referred to as “sabotaging the feeding effort.” The restraint chair, the military claimed, was employed to defuse such sabotaging. Clasping detainees to the chair for hours, immobile, was the answer to ensuring that the liquid nutrition stayed in the body long enough to be absorbed, without being purged. Of course the military never explained why this couldn’t be achieved through other means. For instance, why couldn’t detainees simply be velcroed to their hospital gurneys as had been done in the past? Why couldn’t they just be kept under strict observation post-feeding? Was strapping a painful 7-point restraint across a man’s body and pinning him to a chair for hours literally the only way to combat deliberate vomiting? Of course the military never answered such questions and never elaborated on why they absolutely had to employ such drastic measures.
The second rationale for the use of restraint chairs stemmed from the first. As well as purging the liquid nutrition via vomiting, detainees had also supposedly learned how to siphon out the liquid that’d been pumped into them. According to Army Gen. Bantz J. Craddock, who was the head of U.S. Southern Command, detainees had quite ingeniously devised a way to siphon the food out of their stomachs using the feeding tubes. Although this was certainly an inventive way to sabotage the military’s feeding efforts, it wasn’t entirely new. As far back as the 19th century when methods of forcible feeding were still being conceived and tested, it was noted that nasal tube feeding ran the risk of exactly the kind of backfiring that Gen. Craddock described. An article in The Lancet from 1872 concerning a debate over a best practices for force feeding states that the use of nasal-gastral tube runs the risk that “a patient with any sense” will learn that by blowing out through the nostril he “has the power of sending out at least three-fourths” of the food pumped into him.\(^{45}\) The military’s answer to the well-worn maneuver, obviously, was the restraint chair, but again without providing a basis for how exactly it was supposed to prevent detainees from doing this, especially since the detainees could theoretically continue to siphon out the liquid with or without the restraint chair, or even with or without being strapped to anything at all.

The military also used the rationale that the restraint chairs were brought in because they believed that detainees were determined to commit suicide via hunger strike. They claimed that the hunger strike would be pursued to the death and therefore the restraint chair had to be used as a precautionary measure to protect the life of the detainee.\(^{46}\) However, the military’s belief, whether correct or incorrect, that detainees were absolutely determined to hunger strike to the death was undercut by other statements they made during the same time. For instance, commander of the camp Gen. Jay Hood assured a group of physicians who toured Gitmo in the late autumn 2005 that detainees were absolutely not suicidal in their hunger strike, but rather were merely protesting their indefinite detention.\(^{47}\) Donald Rumsfeld weighed in also, assuring a press corps that the hunger
strikers were little more than “a number of people who go on a diet” in order to “capture press attention.” Not only was this a terribly insensitive statement, but it undermined the very claim the Pentagon was trying to make, which is that the restraint chairs were a necessity because the hunger strike was so serious and men were determined to kill themselves from it. So one or the other is true, but not both. Either the threat of detainees killing themselves was so genuine that a restraint chair had to be ushered in to curb their determination to die, or the hunger strike wasn’t serious and merely a publicity stunt couched in the form of protest. And again, an explanation of exactly how the restraint chair was supposed to curb detainees’ desire to die, or even their ability to die, was never provided, unless it was to be understood that the restraint chair would force them to quit their hunger strike, in which case that would be an admission that the restraint chair was a method of punishment and coercion.

Added to the claim that detainees were determined to commit suicide was the military’s proclamation that some detainees were in grave medical danger from their hunger strike, perhaps even near death, and immediate intervention using the restraint chair was necessary to save life. This was blatantly political, since the desire wasn’t merely one of preserving and managing life, but preserving and managing public perception of the United States. Camp commanders and the Pentagon made no bones about how much of an impact the death of a detainee at Gitmo would have, and how death therefore had to be avoided at all costs. Pentagon officials were quite candid with reporters telling them that the death of one or more prisoners via hunger strike would intensify international criticism of the camp. In fact, in an interview with Michelle Shepard of the Toronto Star an anonymous Pentagon official said of the hunger strike, "The worst case would be to have someone go from zero to hero," adding, "we don't want a Bobby Sands." In other words the restraint chair was brought in not to save near-death detainees, but to save American public image and reputation.
Even more, the military wasn’t even consistent with their talking points about whether detainees were in grave medical danger or near death. If the rationale for the necessity of restraint chairs was grounded in the fact that detainee’s were at risk of death, then that ground was rather shaky. Camp officials and medical personnel at the camp assured journalists again and again that the hunger strike was under control. “They are all clinically stable,” pledged the camp’s medical chief Dr. Edmondson, adding that detainees’ significant weight loss “does not pose a danger.”

Lieutenant-Colonel Jeremy Martin, a spokesman for the camp, flat out denied any accusations that detainees’ lives were at imminent risk, saying that the hunger strikers were "malnourished" but “clinically stable.”

But if statements such as these were true, that detainees were starving but weren’t quite in any real medical danger, then why would the restraint chair have been necessary? And yet, the restraint chair was instituted at Gitmo despite the flawed logic.

According to camp officials, the restraint chair was initially only used on one detainee. Although they now had five chairs on hand, they chose to use it first on one particularly recalcitrant detainee who’d lost a frightening amount of weight. This was most likely Murtdha al Said Makram, a 29-year old Saudi who not only had lost half his normal body weight in the course of the strike but who was reportedly one of the most disruptive and confrontational detainees in the camp. According to the Pentagon’s Detainee Assessment Brief detailing his conduct in detention, Makram’s “overall behavior” was “non-compliant and hostile toward the guard force and staff, and was thus a “HIGH threat from a detention perspective.” Whether the restraint chair was successful during this “trial period” in its objective to make him compliant or make him give up his
hunger strike, even temporarily, is unknown. However, if the metrics to measure the restraint chair’s efficacy was based purely on the body’s pounds and ounces, then the restraint chair seemed to work. In a six-day span from December 22 to December 28 Murtdha al Said Makram’s weight went from 91 to 105 pounds. Fourteen pounds in less than a week. This was proof enough for the Pentagon to expand its use to the rest of the hunger strike population. They did so without hesitation, and then ordered 20 more restraint chair units.\(^55\)

By all accounts the restraint chairs were put to use in the first week of 2006. They served their intended purpose too. By January 7, two weeks after the number of hunger strikers had swelled to 84, only forty detainees remained hunger striking.\(^56\) In just one week the restraint chair had cut the protest in half.

The military had found their silver bullet. The restraint chair was effective, it was efficient, it was fearsome. The military knew it. Detainees knew it. And this knowledge could and would be used to exploit and threaten a detainee resistance now on the verge of collapse.

That threat began on January 9, according to Fawzi al-Odah, when an officer came to the isolation blocks of Camp 3 and read aloud an order from camp commander Brig. Gen. Jay Hood.\(^57\) The directive was short and to the point, if those hunger strikers still holding out continued their protest they would suffer the consequences. Those who hadn’t yet faced the restraint chair would be strapped in and force-fed. Those who’d survived it and somehow managed to continue their resistance would face the chair continually.

The threat alone may have spooked some detainees into quitting the strike. Fawzi al-Odah was not ashamed to say that he was one of them. He’d been hunger striking since August 2005 almost continuously. He’d undergone force-feeding more than fifty times by that point, and endured all the variations and punitive innovations that had come with it along the way. But with the restraint chair he had reached his breaking point. When another detainee in a neighboring cell was
strapped into the restraint chair and force-fed al-Odah said he could hear “screams of pain.” That neighboring prisoner then warned al-Odah how terrible the experience was, and urged him to quit his hunger strike. Al-Odah heeded his brother’s advice, and gave up his protest immediately. Fawzi al-Odah had only two months prior asked his lawyers to file a court injunction to have his force-feeding suspended so that he could die with dignity, die on his own terms, die bravely, die, as he told his lawyers and his father, as a “hero.” The restraint chair had changed all. “I’m brave, but I’m not stupid,” al-Odah said upon giving up his hunger strike. “On the chair, I’ll be restrained and unable to resist. They are determined to torture me.”

Such warnings by those who had undergone force-feeding via the restraint chair were not uncommon. Neither was it uncommon to characterize restraint chair feeding as Torture. Even though he endured the restraint chair day after day for a total of 37 days, Emad Hassan was not shy about warning his fellow hunger strikers of the cruelties of the chair. “They will not stop,” he told his brothers, “they will keep on torturing you.”

Whether other detainees had quit after first-hand experience with force-feeding via the restraint chair or, like Fawzi al-Odah, they’d been urged to quit by those who had experienced it, the result was the same. Detainees were ditching the hunger strike in droves, and swiftly. By January 21 only twenty-two hunger strikers remained. The core group who’d withstood force-feeding for months were fracturing, falling by the wayside, through no fault of their own. The chair was simply unbearable.

For those who didn’t heed the warning from fellow hunger strikers or who chose not buckle under the military’s threats, experiencing the restraint chair first-hand, even a few times, was enough to cause them to quit their protest. But why? What made the restraint chair so much more of an egregious method of force-feeding than the various punitive measures the military had implemented
earlier? What was it about the restraint chair that earned it the designation “Torture Chair” among detainees?

To begin with the restraint chair was visibly intimidating. With all of the various straps and buckles it looked like some new-fangled medieval torture device. Emad Hassan said that he was shocked when he first encountered the restraint chair. Some of the detainees thought it looked like an execution chair, they even called it an execution chair, and were rightly frightened of its capabilities upon first sight.61

Then there was the induced panic from the physical constraint and claustrophobic restriction. They weren’t strapped into a chair so much as they were fastened into a mechanized straightjacket. Although the chair was advertised, sold, and shipped as a six-point restraint, it was never utilized as such at Gitmo. Officials had ordered additional straps to be secured across the head, making the chair in practice a seven-point restraint.62 The entire apparatus bound detainees almost into paralysis. The process, as described by Sami al Haj, went like this:

They begin with the feet first, then the waist. Then, they do one wrist at a time. There is one band around each shin. One on each wrist. One on each elbow. On strap that comes down over each shoulder. Three on the top of the head, so that the head can’t move. The ankles are shackled to an eye on the chair. They pull hard on the wrists in particular.63

The panicked restriction of the chair was rivaled only by the physical pain it caused. Although the chair advertised that its padding provided comfort, detainees complained that the angle of the chair induced significant pain. Detainee Ahmed Zuhair reported that it caused excruciating discomfort in his tailbone.64 His immobility on account of the straps kept him from being able to alleviate the pain and pressure on his back and tailbone, a pain and pressure that persisted throughout the day, never being fully alleviated. Also, the straps themselves sliced into the limbs and torsos of the men. Numerous detainees asserted that guards tightened the straps so tightly that it pinched their skin, or in rougher cases actually cut them or left burns, especially on their wrists and ankles.
The amount of pain and discomfort the chair caused, as well as the sheer amount of straps and shackles fastened to the men, made resistance impossible. Sami al Hajj reported along with the use of restraint chairs force-feeding was now accompanied by the constant looming presence of an ERF team decked out in riot gear during the feedings, which ensured that any sign of resistance would be stamped out almost immediately by force. Emad Hassan said that on one occasion where he shook his head to keep the head band from being strapped across him, he was met with an ERF team standing nearby who used pressure points under his jaw and behind his ears until he became compliant.

Furthermore, the pain and discomfort weren’t brief. Detainees were bound to the chair for long stretches of time. The recommended time for keeping a prisoner strapped in the chair was no more than two hours. This was according to the manufacturer’s specifications, Federal Bureau of Prison guidelines, and Gitmo protocol. Yet, numerous detainees reported being left in the chair much longer than that. Emad Hassan reported that he sometimes spent up to five hours immobilized in the chair. Ahmed Zuhair stated that there were times were he stayed strapped to the chair for more than six hours.

In this manner, being strapped into the restraint chair was ominously similar to the way many detainees at Gitmo had been forced into “stress positions” during their interrogations. Even before the infamous “Torture Memos” were drafted in August 2002, authorizing a number of torture methods under the legal misnomer of “harsh interrogation techniques”, stress positions had at least been verbally authorized at detention centers in Afghanistan. In December 2001, a full month before Gitmo received its first detainees, intelligence officials were able to tell the Washington Post that men held in U.S. custody in Afghanistan were “kept standing or kneeling for hours” and “held in awkward, painful positions” as part of interrogation strategy. By the time detainees were caged at Gitmo stress positions went from being verbally authorized to officially authorized by the White
House, Department of Justice, and the Pentagon after Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld approved the “Counter-Resistance Strategies” formulated by officials and interrogators at Gitmo in the “Haynes memo.”\textsuperscript{70, 71} The most common of the stress positions used on detainees at Gitmo was “short shackling”, where a detainee was chained by his hands and feet very close to an eyebolt in the floor so that he was forced to crouch in an uncomfortable position for a prolonged period of time. The method was used so often and so egregiously in CIA and military interrogation sessions that scores of FBI agents who’d witnessed its use at Gitmo reported it to the authorities.\textsuperscript{72}

There was no doubt that detainees knew the torture of stress positions, as they’d experienced it everywhere they’d been held captive by US authorities. For them to say, then, that the restraint chair used during force-feeding was a “torture chair” was not a matter of hyperbole. It was an accurate assessment both of their experience and its relation to previous torture methods they’d endured at one time or another. The goal of stress positions like the “strappado” or “short shackling” was to degrade the subject so completely that it forced compliance, an objective no different for the use of the restraint chair.

The feelings of degradation induced by the restraint chair were one of its key features. It wasn’t just that the chair intimidated, hurt, caused discomfort, or immobilized the body into a stress position. It was that it completely demoralized and degraded the men. The restraint chair when combined with the laxative, the increased volume of liquid, and the faster feeding process, made it so that the men were now not only pissing and shitting themselves, but forced to sit in their own filth for hours at a time. They couldn’t squirm their way into a different position so as to avoid smearing their back, and buttocks, and genitals in their shit. They had to simply sit there covered in it. And the same went for vomiting. For those who weren’t trying to throw up deliberately, and maybe even for those who were, a bout of vomiting meant only vomiting on oneself. Before the restraint chair detainees could lean over to the side to throw up, but now the chair’s shoulder and
head straps prevented them from such mobility in emergency situations. The only option, which was no option at all, was to vomit on themselves. This was the kind of psychological terror the restraint chair induced.

Force-feeding via the restraint chair was degrading and demoralizing. It met the very definition of cruel and unusual punishment, despite whatever memos or policies could be written to justify it. The military could give assurances that it was “lawful”, “clinically appropriate”, “a responsible and prudent measure”, done for the “safety and well-being of detainees”, but they weren’t the ones trapped into the “torture chair” having tubes shoved up their nose, large quantities of liquid pumped into their bodies at accelerated speeds, and then forced to sit in their own vomit, piss, and shit.³³ One suspects Donald Rumsfeld or George Bush or Dick Cheney or any other White House or Pentagon ranking official would be hard pressed to smile while thrown into the chair by a riot squad, straps cutting into their arms and ankles, covered in their own excrement, and say “this is for my own good; this is perfectly fine.” But that’s more or less exactly what they were trying to convince to the American and international public. George Bush, in a press conference on January 13, during the very height of the restraint chair force-feeding, claimed with a straight face that hunger striking detainees were being treated “humanely.”³⁴

From the point of view of detainees, nothing could be further from the truth. Ahmed Zuhair spoke for many detainees when he said that force-feeding via restraint chair made him feel like an animal. “The treatment of animals is better,” Zuhair said of the chair, “I feel as though I'm not being treated like a person.” Not just degrading or demoralizing, although it certainly was those things as well, the restraint chair dehumanized the men. “It takes away from my honor, it reduced my dignity,” said Zuhair, "I'm a person. I have my honor, my dignity, my humanity.”³⁵ But the fact of the matter was that the restraint chair removed each of those things one strap at a time. With the shackling of his ankles, gone was his honor. With the binding of his wrists, gone was dignity. With
the strapping of his waist, head, and chest, gone was his humanity. All of it, all the things that made him him, all the things that made him feel like a man, like a human, like a human with agency and free will, all the things that gave body to his soul, all the things that gave soul to his body, were jettisoned with not so much as a chair, some straps, and a tube. This was why so many men were quitting the hunger strike.

By the first week of February the hunger strike was, for all intents and purposes, broken. By February 9 only four hunger strikes remained. 76 For the rest of that month there would never be more than five detainees hunger striking and being force-fed on the restraint chair. This small handful of strikers were hold-outs unwilling to give in, but the popular support and mass participation was over. The resistance had been crushed. With the exception of a week-long break from July 28 to August 5, where the Prisoners’ Council attempted to negotiate better conditions with camp officials, the hunger strike had carried on continuously for seven months. Seven months. Seven months of resistance, starvation, force-feeding, punishment, restraint chairs, and still more resistance. It was nothing less than remarkable.

Detainees had shown an ability to organize each other despite language barriers and physical barriers. They’d shown an ability to create solidarity even in circumstances of intense isolation. They’d taken collective action for a collective cause even though they were individuated and separated by ethnicity, by nationality, by culture, by race, by class, by age, by ability, by political orientation. They’d re-found faith, clung to faith, used their faith to empower themselves. They’d used the ancient art of fasting to wrest a semblance of self, of humanity, of subjectivity from forces of Power that daily and deliberately tried to dredge those very things from their beleaguered bodies. They’d used this traditional religious practice to survive in a time of great turbulence, find holiness in a place of despair and rancor, overcome trials of the spirit when they couldn’t stand trial in court. For seven months they’d successfully stuck a monkey-wrench into the military’s machinery, kept it
from producing docile bodies, bodies that could be dominated, directed, exploited, managed, surveilled, isolated, and brought under strict control. For seven months they’d built an alternative apparatus, a rival dynamo born of defiance, a dynamo that fed off of an energy grid composed entirely of refused meals, day after day, rejected tray after rejected tray, a dynamo which produced bodies of, by, and for detainees themselves. If one asks what the hunger strike did, THIS is what it did. If one asks what the hunger strike accomplished, THIS is what it accomplished. If one asks why the hell these men would want to destroy their bodies by starvation, the answer is because doing so empowered their bodies. If one asks why the hell these men would want to nearly kill themselves by starvation, the answer is because doing so gave them life.

And yet, by February 2006 their resistance movement was practically crushed. Upon breaking the hunger strike the military was much more candid about the true rationale behind force-feeding via restraint chairs and the use of aggressive measures. In late February 2006 the commander of the United States Southern Command, Gen. Bantz J. Craddock, told the New York Times that the military had decided to make life less comfortable for hunger strikers. In his estimation the protest was “causing problems”, and many of the “hard-core guys were getting worse.” This was a conclusion shared at the highest level of the Pentagon as well. Department of Defense officials stated unequivocally that the hunger strikes were “having a disruptive effect and causing stress for the medical staff,” which necessitated the order to break the hunger strikes. This is why the restraint chair was brought in.

Gen. Craddock made no bones about how successful the chair had been either. Speaking of the hunger strikers battle with the restraint chair Craddock said, “Pretty soon it wasn't convenient, and they decided it wasn't worth it.” He added, "A lot of the detainees said: 'I don't want to put up with this. This is too much of a hassle.” Of course for detainees it wasn’t a matter of whether the restraint chair was “inconvenient” or a “hassle.” It was a matter of the restraint chair being cruel,
degrading, and inhumane. It was only “inconvenient” and “a hassle” insofar as being Tortured was inconvenient or a hassle.

By using the restraint chair and force-feeding the State had treated the hunger strike the way they had treated any threat to their power, or any attempt to undermine their global supremacy, which was to respond with excessive force. What happened to hunger strikers at Gitmo was symptomatic of the Bush (and later the Obama) administration’s entire modus operandi in the global war on terror - retaliate with force, negotiate nothing, concede nothing. Force was always the first, and often the only, option ever employed. This was the case in Afghanistan. This was the case in Iraq. This was the case at Gitmo. This would later be the case in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia.

Force, more force, even more force, and yet even more force. Gizmo was a continuation of war by other means. When the disciplinary measures and other strategies of controlling bodies failed, force was always something the military could pull out of its back pocket.

The United States could have responded in any number of ways to 9/11. They could have dealt with a terrorist attack using a multitude of alternative means. Yet the automatic default was always excessive force, as if no other options were ever on the table. As if terrorism could be stamped out with force. As if a foreign people’s defense against imperialism, neocolonialism, and military occupation could ever be stamped out with bombs, or guns, or bunker busters, or drones, or cruise missiles, or tanks, or battalions, or fighter jets, or white phosphorus, or targeted strikes, or neighborhood night raids, or special forces, or mercenaries, or black ops, or warlords, or shock and awe, or torture, or Abu Ghraib, or CIA black sites, or Gitmo. It was a fantasy. It was a fallacy. It was a fucked up foreign policy prepared by frauds and phonics, cooked up by charlatans in think tanks and back rooms, sold like snake oil by neoliberals and conservatives alike to an American public looking for closure and justice. The United States was a hammer, had long since been a hammer,
and after 9/11 had rededicated itself to being a hammer. The “global war on terror” was just an excuse to treat everything like a nail.

That included detainees at Gitmo. In fact, it more than anything included detainees at Gitmo. The hunger strikes were collective action based on legitimate complaints and grievances. Scores of men weren’t starving themselves nearly to death because of some delusional fancy of mistreatment which they’d fabricated. They were hunger striking over the most basic shreds of humanity. Rather than improve conditions of confinement, provide fair and impartial trials instead of an improvised kangaroo court, the military chose force-feedings and restraint chairs to snuff out resistance, even though other options were always on the table.

But there were repercussions to such decisions. Excessive force always had blowback. By the winter of 2006 the United States had already felt that blowback in Iraq and Afghanistan. They were dealing with it in the form of local insurgencies. The same thing would happen at Gitmo too. When the military crushed the Prisoners’ Council in August 2005 the detainees responded by escalating their resistance with a renewed and more serious hunger strike. Now that the military had broken the hunger strike with force-feedings and restraint chairs detainees would once again regroup, regather, and reorganize another escalation. Perhaps not surprisingly, most of the detainees who’d go on to be major players in the next round of escalation were the very same ones who’d been brutalized the most by the military’s excessive force.

Yousef al-Shehri and Murtadha al Said Makram were Saudi citizens who’d been hunger striking continuously since June 2005, when the hunger strike began in Camp 5. Al-Shehri had lost 53 pounds before he began being force-fed in August, a reality he would then face nearly every day of his strike thereafter. Makram had weighed as much as 163 pounds at one time in Gitmo, but in the course of his hunger strike he’d dropped to a frightening 87 pounds. Like al-Shehri he too had been force-fed every day since August 2005. Makram, as I suggested earlier, was probably also the
first detainee to be experimented on with the restraint chair in December. But both he and Yousef al-Shehri spent most of January attempting to carry on their hunger strike in spite of the brutalization of force-feeding via restraint chair. They’d certainly endured it longer than most other strikers, as it appears they didn’t end up giving up their resistance until around January 26. And although they’d surrendered on this particular battle, neither were ready to concede outright. Their resistance would later continue, but in other forms.

Three other detainees, Yasser al Zahrani, Mani al Utaybi, and Ali Abdullah Ahmed, had similar circumstances. Al Zahrani began his hunger strike in August 2005, losing more than 30lbs in two months. Force-fed pretty much everyday from September onwards, his weight loss became critical in early January when he dropped to a meager 87lbs, a full 50lbs less than when he began his hunger strike. The restraint chair was almost certainly the cause for him to break his strike, as his weight records show that between the week of January 12 and January 18 of 2006 he must’ve endured the most forcible of force-feedings, gaining 35 pounds in just six days. A month after quitting his strike he had regained all the weight lost during his protest, weighing in at 163lbs on February 22.

Mani al-Utaybi too had been on hunger strike since August 2005, and had also faced force-feeding nearly everyday. In January al-Utaybi, like a number of the remaining hunger strikers, chose to face the restraint chair day after day. Rather than relent he kept resisting. It appears he held out as long as his body and his spirit would allow, as his hunger strike ended on February 7, which was longer than the majority were able to hold out for.

Ali Abdullah Ahmed did what most other detainees, through no fault of their own, could not do, which was to resolve oneself to overcome the force-feeding and restraint chair. Ahmed like so many other hunger strikers was in a physically deteriorated state in January 2006. Ahmed weighed 40lbs less than when he joined the renewed hunger strike in August. Although he had been force-
fed throughout his hunger strike it seems his force-feeding via restraint chair began around January 11. But he didn’t give up his hunger strike after the first day, or the first week, or even the first month. He was determined to endure the torture and continue his struggle. In fact, he continued his hunger strike and continued to be force-fed for another six months after the military introduced the restraint chair, ultimately giving up his hunger strike in June 2006.

Ali Abdullah Ahmed was not alone in persevering through the restraint chair. Two other detainees also refused to give up their hunger strike regardless of the punitive methods the military chose to employ. Ahmed Zuhair began his hunger strike in June 2005. Within two months his weight dropped from 163lbs to 127lbs. He was among the core group of hunger strikers who carried on the hunger strike throughout the Fall of 2005, despite the force-feeding measures the military introduced and the holy month of Ramadan in October. By the end of December Zuhair’s weight had dropped to an incredibly low 108lbs, meaning close to a third of his body weight had been sacrificed during his fast. When he began being fed via the restraint chair in January 2006 he didn’t abandon his protest. In fact, Zuhair didn’t abandon his hunger strike for nearly four years, resuming eating only when he had been released from Gitmo on June 12 to his home country of Saudi Arabia.80 He had refused to eat for nearly 1500 days. He was ripped from his cell by a riot squad, thrown into the restraint chair, buckled in suffocatingly tight, penetrated with feeding tubes, and pumped full of liquid, all against his will, more than 2500 times total. More than half of his time at Gitmo was spent hunger striking and being forcibly fed. And the majority of his time hunger striking was spent trying to defy the military’s attempt to feed him. The military acknowledged that they regularly used ERF teams to extract him from his cell because he refused to go to the hospital to be force fed. In one four month span Zuhair racked up 80 disciplinary infractions, the majority of which were refusing to be force-fed and fighting the guard force who would drag him unwillingly to the torture chair.81 At one point during his hunger strike he started to cover himself in his own shit
as a way of warding off soldiers from coming in and manhandling him. Zuhair’s four year hunger strike, daily defiance, and noncooperation were a testament to the resiliency of detainee resistance. When asked after his release why he continued his hunger strike despite the lack of popular participation, and despite being tortuously force-fed Zuhair replied, “Not once did the thought occur to me to stop my hunger strike. Not once.”

It never occurred to Abdul Rahman Shalabi to give up his hunger strike either. In fact, before he finally quit in October 2010 he was Guantanamo’s longest active hunger striker. For five years and two months, more than 200 days, he had refused to give up the hunger resistance that began in the summer 2005. Such long-term starvation was not without its medical consequences though, despite the intervention of force-feeding, and even because of the intervention of force-feeding. In 2009 on orders from a United States court Dr. Sondra Crosby was sent to Gitmo to conduct an independent review of Shalabi’s health condition. She concluded that he was at risk of organ failure and death from being so dangerously underweight. He had suffered a string of episodes where he was collapsing and fainting, to the point where emergency “Code Yellows” were regularly called by the guard force who found him collapsed on the floor of his cell, fearing he had died. Camp doctors diagnosed him with gastroparesis, a condition which slows down the digestive system, leaving food in his stomach and intestines longer than normal. He developed the condition due to the weakening of his abdominal muscles on account of his hunger strike and the extended use of liquid nutrition. It reportedly caused him severe constipation, bloating, and abdominal pain, which the military said left him crying in his cell for days on end. The pain was so severe at one point, and his treatment by guards and medical staff so brutal that he wrote a letter to his lawyers asking them to intervene:

“I am sick, I am sick, what should I do, the pain is severe, and headache is severe, my nose is having inflammation, so what should I do...There are provocations and harassment that happen day and night. When I talk to the doctor or the officials, they respond by saying, cooperate and eat. They don’t care about anything else. All they do is insert a tube in my nose and fill my stomach with Ensure. This is torture...My weight has dropped from sadness and provocations,
daily humiliations and harassments and the sickness. Currently, I am sick and my condition is very bad and nobody wants to help me. If you are indeed lawyers who represent me and who are concerned about me, then please deal with these criminals and help me as soon as possible. I am a human who is being treated like an animal. 85

Sadly, Shalabi’s being treated like an animal didn’t come to an end when he gave up his hunger strike, as the agony of ill-treatment, the heartbreak of indefinite detention, and the subtle and not-so-subtle processes of dehumanization riddled him for the remainder of his time at Gitmo, where he still awaits release, and where he still resists the military in every way available to him, including resuming his hunger strike in 2013 with hundreds of other detainees. Abdul Rahman Shalabi’s being treated like an animal didn’t begin with force-feeding either. Force-feeding was only one of the newest methods of breaking the bodies, and spirit, and resistance of detainees - punishing them, disciplining them, making docile their bodies in a process of production managed and manipulated by the military, governing their lives and their very choice to live. Shalabi had seen it all before. He was there the first day Gitmo opened. He was among the first batch of prisoners to walk through the gates on January 11, 2002. Every single day at the camp that followed was a battle for the body, characterized by a spiritual battle within the self and a political battle against their captors. That battle had spikes in activities and waxed and waned depending on the circumstances, the organizing among detainees, and the crystallization and timing of particular grievances. Until the hunger strike that began in the summer of 2005, no confrontation had ever been of such size, of such duration, of such coordination, of such escalation, of such perseverance. The 2005 to early-2006 detainee hunger strike was by far the largest and most nuanced method of resistance detainees had mounted thus far. They had taken it as far as they could go using available methods. But now that the hunger strike had been broken by the military’s all-out force, new tactics would have to be developed in the ongoing battle over bodies and autonomy.
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Chapter 5

By May 2006 nearly every detainee at Gitmo had resumed eating. Only three particularly recalcitrant detainees remained hunger striking, boldly enduring the daily dehumanizing force-feeding regimen. Aside from these resolutely defiant three, detainees in all camps enjoyed their dinner on Wednesday evening May 17, 2006.

By all accounts they ate it with a certain amount cheer and celebration. It was a festive meal of curried chicken, rice, and special Middle Eastern sweets for dessert. The dinner was served in honor of a large group of Saudi detainees who were about to be transferred home.¹ The Saudi Foreign Minister had announced to the press that very day that the United States had agreed to send 16 detainees back to Saudi Arabia, where they would face trial in their home country or be released outright, either way they were leaving Gitmo. The next morning the Pentagon decided to put 15 detainees, not 16, on a plane to King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh, where their families gathered to meet them.

Not on that plane was Yousef al-Shehri. He had been promised his release multiple times. In July 2005 when he had given up his hunger strike with others in order to allow the Prisoners Council to broker better conditions with the camp’s top brass, he had been told by the military that he’d be released in less than three weeks.² That release obviously never materialized. So in protest of the myriad broken promises the military had made to the population as a whole and to him personally, Yousef al-Shehri resumed his hunger strike. Like other hunger strikers who resumed eating in August 2005, he was determined to take it to its terminal point. This tall young man who regularly weighed around 150 pounds while at Gitmo, dropped to as low as 97 pounds during his hunger strike, and stayed in the low 100s from August 2005 to February 2006, before ultimately
quitting when the force-feeding torture was amped up with the implementation of the restraint chair.

The festive meal served on Wednesday evening May 17, was probably little consolation to Yousef al-Shehri. If anything it was a reminder that he wasn’t going to be boarding the plane destined for his home town in Riyadh. It was a reminder that he wasn’t going anywhere. It was a reminder that tomorrow, and maybe everyday after that, he would be stuck at Guantanamo serving a sentence for some crime he was never convicted of, or even tried for. Curried chicken and rice, however well prepared, would never taste as good as freedom, as good as liberation. In fact, it could only taste like everything else the detainees were forced to swallow, the flavorless putridity of indefinite detention.

But indefinite detention was all Yousef al-Shehri knew. He was just a kid after all. His entire adult life was drawn within the confines of indefinite detention. Al-Shehri was 16 years old when he was dumped off at Gitmo. He arrived on January 16, 2002 among the first batch of detainees, and was one of the first juveniles to be brought to the camp. This was after already suffering the dungeon of Shebergan Prison in Afghanistan run by the Northern Alliance’s dreaded General Dostum.³ This was after surviving the massacre on the way to Shebergan Prison, the now-famous “Convoy of Death,” in which hundreds of captured Afghans, Arab fighters, and civilians were loaded into metal shipping containers by Northern Alliance soldiers, until the containers were filled to the brim with bodies, bodies that would later be murdered as Northern Alliance soldiers fired aimlessly into the metal containers, bodies that would later die from exhaustion because they had no food or water, bodies that suffocated as they piled on top of one another like sardines in a can, bodies that “spilled out like fish” when the doors of the shipping containers after days in the Afghan heat, bodies that were buried in unmarked graves in the desert.⁴⁵ Somehow 16 year old al-Shehri had made it out alive, but only to land in Gitmo months later.
Maybe a part of him felt survivor’s guilt about making it out of that massacre. Maybe a part of him wished he had died in those metal boxes, buried in a mass grave. There were probably many times when that thought fluttered through his mind during the heavy daydream moments that passed for time in Gitmo. Without much to busy oneself with, how could it not have? There were probably times when that flutter of thought developed into a linger, then a melancholy, then a mental affliction, before finally resolving into a paralysis. Maybe a part of him thought he actually had died in those metal boxes in Afghanistan, since nothing from that moment to now resembled anything a person would normally characterize as “life.”

What life Yousef al-Shehri did hold on to, however, he was willing to part with. That much was clear. He’d come dangerously close during his hunger strike, nearly starving to death. He’d sent letters to his family declaring his intention to die at the camp, letters in which he imagined himself a martyr. And no festive meal of curried chicken or Middle Eastern sweets could lure him back from that ledge. Neither could it alleviate the daily desolation that had come to be qualified as “life” on this lamentable island. No meal or pleasantry could ever substitute for a plane ride back to Riyadh, a plane ride that he knew he wouldn’t be on the following day, a plane ride he doubted he’d be on the day after that, or the day after that, or the day after that…

He may have wondered if there was any escape.

Was there any escape?

Could his body leave the confines of his cage?

At 6:43 on the morning of Thursday May 18 Yousef al-Shehri wasn’t with his Saudi brothers on that plane. At 6:43am he wasn’t with his brothers at morning prayer in Camp 1, either. At 6:43am Yousef al-Shehri was crumpled in a ball on the floor of his cell, orange fabric hanging from his skinny frame. Unconscious.
The guard might have called a “Code Yellow”, thinking al Shehri had just fainted from another one of his hunger strikes. The guard might have called a “Code Snowball”, thinking that al Shehri had somehow strangled himself or cut himself. Whatever code the guard radioed in, it didn’t matter. Time was of the essence. Al-Shehri was lying on the floor of his cell motionless and unresponsive. Fading fast.

When guards burst into the cell they saw no noose, no sign of hanging or strangulation. Neither was there any blood, no sign of cuts or wounds on his body. Yousef al-Shehri hadn’t just fainted either. He was rigid, foaming at the mouth, and looked near death.

Medics raced to the scene. They immediately placed him on a stretcher and whisked his body out of Camp 1, leaving in the background a cacophony of cries from detainees who couldn’t tell exactly what had happened or what was happening. They knew something was wrong, seriously wrong. They knew he hadn’t shown up to morning prayer. Was he sick? Had he been beaten? Had he tried to kill himself? Among the chaos of the cages there were no answers. All detainees could do was speculate.

By the time medics got al-Shehri to the camp hospital they knew what they were dealing with. Poisoning of some kind. More than likely a medication overdose. Almost certainly a suicide attempt. Al-Shehri was frothing white at the lips. His breath was slow and weak, getting weaker. His pulse was faint, getting fainter.8

Nine months earlier Yousef al-Shehri had drawn up a will to be delivered to his family. He’d written a last testament and given it to his lawyer. He had intended to hunger strike to the death. The military’s force-feeding and restraint chairs had prevented him, back then. He’d learned the hard way that nothing in his power could overcome the military’s force. That’s what made this time different. He would try to outfox them with a bit of guile, a handful of pills, and nine month’s worth of harbored determination. If the military was going to break the resistance, then he’s have to
find new ways to resist. If the military was never going to release him, then he was going to have to find a way to escape. The question now was what would work faster, the drugs or the medical team.

When he arrived at the detention clinic doctors immediately acted on an overdose protocol. They pumped his stomach, hoping he’d purge the pills. For the more than six months that Al-Shehri had participated in the now-crushed hunger strike doctors had done absolutely everything they could to keep him from throwing up the food they were force-feeding him. Coercion. Straps. Buckles. Restraint chairs. Throwing up had become a threat to camp operations. Now doctors were doing everything in their power to get him to throw up. Now if he didn’t throw up it was a threat to camp operations. But the stomach pumped served its duty. Al-Shehri purged the mostly-digested pills. The mixture of spit and vomit was set aside so that the contents could be analyzed. Doctors then gave him activated charcoal to neutralize the effects of the unspecified drugs.

The charcoal worked, but he wasn’t in the clear just yet. Al-Shehri was still in a coma. He needed critical care in a better facility. Officials decided to move him out of the camp and to the island’s main Naval hospital. Once there, doctors continued to make recovery attempts in the intensive care unit. After hours of medical intervention Yousef al-Shehri was finally stable. Still unconscious, but alive. But now the military had another problem on its hands. The crisis, it seemed, was only getting started.

Guards had been put on high alert after the discovery of al Shehri. The military feared camp-wide detainee outrage and confrontation. Detainees were on edge, impatient, wanting to know what happened to their brother. Even if the guards answered truthfully that they didn’t know, or weren’t sure, it wouldn’t calm the men’s nerves. Pleading ignorance would only draw suspicion from detainees that the military was hiding something sinister. Tensions ran high, and camp personnel were on the lookout.
At around noon in Camp 5 guards spotted a detainee looking unwell. The prisoner was dizzy and exhibiting signs of nausea. Without hesitation medics were called in to rush the detainee to the hospital. He was suffering a horrible response to some kind of medication, that much was certain. But what kind of medication and how much the military couldn’t be sure. Was this another intentional overdose? Was it another suicide attempt? The military was unsure, but they weren’t going to take any chances. They had to operate as if detainees were staging something big, something serious, something that threatened the camp’s entire operations, indeed threatened the camp’s very existence. All of a sudden the military, without being fully ready for it, was thrust into a crisis where they weren’t dealing any longer with the specter of a dead detainee body, but dead bodies, plural.

Col. Bumgarner, the head of detention, didn’t hesitate. He ordered a complete shakedown of the camp. Every detainee would be questioned, scrutinized, and patted down. Thoroughly. Every cell would be searched. Every square inch would be scoured. Every nook, cranny, and corner would be swept for contraband. Every item would be inspected, turned inside out, turned upside down. No item was sacred. No item was too mundane. Everything carried a potential threat. Toothbrushes, soap, pillows, bedsheets, toilets, books, letters. Everything would be given a once over, if not a twice, third, and fourth over. Col Bumgarner ordered personnel to let absolutely nothing go unturned. He knew it would take the rest of the day to complete, and he knew it would take the efforts of every soldier on the island, but the stakes were too high to risk anything less. No detainee was going to die under his watch. Not now. Not ever.

Bumgarner had to have known that detainees weren’t going to willingly or quietly accept having their personal items rifled through. This shakedown wasn’t going to be pretty. There would no doubt be some raucous and more than a little resistance. For this reason guards were mobilized into Emergency Reaction Force (ERF) squads of five to eight people, all of whom were armed with
body armor, riot shields, helmets, face masks, pepper spray, and batons. ERF squads geared up quick and then dispersed throughout the camp to perform forced cell extractions.13

They took it one camp at a time, proceeding up each block. Detainees who were considered leaders or those suspected of participating in or having knowledge of the coordinated overdose attempts were hit first. Cell after individual cell was raided by the ERF squads.

Detainees were ordered to submit to handcuffs and leg restraints before evacuating their cells and having them inspected. Those who didn’t comply were overpowered by the riot teams and forced to comply. Those who didn’t fully comply or took their time were overpowered by the riot teams and forced to comply. Those who did comply did so reluctantly or to avoid getting gang tackled and roughed up. Wails of protest filled the corridors. Detainees were getting agitated. Guards were getting frustrated. A crisis was brewing, and both sides knew it.14

Roughly an hour into the shakedown the guards began making discoveries. They hadn’t uncovered a conspiracy or foiled a plot but they were finding medication squirreled away in numerous cells, which suggested that there was some possibility that other detainees were at least considering saving enough to make similar overdose attempts. Pills were found stashed in the waistband of uniform pants.15 Another cache was found hidden in a toilet.16 Later the military would say that they even found one stash of pills hidden away inside a detainee’s prosthetic leg.17 Anytime ERF squads found contraband the detainee responsible would be sent to the disciplinary isolation block in Camp 3.

Shortly after 1pm guards made their way to Camp 1, where Yousef al Shehri had been discovered six hours earlier. What they discovered there confirmed that they were not dealing with a coincidence. This was a mass suicide attempt coordinated by detainees.

At 1:25pm guards found a detainee collapsed on the floor of his Camp 1 cell.18 Unresponsive, unconscious, he was foaming at the mouth. “Snowball! Snowball!” guards yelled.
They had another detainee down, not far from where they’d discovered the overdose that began the day’s chain events. The detainee was immediately whisked away to the detention hospital, where doctors would make the same recovery attempts they’d tried with al-Shehri — stomach pumps and activated charcoal.

The medics recognized the detainee, just as they’d recognized al-Shehri when he arrived half-dead. The man on the brink of losing his life was Murtadha al Said Makram, a long-term hunger striker of some notoriety. Makram had spent months in the detainee medical clinic starving to the point of becoming a skeleton before becoming the first detainee on whom the restraint chair was used for force-feeding in December 2005. He’d spent his fair share of time in the hospital as a committed hunger striker. He’d come dangerously close to death when his weight dropped from the 150 pound range to an astonishing 87 pounds in January 2006, but the force-feeding and restraint chair had ensured death’s door would remain closed to him as a hunger striker. By Thursday May 18, he’d found that a handful of pills may crack that door open enough to make his final escape. When medics rushed him from the detention clinic to the island’s main Naval hospital where he would join Yousef al-Shehri in the intensive care unit, death’s door was half-open half-closed for the both of them, as they lay in a coma.

Meanwhile, back inside the wire, camp officials had learned that the detainee they’d discovered earlier in the day at Camp 5 hadn’t made a suicide attempt at all. He’d merely suffered an adverse reaction to his tuberculosis medication. However, somewhere in between finding Murtadha Makram in Camp 1 and escorting him to the Naval hospital they’d found a third detainee who had tried to overdose on medication in the same way as al-Sherhri and Makram. The unidentified detainee told the military he’d tried to kill himself also, but merely lacked the proper amount of medication to do the job correctly. There were no doubts now. There had been a coordinated
suicide attempt involving at least three detainees in Camp 1, which left two men in critical condition with doctors fighting to keep them alive and camp officials scrambling to keep operations in order.

Col. Bumgarner may have wondered to himself at that point if breaking up the Prisoner’s Council was such a good idea afterall. He may have wondered if he’d handled things differently ten months ago whether detainees now would be coordinating suicides, feeling like their only option was a handful of assorted pills. He may have wondered if not implementing the restraint chair five months ago would’ve kept him from ordering his guards to do an invasive shakedown of the entire camp which would only rouse the detainees into a frenzy the likes of which they’d never had to deal with. He may have wondered if all of this could have been avoided. He may have wondered if the military could ever be fully prepared enough to handle the determination of detainees’ desire to resist by any means necessary.

The coordinated overdoses in Camp 1 by al-Shehri, Makram, and the other unidentified, were reportedly the first instance of detainees using prescription medication to kill themselves. However, these weren’t the first suicide attempts at Gitmo. In fact, they weren’t even the first coordinated suicides among multiple detainees. In August 2003 twenty-three detainees attempted to hang themselves in an organized mass suicide bid. For eight straight days, August 18 to the 26th, men had tried to strangle themselves to death using improvised nooses fashioned from their bed sheets and orange uniforms.

The suicides had begun as a protest weeks earlier in response to an interrogator throwing a detainee’s Koran to the ground, stepping on it, and kicking it across the room, an incident that would later be verified by an Arabic-speaking translator for the military’s interrogation team and the camp’s Muslim chaplain Capt. James Yee. This egregious and intentional violation of Islam led to more than a dozen detainees refusing to speak to interrogators, while also engaging in a temporary hunger strike until they received an official apology from the military and something in writing.
stating that the military would order a prohibition on mishandling the Koran and humiliating Islam. Tension grew on the blocks in the ensuing weeks as no apology or action from the military was forthcoming. The result was that a few dozen detainees organized a daring and dramatic series of suicides as retaliation to the desecration of their holy book. This included 10 attempts on one day alone, a scene described quite graphically in Muslim chaplain Capt. James Yee’s memoire:

“As it began, the soldiers were caught off guard by how well it had been planned. Once every fifteen minutes, a prisoner tried to hang himself by tying his sheet around his neck and fastening it through the mesh of the cage wall. The guards never stood still on the blocks, and it wasn’t long before they found the prisoner. Two guards would rush to open the cage door and release the prisoner’s sheet. The other guards would immediately call the medics. The scene was chaotic. The prisoners on the block would yell and bang their cage doors and the guards would rush up and down the corridor, calling for medics and trying to shackle the man who attempted the suicide. As soon as one prisoner was taken to the hospital, another detainee would be found - his sheet wound around his neck and tied to his cage wall. The guards would rush in to save him and the chaos would start again. The protest lasted for several days as twenty-three prisoners tried to hang themselves. I was asked to intervene, but the situation was so out of control there was little I could do.”23

The sheer number of suicide attempts in such a short time-frame totally overwhelmed medical personnel. The detention clinic was filled beyond capacity, with 23 detainees needing immediate emergency care.24 Two detainees in particular sustained serious injuries from their hangings and remained hospitalized for some time before eventually undergoing psychiatric treatment.25

Keeping with the recurring theme regarding detainee protests and acts of resistance, the military concealed the incident from the media and then misrepresented the cause of the event once it was disclosed. In the first instance, news of the August 2003 suicides didn’t surface until January 2005 when during a standard media tour the commander of the Naval Hospital at Guantanamo Capt. John S. Edmondson accidentally referred to the “mass-hanging incident” in answering a question from LA Times reporter Carol J. Williams, a slip that eventually forced the military to issue a full press release concerning the August 2003 mass hanging.26 In the second instance, when the military officials finally did disclose the event some 17 months after the fact no mention whatsoever was made of an interrogator desecrating the Koran. Instead, the military stated that the detainees’ attempted suicides were, “a coordinated effort to disrupt camp operations and challenge a new
group of security guards from the just-completed unit rotation.” While this may have been objectively true, insofar as such drastic and dramatic forms of collective action do in fact disrupt camp operations and challenge new inexperienced guard staff, it also belied the fact that the 23 hangings were a direct response to a serious violation by the military of detainees’ religion.

One of the more serious suicide attempts in the camp’s history came as a response to a religious violation as well. In January 2003 on India block, the disciplinary isolation area, guards apparently took a Koran away from a detainee as punishment. This started a small riot on India block in which ERF squads had to be dispatched to settle the understandably outraged detainees. During the melee Saudi detainee Mishal al-Harbi tied a blanket to an air vent in the ceiling of his cell and hung himself. It was a long time before al-Harbi was discovered by guards, presumably because they were preoccupied scuffling with other detainees. He was eventually found collapsed and unconscious, as his brain had been cut off from oxygen for several minutes. He was immediately rushed out of the camp to the island’s main military hospital in order to receive more intensive care. Al-Harbi had come quite close to dying in his suicide attempt. As it was he suffered traumatic and irreparable brain injury and was kept alive thanks only to artificial respirators. Muslim chaplain Capt. James Yee said that al-Harbi’s skin infections from laying in the hospital bed were so severe at one point that doctors feared he was more apt to die from these than the brain trauma. In fact, doctors and military officials were so certain of al-Harbi’s eventual death that they ordered coffins sent to the island and had Capt. Yee draw up a Standard Operating Procedure in preparation for a Muslim funeral and burial. However, after more than three months in a coma Mishal al-Harbi eventually came back to consciousness, although he would spend another eight months in the hospital undergoing various forms of physical therapy. According to camp medical personnel recovering from such severe brain injuries was so rare and so unexpected that at least one neurosurgeon on staff remarked that al-Harbi’s recovery was a “miracle.” Yet, the detainee would
remain permanently debilitated and partially paralyzed for the rest of his life. He suffered from speech slurs, memory loss, muscle spasms, seizures, was bound to a wheelchair, and required numerous expensive medications to control his hallucinations, seizures, and help brain functionality. Mishal al-Harbi’s suicide attempt, like future suicide attempts at the camp, was met with skepticism, as other detainees, family members, and activists speculated that he had actually been the victim of severe military beating that was being covered-up. In an investigative story about al-Harbi by The Washington Post in 2007 said that it “appears almost impossible” to get the exact story or learn the precise details of that day’s events, thanks in no small part to incredible military secrecy, and the fact that, unfortunately, Mishal al-Harbi’s brain injuries were so severe and his memory so fractured that he has no recollection of the event.

There was no disputing other suicide attempts, as detainees not only made their intentions obvious but made the act as public as humanly possible. Bahraini detainee Jumah al-Dossari did exactly that for the more than five years he spent at Gitmo. One of his first major suicide attempts was recounted quite vividly in military translator Erik Saar’s best-selling Guantanamo memoir Inside the Wire. In 2003 during an otherwise routine trip to the shower Jumah al-Dossari asked an accompanying guard for a razor so that he could shave. The unsuspecting guard provided him one and then stepped away from the shower. Minutes later al-Dossari was discovered slumped in a pool of dark red blood on the floor, bleeding from a gash in his right arm. When Erik Saar was called to the scene he said that it looked like “a river seemed to have spilled from this man’s veins.” The reason a translator had been called to the scene at all was because al-Dossari had taken the time to write a suicide note in the shower prior to collapsing. Smeared on the shower wall in dripping blood was the message “I committed suicide because of the brutality of my oppressors.” He was rushed to the camp hospital where he would eventually recover.
Jumah al-Dossari’s suicide attempt here had a definite message, one meant to amplify beyond the confines of his cage and reach a broader audience. He was trying to let the wider world know that the only form of escape available to him was death, death at his own hands. His potential suicide wasn't a matter of psychosis. Rather, he had been made to suffer psychologically, physically, and spiritually by the military, a brutality which could only now be evaded or resisted by suicide. His suicide and the words scrawled in blood were a challenge, a challenge and a message. That challenge would only get more direct and that message would only get more articulate with each of his subsequent suicide attempts.

His earlier attempts hadn’t been nearly as performatic, framed with an audience in mind. In one previous attempt he had reportedly tried to scrape the paint off his cell in order to eat it all at once and die from poisoning. However, it would only leave him with terrible stomach problems, as he could never swallow enough paint to do the job properly. In another attempt, similar to the coordinated suicides that Yousef al-Shehri and Murtadha al Said Makram had just attempted, Jumah al-Dossari tried to hoard away a stash of prescription medication hoping to acquire enough to overdose and die. But his plan was spoiled by a detainee in an adjacent cell who reported al-Dossari’s hoarding to the military.

Then in late 2005, after participating for months in the camp-wide hunger strikes, Jumah al-Dossari attempted to take his life in a manner that tried to reach the broadest audience possible. On October 15, 2005 al-Dossari had a routine meeting with his lawyer Joshua Colangelo-Bryan. The meeting, by all accounts, was going fine when al-Dossari suddenly excused himself for a moment so he could use the bathroom. This required him to be escorted from the meeting room to an adjacent cell with a toilet. After minutes of Colangelo-Bryan waiting around for his client to finish he decided to check in on him. When he looked in he discovered a large pool of blood. Al-Dossari was hanging from the ceiling, eyes rolled back in his head, blood seeping from a huge gash in his arm.
Guards rushed in to cut him down from the noose, and then hurried him to the clinic. Al-Dossari would eventually regain consciousness, but had to have surgery on his arm from slicing open an artery with a razor.37

It was the first detainee suicide attempt at Gitmo witnessed by an outsider. His lawyer felt that had been Jumah al-Dossari’s intention all along, to time his suicide precisely so that someone other than the military would bear witness to the act. That presumption was verified once al-Dossari’s suicide letter was eventually discovered and declassified. The letter, which he signed “Prisoner of Deprivation”, was addressed directly to his lawyer, Joshua Colangelo-Bryan.

“Josh… I feel very sorry for forcing you to see. It might be the first time in your life to see a human being who suffered too much, dying in front of your eyes. I know it is an awful and horrible scene… When you remember me in my last gasps of life before dying, while my soul is leaving my body to rise to its creator, remember that the world let us and let our case down… Farewell with no hope of you seeing me again. I thank you for everything you have done for me, but I have a final request. Show the world the letters I gave you, let the world read them. Let the world know the agony of the detainees in Cuba.”68

In essence, Jumah al Dossari was attempting to stage a protest with his suicide. He had intended for the act to be witnessed, for it to be dramatic enough to have emotional impact, and for the narrative to be distributed to the wider world, where it would serve as a wake-up call for others to aggressively intervene on behalf of Gitmo detainees. At the time of his October 2005 suicide attempt detainees had been trying to protest and bring attention to their cause for more than three months with their hunger strikes. But for Jumah al-Dossari it hadn’t been enough. “What else can I do?”, he asked himself in his suicide letter. The answer of course was use a razor, a noose, a witness, and his death. “There was no other alternative to make our voice heard by the world from the depths of the detention centers except this way,” he told his lawyer in the letter. Later, upon his release back to Bahrain in 2007, al-Dossari told interviewers, “When a person is desperate, he does desperate things. I wanted freedom at any cost and ending my life was the best option.”39 (CagePrisoners 2007)

Jumah al-Dossari’s longing for “freedom at any cost” explains why he tried to kill himself so often over the course of his internment at Guantanamo. Weeks after his October 2005 suicide
attempt in front of his lawyer he tried to rip the stitches from his arm and slice back open the wound so that he could bleed out. In March 2006 he slit his throat in a botches suicide. Then ten days before he was ultimately release from Guantanamo he slit his wrists, damaging a main artery so severely that he required an emergency blood transfusion. When Jumah al-Dossari boarded the plane to transfer off the island and return again to his family he had made a total of 15 different suicide attempts at Gitmo.

How many suicide attempts Yousef al Shehri or Makram had made prior to their coordinated overdose on May 18, 2006 is anyone’s guess. Only the detainees themselves know for sure. The military certainly hasn’t been very forthcoming with exact records for each detainee in this regard. In fact, knowing just how many suicide attempts in general had occurred at Gitmo prior to the May 18 overdoses is difficult to say with any certainty. But that’s not because the data isn’t available. It is. The data has been available for some time, thanks to pressure from journalists and tenacious Freedom of Information Act requests. The problem, which was a recurring one at Gitmo, is parsing the terminology the military invented to categorize suicide attempts at the camp.

In January 2005, after mounting pressure from journalists and numerous FOIA requests, the Department of Defense released figures regarding detainee suicide attempts at the camp from 2003 and 2004. At the time those were the only years for which such data was available. According to those records there were 350 suicide attempts made by detainees in 2003, a phenomenally high number.

Although the military doesn’t detail the various reasons for each suicide attempt, it is reasonable to presume that the exceptionally high number in 2003 corresponds to the increased physical and psychological pressures placed on detainees during that year. One of the largest factors leading to suicide attempts may have been the harsher interrogation methods instituted by Maj. Gen. Geoffrey D. Miller, who operated as Gitmo’s commander from November 2002 to May 2004.
Miller employed a strict Pentagon mandate at Gitmo of gathering more intelligence from detainees by any means necessary. Miller grew to infamy as the military official sent to Iraq to “Gitmo-ize” the Abu Ghraib prison, by using guards and medical staff to assist in every conceivable way with the interrogation objectives, just as he had done at Guantanamo. Numerous detainees at Gitmo have attested to a regime of cruel treatment and torture during Miller’s reign as commander, saying that their situations “dramatically worsened” after Miller took over, and that “interrogations got more brutal, more frequent, and longer,” with guards and interrogators using techniques like extreme temperatures, sleep deprivation, isolation, short-shackling, sexual humiliation, forced nudity, and forced-shaving of beards on detainees. The sheer amount and intensity of degrading treatment detainees faced under Miller goes a long way toward explaining why 350 suicide attempts were made in 2003.

The military also reported that 110 suicide attempts occurred in 2004. While certainly lower than the previous year, this is still no doubt a significantly high number. Presuming the figures are correct, this meant that between 2003 and 2004, a span of 731 days, there were 460 suicide attempts. That’s an average of nearly one suicide attempt every day and a half.

The big asterisk to all of this data is that none of these suicide attempts were categorized by the military as “suicide attempts.” Instead, they were labeled “manipulative self-injurious behavior” (MSIB), which the military specified was a category distinct from “suicide attempts.” According to medical facility commander Capt. John Edmondson “manipulative self-injurious behavior” refers to an act of self harm where “the individual's state of mind is such that they did not sincerely want to end their own life,” rather they supposedly committed the self-harm as a way to obtain release, better treatment, or better conditions. Elsewhere camp officials have said that they differentiate between the two by claiming that a “suicide attempt” is an act in which a detainee could have died
without intervention, while “manipulative self-injurious behavior” was an act aimed at getting attention.\textsuperscript{48}

First of all, it must be said that “Manipulative Self-Injurious Behavior” is not a condition recognized in the field of psychiatry or psychology. It has no basis in medicine, and is not a designation used by anyone anywhere in the world other than the US military at Guantanamo. Dr. Daryl Matthews, a forensic psychiatrist who was invited by the Pentagon to visit the camp and investigate detainees’ mental health, asked the military to stop using the term, since dividing “serious” suicide attempts from supposed “non-serious” suicide attempts was more harmful than helpful, creating a non-existent tier of “greater” and “lesser” degrees of suicide attempt.\textsuperscript{49}

Second of all, the criteria the military uses to make a distinction between “suicide attempts” and “MSIBs” seems highly subjective and open to manipulation. On the one hand, they use the detainee’s intent as a variable with which to make the distinction. If the military concludes that the act was “sincere” then it gets classified as a “suicide attempt.” If they conclude that the act was somehow “insincere” then it gets classified as an “MSIB.” The obvious problem is that there are no objective metrics with which to measure “sincerity.” The military could make an inference about the level of sincerity based on their own assumptions of the detainee, his mindset, and the situation, but that seems a dubious proposition at best. The military could also ask the detainee after the fact whether he “sincerely” wanted to commit suicide, but a detainee may or may not answer their questions truthfully. Indeed, he has no real incentive to do so, since answering truthfully yields no material advantages (better treatment, better conditions) only disadvantages (tighter security, hospitalization, medication, isolation). In fact, the detainee has every incentive not to answer truthfully, since if he can convince the military not to take him seriously then it affords him an opportunity to make another suicide attempt, which could prove successful. Furthermore, if asked whether he sincerely wanted to die or whether he just wanted to be released, or have his condition
improved, or be treated better, it stands to reason that he, like most people, would rather live and have the freedoms, rights, and humane treatment that he desires than die. But it’s precisely the fact that those freedoms, rights, and humane treatment haven’t been granted, aren’t being granted, show no signs of being granted, and for all intents and purposes probably never will be granted, that make a detainee want to attempt suicide in the first place. These are the very foundations upon which detainee acts of resistance are based.

The other criteria the military employs to make the distinction between “suicide attempts” and MSIBs is the degree of injury sustained to the detainee during his act of self harm. If a detainee was seriously harmed during the act, was hospitalized for a significant amount of time, or had to receive critical care, then the act could be classified as a “suicide attempt.” If the injuries weren’t serious or there were no injuries at all then the designation “manipulative self-injurious behavior” was used. One immediate problem with this criteria is that it fails to account for botched suicide attempts in which a detainee, for whatever reason, was unable to effectively perform the act of self harm, and thus suffered no injury at all. The real problem with this criteria, though, is that in nearly all cases of detainee self harm, especially ones involving hanging or overdose, the level of potential injury a detainee sustains is almost entirely dependent upon the reaction time of the guards. In one way or another all detainee acts of self harm, whether they were classified as “MSIBs” or “suicide attempts,” had been thwarted in time to prevent a detainee death. In a case like that of Mishal al-Harbi, guards were able to intervene before he died from his hanging, but not before he went into a coma and wound up suffering permanent medical complications. This was labeled a “suicide attempt.” However, had guards discovered him sooner the military would not only have prevented the man from debilitating injuries, but they would have had plausible enough rationale according to their invented criteria to label al-Harbi’s hanging an MSIB rather than a suicide attempt. The same holds true of Jumah al-Dossari’s hanging and wrist-slitting during his lawyer’s visit. A few minutes
more and he could have died. A few minutes earlier and it would have been nothing more than an MSIB. In other words, the military’s entire classification system is predicated on military response time rather than anything having to do with the detainee.

It’s not a stretch of the imagination to say that the military had a double incentive in preventing detainee suicides, both of which had to do with saving the camp’s public image. In the first instance, they don’t have a dead body in their prison to be accountable for. In the second instance, if they react to a detainee’s suicide quickly enough and prevent his death or any serious injury then they also get the added benefit of being able to relegate the detainee’s suicide attempt to a “lesser” category, thus hiding the true number of suicide attempts and making it appear to the outside world as if the US military has only had to deal with a few dozen suicide attempts rather than hundreds and hundreds of them.

Hiding the true number of suicide attempts was exactly what the military was doing, too. The amount of self harm acts categorized as “suicide attempts” were relatively low in comparison to MSIBs. And that’s not by coincidence. Ever since the military introduced the term “manipulative self-injurious behavior” into their lexicon in September 2003 the number of “suicide attempts” recorded at the camp has tapered off considerably.

In a 2006 report titled “Detainees During Detention” researchers at Seton Hall University Law School provided a thorough qualitative and quantitative analysis of the Department of Defense’s data concerning both “suicide attempts” and “MSIBs” at Guantanamo. According to the government’s own statistics, from the camp’s opening in January 2002 to September 2003, when the term MSIB came into effect, the military reported 32 “suicide attempts” at Gitmo. Yet from October 2003 onward it’s a different story. Until the coordinated overdoses of May 18, 2006 the Pentagon only recorded seven detainee “suicide attempts.” Just seven.⁵⁰
Why the figures would drastically decrease is unexplainable. In fact, it’s counterintuitive. October 2003 to May 2006 was a time when the harshest interrogation methods were used, when detention conditions were at their worst, when the government’s experiment in “breaking” the men really ramped up, and when detainees were beginning to realize just how indefinite their indefinite detention actually was. Things were so bad during this period, in fact, that it forced the International Committee of the Red Cross, normally sworn to confidentiality in their findings, to break protocol in November 2004 to report that the experience and treatment of detainees at Gitmo was “tantamount to torture.” But torture and deplorable conditions alone don’t explain why such a low rate of suicide attempts are counterintuitive. This was also a time when detainees were regularly taking collective action, regularly trying to outwit and out-maneuver their captors. October 2003 to May 2006 was when the most reported block disturbances occurred, when the most detainee disciplinary violations occurred, when detainee resistance and protest was at its peak, and when numerous and escalating hunger strikes were taking place. If anything, all of this points to the fact that one would expect to see more, not less, suicide attempts during this time. Realistically, and as sad as this is to say, we should expect to see hundreds of them. The problem is, we do. We see 460 in 2003 and 2004 alone, in fact. Only the suicide attempts are catalogued as “MSIBs” rather than “suicide attempts.”

“To the extent that there is any bias in the system, however, it certainly tilts in terms of under-counting suicide attempts,” researchers from the Seton Hall Law School concluded in their report, when trying to explain the disparity between MSIBs and “suicide attempts” in the Pentagon’s data. This was as non-partisan a way as possible to say that the government’s categorization was suspicious and they were likely manipulating the figures to paint a better picture of Guantanamo than actually existed. Others weren’t so non-partisan, however. That included the military’s own personnel.
Sgt. Erik Saar, who served on Gitmo’s interrogation team as an interpreter, said that although the entire military apparatus was constantly on the lookout for detainees trying to kill themselves, “suicide attempts were much too frequent.” Even more, during his deployment he noticed a disconnect between what he was seeing in the camp versus what was being reported in the media. “We used to talk in the office about how the number of suicide attempts being reported in the news seemed to be far too low. We could never make the numbers match up,” Saar wrote in his memoir.

Capt. James Yee, the camp’s Muslim chaplain, who was closer than most of the military staff to understanding the situation, knew that the military’s numbers weren’t supposed to match up. In a televised interview responding to the coordinated overdoses of May 18 2006, Yee told CNN:

“When I was down there, they were occurring pretty often….What happened when I was down there is they changed the terminology. Suicide attempts were actually relegated to a term called self-injurious behavior, and then they had a more stricter definition of what exactly defined a suicide attempt. So, really, the number of incidents regarding attempts on one’s own life is a lot, lot higher than what’s being portrayed by the Pentagon.”

Looking at the reports, reading testimonies of detainees and former camp personnel, it becomes clear that prior to the Camp 1 overdoses of al-Shehri, Makram, and a third unidentified detainee, detainees had spent the better part of four years making hundreds of suicide attempts at the camp. A history of Guantanamo, in fact, is a history of suicide attempts. But the Pentagon was set on scrubbing that history from the record by doing what it had always done at the camp, manipulate numbers and govern terminology in order to save face. Hunger strikes were “voluntary total fasts.” Force-feeding was “assisted feeding.” Torture was “enhanced interrogation.” And now suicide attempts were “manipulative self-injurious behavior.” But all of these terms were a ruse. All of these were a strategy of domination and control. All of these were manipulative self-beneficial behavior exhibited by the military. They were an attempt to make things look better at the camp than they actually were. The Pentagon’s public version of Guantanamo was such a fragile facade.
And by May 2006 detainees at least three detainees, perhaps more, were more than aware that their potential suicides were the spiderweb cracks that could make the whole facade come crashing down.

Yousef al Shehri and Murtadha Makram had come dangerously close to death by staging overdoses. With perhaps a few more pills or a few more minutes they may have actually been able to pull off the suicide. The military had intervened at just the right moment, though, as they had been fortunate enough to do with every suicide attempt that had been performed thus far at Gitmo. But al Shehri and Makram were also by no means in the clear, medically speaking.

The third detainee to attempt suicide with them would be medically cleared by day’s end, preventing a coordinated triple suicide in Camp 1. Al Shehri and Makram, however, remained in the Naval hospital outside of the camp, as doctors worked on them and monitored their bodies closely. They’d end up staying in the hospital for nearly a week. Eventually, remarkably, they’d both wake from their coma and regain consciousness, upon which time they were transferred back to the detention clinic inside the wire to be monitored.56 Although they’d end up surviving their overdose and failing in their suicide attempts, by swallowing a handful of pills on May 18 they put in motion something that threatened to rattle the camp to its foundation, a resurgent and ramped-up resistance movement.

After dealing with what they hoped was their last suicide attempt the ERF squads spent the remaining afternoon performing cell extractions for each detainee in every block and every camp. Cries of anguish and outrage filled the camps as detainees defied military orders to leave their cells and allow their personal belongings to be rifled through and turned upside down. The most defiant detainees were forcefully extracted by riot squads, cuffed and shackled, and then sent off to the disciplinary isolation cells of Camp 3. Any refusal to cooperate on this day, at this moment, meant that detainees could expect riot shields and rough force to rain down upon their defenseless bodies.

All afternoon block after block detainees erupted into bedlam as ERF squads confronted them.
They howled watching their neighbors get yanked around and all of their possessions ransacked by soldiers looking for the tiniest amount of contraband. Col. Bumgarner expected the shakedown to trigger some mayhem among the detainees, but this was becoming more than mere mayhem. ERF squads were kindling a riot closer and closer to combustion.

ERF squads made their way through Camps 1, 2, 3, and 5, arriving in the late afternoon to Camp 4, Gitmo’s medium-security communal living camp. They’d saved this camp for last. Perhaps the ERF squads had done so because they thought that detainees in Camp 4 were the last people they had to worry about. After all, the camp was supposed to house the most compliant among Gitmo’s detainee population. Sure detainees had once staged a walk-out in the camp to show solidarity with the hunger strikers in Camp 5 and eschew the military’s classification system, but by May 18, 2006, that was almost a year ago. The resistance movement had waxed and waned in that time, and Camp 4 had reverted back to being a place where the most cooperative group of detainees could enjoy the advantages and amenities of a communal living situation. In other words, the military’s imposed classification system had more or less reconstituted itself. Detainees, in theory anyway, were once again stratified just as the military had intended. Bodies separated from bodies, solidarity severed. For this reason the riot squad may have banked on the shakedown being nothing more than a procedural walkthrough, believing that resistance had effectively been sapped from the bodies of Camp 4 detainees. When they opened and then marched through the gate of Camp 4 they didn’t exactly know what they were in for.

Seeing the ERF squad enter Camp 4 and march through the open recreation area with riot shields, body armor, and face masks it was likely that detainees expected the same rough treatment they’d been witness to for hours. They may not have been prepared to defend themselves, but they were resolved to defend themselves. Sure, the resistance movement had nearly flickered out after the torture chair broke the hunger strike, and sure, the camp’s classification system had been
reconstructed to stratify the detainees and keep them from taking collective action, and sure, all of this resulted in their bodies being re-disciplined back into compliance and brought back under control, but the accumulation of the day’s events was threatening to change that. There was some resistance left in these bodies yet. The morning’s attempted triple suicide and the afternoon’s riotous camp shakedown reignited something within the men of Camp 4, and the fuse sizzling toward that combustible uprising was short, growing shorter with each advancing march of the ERF squad.

The ERF squad probably had no way of knowing this when they arrived outside of Zulu, the first barracks in Camp 4. It’s likely they thought they were about to deal with a group of compliant detainees. In that sense they underestimated the situation.

One of the soldiers announced to detainees in Zulu that they’d have to evacuate their communal barrack so that the military could conduct a thorough search. That meant that not only every square inch of their bay would have to be scoured by a riot team but all of their personal belongings, from their clothes to their toothpaste to their personal letters to their holy Koran would have to be gone through. Furthermore, their bodies would have to be searched for contraband as well. The detainees in Zulu, made up entirely of Afghan nationals, adamantly refused. They weren’t going let their bodies, belongings, and barracks face inspection. They weren’t going to participate in the military’s shakedown and that was that. The ERF squad may have been able to bully detainees in other camps, but that bullying stopped at the entrance to Zulu. The soldiers tried to reason with the detainees, reportedly even bringing in interpreters who had good rapport with the men, and even going so far as to recruit an elderly detainee from another barrack in Camp 4 to act as an intermediary between the ERF squad and the now-wholly resistant group of Zulu detainees.57

The soldiers had to try to reason with Zulu because the dynamics at Camp 4 were different than they were anywhere else at Gitmo, by virtue of the camp’s layout. Unlike Camp 5 or Camps 1
through 3, ERF teams of five to six soldiers in riot gear couldn’t just burst into a single cell and overpower a lone detainee. In Camp 4, if they wanted to force an extraction they’d have to force a full barracks extraction, which meant they’d likely have to take on a group of eight to ten detainees at once. In other words, soldiers didn’t have the same capacity for overwhelming force the way they did elsewhere in Gitmo. They couldn’t just enforce their will on the body of a single defenseless detainee. The situation at Camp 4 was much more fragile, which necessitated the kind of diplomacy the ERF squad was trying to perform in order to get Zulu detainees to leave their bay. If they would have tried to just storm the barracks they were liable to get dealt with by a gang of resistant detainees who weren’t afraid to fight back in a united front. The ERF team was in a tough spot. On the one hand, they had to attempt negotiations with the Afghans in Zulu to avoid a potential skirmish they very likely would be on the losing side of. On the other hand, they were prideful US soldiers who weren’t going to just be cowed by a group of unarmed Afghans, either.

What happened next was a matter of contention. The military would claim that detainees in Zulu simply stonewalled them. They said the group of defiant Afghans refused to respond or cooperate for no reason other than to simply be defiant and uncooperative. This could have been true. The Zulu detainees may have decided to simply resist, choosing not to bring their bodies into compliance with the military’s orders, and no amount of reasoning or debating or diplomacy was going to dissuade them from being all in all defiant.

Detainees had a different story, though. According to a few who were either inside Camp 4 or were told about it by those inside, what really made the Afghans stonewall the ERF squad was the demand that their Korans be searched. Whether the military had it on good intel or not, they were convinced for some reason that the three suicide attempts earlier in the day had transpired because the detainees had somehow stashed hoarded medication inside copies of the Koran. This suspicion meant that ERF squads were going to go through copies of the Koran. Based on a multitude of
different instances over Gitmo’s four year history where the Koran was either mishandled or disrespected or openly desecrated in some way, camp officials had agreed not to allow soldiers to handle the book. The chaplain or an Islamic interpreter could on occasion handle the book if it was required, but after numerous violations and subsequent uprisings based on those violations, the military agreed not to handle the book any longer. But the suicide attempts in the morning apparently changed all that. ERF squads were going to go through absolutely everything, including and especially the Koran if they believed that it was a source for subverting camp operations. It’s an odd thing to say given that Gitmo always operated as state of exception where the rule of law didn’t apply, but for all intents and purposes the May 18 suicides had made it so that Gitmo was locked down under a kind-of martial law, where even their own internal rules and agreements were no longer applicable, and thus suspended.

Detainees in Zulu, obviously, weren’t going to just allow their Korans to be rifled through. They had no reason to have faith in the military’s ability to treat the book with any respect, especially on a day like this. Soldiers had already proven themselves unworthy of respecting the book, which is why the rules had been put in place to begin with. But now, after witnessing and hearing the protests of their brothers in other camps, the Afghans in Zulu weren’t about to give the military the benefit of the doubt. Not with the object that was most sacred to them.

Detainee witnesses said that some in Camp 4 had offered to use a chosen delegate to work with the military. This designate would gather all of the Korans and search them in front of the soldiers so that they could inspect them without actually having to touch them. It seemed a good faith effort to find an amicable middle ground. Soldiers wanted to ensure detainees weren’t hiding anything to attempt another suicide. Detainees wanted to have their religion and their bodies respected. And the Koran was the body. Their holy book and their body weren’t indistinguishable. Many a detainee at Gitmo had become a Hafiz during his time at the camp, meaning he’d
memorized the Koran in its entirety. Most others who hadn’t been able to achieve this yet were practicing. The Koran was more than just a scripture, it was something that a Muslim attempted to quite literally embody, text, gesture, and speech becoming one. The Koran was their body, which goes a long way toward explaining why they treated desecrations to the book as seriously as brutalities against their body. This stand off moment between guards and detainees over the fate of the Koran actually crystallized Gitmo in an instance — who would control, handle, and manage detainee bodies, the military or detainees themselves?

This is what made Gitmo a continuation of war by other means. And this is what cornered detainees into fighting a war of resistance. The site of contestation was the body, and war would have to be waged. In the early evening of May 18 inside Camp 4 that war was about to escalate. Detainees chose to defend that body, defend themselves, when they refused to leave their barracks and let the military man-handle their bodies and belongings. The brief moment of diplomacy was over. It was time to prepare for battle. The Zulu Afghans piled back into their barracks. The ERF squad regathered to devise a battle plan.

The ERF team radioed into Col. Bumgarner to update him on the situation. Detainees in Camp 4 were resisting, they told him. Something had to be done and done quickly, lest the remainder of Camp 4 detainees resolved themselves to resist as well. The ERF team then ordered back up from Gitmo’s Quick Reaction Force, a platoon-sized unit of anywhere between 15 and 30 fully armed Marines deployed to handle major disturbances at the camp, escape attempts, or intrusions into the compound. The ERF teams may have been intimidating in their riot gear, but QRF squads were even more beefed up. According to Gitmo’s Standard Operating Procedures Chapter 25, they were to respond to all situations outfitted with shields, head to foot body armor, Kevlar vests, and face masks. What’s more, they were armed with everything from 12-gauge shotguns to M-16 machine guns, from M84 stun grenades to M203 grenade launchers, from
blackjacks to handguns. In other words, these Marines were Gitmo’s instrument of actual war. However, in instances where they responded to detainee disturbances, QRF teams were to use nonlethal munitions, which could be anything from beanbag rounds to rubber bullets, rubber buckshot to pellets. While the military, and most state agencies and police forces for that matter, termed these “nonlethal munitions,” they also regularly caused fatalities every year everywhere in the world where they are used. The risk of casualties with these munitions may have been minimized in comparison to live ammunition, but they also carried the risk of being absolutely lethal.

By calling in the QRF team for backup in Camp 4, the military was no doubt escalating the situation. They were literally bringing guns to a fist fight. Making things truly bizarre, they decided to bring this potential lethal show of force in order to make sure detainees weren’t going to die. The whole rationale for the camp-wide shakedown was to find hidden suicidal contraband in order to keep detainees from killing themselves. And now here was a platoon of Marines armed to the teeth getting into position along Camp 4’s fence line ready to strike as soon as they were given orders.

Although the QRF team was supposed to be stationed out of detainees’ sight, maybe the Afghans in Zulu spotted them. Maybe they simply sensed that by resisting the riot squad’s orders that a battle would no doubt be coming shortly. It was one thing to defy a guard’s orders on a regular day in Gitmo, but it was quite another to defy the orders of an ERF squad on a day this fraught with crisis. The Afghans had to have known that the military wasn’t going to take any shit, and would use excessive force if they sensed even the slightest hint of provocation. They’d already heard excessive force being used on their brothers in other camps earlier that afternoon. But whether they sensed the impending battle or actually spotted the QRF teams getting into position, made no difference. Inside Zulu detainees were preparing for an escalation themselves.

The Afghan detainees in Zulu were notoriously strong. German detainee Murat Kurnaz was a beefy former nightclub bouncer and trained martial artist, who wrote in his memoire that he’d
often arm wrestle the Afghans when he was held in Camp 4. Although he attested that he usually won the matches, he also confessed that the Afghans were incredibly good at arm wrestling and deceptively strong. He chalked up their strength to growing up in the mountains, hiking and carrying things around all day. They had a natural and functional body strength. Although they may not have trained in martial arts like Kurnaz, they almost certainly had the capacity to handle themselves in a physical altercation.

While their strength was moments away from becoming an asset, it was their ingenuity that was about to serve them best. Preparing for the impending altercation the Afghans began tearing their barrack apart and using the spare pieces to fashion improvised weapons. (GTMO Press Release) The standing industrial metal fans used to air condition the room were busted and its parts repurposed. The fan’s rotor blades were sharpened, one blade whetting the next, to fashion makeshift swords. The fan’s encasing became a shield. The base and pole became a battering ram. Pieces of electrical conduit were transformed into blackjacks. Broken fluorescent light fixtures turned into jagged knives. Wires and cables were ripped up for potential whips or strangulation cords. They were arming themselves for war just as the military was. The Afghans were determined to defend themselves. For all they knew, this may be their final stand and they were going to go out fighting. This wasn’t about protesting. This was about resistance. This was about survival.

The military fired the first shot by gassing the barracks with pepper spray. The armed ERF and QRF teams stationed along the fence line moved in toward the barrack. The stand-off turned quickly into a stampede of pandemonium. The soldiers used so much pepper spray that it wafted into other barracks and even affected the soldiers themselves. With the Quick Reaction Force acting as backup the riot squad stormed the barracks expecting the pepper spray to have neutralized the detainees inside. Instead, they ran straight into an ambush.
The Afghans primed the ambush perfectly. The door leading into Zulu was narrow, which meant the military could only squeeze through single-file. Detainees took full advantage of this territorial advantage by slicking the entrance with soap and water. The military would say after the fact that the detainees had used piss and shit on the floor as well, which of course wouldn’t have been a first given that detainees had always found ways to weaponize the body to battle their captors. The booby-trapped floor caused the first few soldiers through the doorway to tumble to the ground where they were immediately pounced on by a number of armed detainees. The rest of the Afghans mobbed the door to prevent the rest of the riot squad from entering. Detainees had outwitted their military with impromptu but ingenious guerrilla tactics, and they had, against all expectations, gained the upper hand. The military would later admit that the Afghans got the better of them in the opening few minutes of the armed insurrection. “Frankly we were losing the fight at that point,” Col. Bumgarner said afterward.66

But the tables turned rather quickly once the QRF platoons made their way to Zulu. Once in position the marines opened fire on detainees with “nonlethal” munitions. Using shotguns the Marines fired five rounds into the backs and chests of detainees with high velocity marble-sized pellets.67 They also fired a rubber grenade from a M-203 grenade launcher attached to an M-16 machine gun.68 It was the first time the military had fired on detainees in the history of the camp. What started as a morning full of coordinated suicide attempts escalated into the the largest and most violent uprising detainees had ever staged.

Upon firing their weapons, the ERF and QRF teams quickly took control of the fight. All in all the skirmish was over in five minutes. The Afghans didn’t just give up as soon as shots were fired, though. Outmanned and outgunned they fought US soldiers to the bitter end. Murat Kurnaz later attested that they fought the military until they exhausted themselves and could no longer stand.69 Once down the Afghans were flex cuffed with plastic ties and ushered out of Zulu. In
front of an audience of stunned Camp 4 captives the Afghans were quickly ushered out of the camp and taken to the disciplinary isolation blocks of Camp 3. Six detainees who’d been hit with rounds of ammunition were taken to the clinic for medical treatment.\textsuperscript{70}

After soldiers put down the uprising in Zulu, camp officials would tell any media outlet that would listen that the soldiers were compelled to enter the barracks with so much force because an ERF squad member witnessed a detainee trying to hang himself. Officials stated that the detainee had tied a sheet around the ceiling lights and built a makeshift noose. The ERF and QRF teams reacted just as he was putting his head in the noose, and essentially saved his life by firing on his brothers. The whole thing, in other words, was nothing more than the military’s attempt to save the life of a detainee.\textsuperscript{71} Of course detainees who witnessed the violent clash in Zulu disputed the claim.

The military’s day wasn’t over after the uprising in Zulu, however. The rest of the detainees in Camp 4 had seen the violence perpetrated against their brothers. They’d watched them get shot at with guns and grenade launchers. This was on top of a day already filled with detainees being roughed up and having their belongings rifled through. It sent Camp 4 detainees into a frenzy. The overwhelming show of force they’d just been witness to didn’t frighten them into compliance or obedience. It only made them want to resist and riot. And that’s exactly what they did.

As ERF and QRF teams escorted Zulu detainees out of Camp 4, the remaining detainees went into their own barracks and began destroying them piece by piece. Cameras were shattered. Cots were smashed. Fans were busted. They destroyed, tore up, and ripped apart anything they could get their hands on. They demolished the entire camp, using the wreckage to fashion improvised weapons just as those in Zulu had done. All told the military would later claim that detainees in Camp 4 caused more than $100,000 worth of damage.\textsuperscript{72} The fighting went on inside the camp until around midnight with guards using pepper spray rather than ammunition to deal with rest of the rioting.\textsuperscript{73}
May 18, 2006 marked a turning point, marked a rejuvenation. Sure, the hours-long uprising in Camp 4 had been put down by armed platoons of Marines and riot squads. Sure, the triple suicide inside Camp 1 had been curbed before any life was lost. And sure, a full day’s worth of clamoring and commotion by detainees in every corner of Gitmo had been quieted, put to rest…for now, anyway. Whether it had been planned or not, organized and talked about or not, the resistance movement that seemed to have been nearly snuffed out by overpowering military force in February had been revitalized. It was now about to come careening toward a crescendo.

In the meantime detainees would do what they had always done — recuperate and reorganize. They weren’t going to be silenced, made invisible, demobilized. They weren’t just going to give up. They weren’t just going to give up without a fight. There was too much at stake. Body. Life. Liberty. Agency. Autonomy. Freedom. Terms and abstractions that in the American lexicon were often so vague, so remote and inauthentic, little more than hollow mantras half-remembered, were for the 465 caged captives of Guantanamo the full-bodied desires that teased their skin each night, awakened their bones each day. To these men they weren’t vague concepts. They were the particles of existence they tried relentlessly to make materialize out of thin Caribbean air, not through magic or parlor tricks, but through the relentless locomotive of their resistant bodies.

Not surprisingly this meant first and foremost a new wave of hunger strikes. Within a week of the uprising and failed suicides the men were back to starving their bodies. There were only three hard-core hunger strikers remaining from the previous campaign who, despite multiple punitive measures imposed by the military, had been fasting non-stop since the previous August. On Thursday night May 25, 2006 those three who’d been going it alone for months as a steadfast trio were now joined by numerous detainees from across the camp who began refusing food. By Monday May 29 the military announced that the number of detainees hunger striking had increased from three to an incredible 75. Camp officials hadn’t seen that many hunger strikers since the
restraint chair had been introduced in January. By Thursday June 1, the number of participants grew even more, peaking at 89 hunger strikers out of a remaining population of 465.76

Unlike previous detainee hunger strikes the military was quick to disclose this to the media. In the past, hunger strikes had gone on for weeks before camp officials or the Pentagon would acknowledge to the media that such a thing was occurring, and even then it was only to counter whatever had already been put into the press by journalists or detainee lawyers. This was new. The military was being unusually candid about the challenges they faced running the detention center and the kinds of disruptions detainees posed to camp operations. They were both frank and immediate in reporting not only this new hunger strike, but also the detainee uprising that had preceded it.

So why the change of tune? Journalists such as Carol Rosenberg of the Miami Herald, who’d been covering Guantanamo as her regular beat since the camp first opened, believed that the military’s new strategy was to get out in front of the story and control the narrative, rather than let the narrative be dictated by detainees, their legal teams, human rights organizations, or others critical of the camp.77 By choosing offense over defense military officials were able to take the detainee resistance riddling the camp and shape it for the press into something both benign and banal.

For instance, the military was quick to speculate that there was no real underlying issue giving rise to the new hunger strike. Camp spokesman Navy Cmdr. Robert Durand assured the media that it was little more than a short-term publicity stunt staged by detainees in anticipation of the military commissions slated for June 12, when dozens of news outlets were going to descend on the island to cover the first war-crimes tribunals. Even more, Durand implied that the hunger strike was a blatant media grab by a group of terrorists to further advance their terrorist agenda. The protest, he contended, “reflects detainee attempts to elicit media attention to bring international pressure on the United States to release them back to the battlefield.”78 More than that, Durand dragged out the tired trope used numerous times by the military over the years when he told
reporters that, “The hunger strike technique is consistent with al Qaeda practice.” That is to say, that detainee protest of their mistreatment and indefinite detention was proof enough that the men were allied with Al Qaeda, a slander not only patently false but completely illogical.

Detainees, however, were not hunger striking because it was a page out of the Al Qaeda handbook. Nor had they vowed to starve themselves for momentary media attention. They were hunger striking, as always, as a response to mistreatment and the injustice of their detention. That the hunger strike began days after the uprising is not coincidental. The men had much to be upset about. They’d endured a day’s worth of unprovoked hostilities and harassment. Some had been beaten, some had been verbally accosted and humiliated, others shot with guns and artillery. Sixty-six detainees had been forcefully moved out of the medium-security blocks of Camp 4 and sent to other camps throughout Gitmo, where many were punished with time in disciplinary isolation cells.

Furthermore, detainees were almost obligated to stage some kind of response to the Koran abuse experienced on the day of the uprising and suicide attempts. Whether the military had indeed mishandled the Koran during cell searches, or threatened to mishandle the Korans, or had the authority to potentially mishandle them, or did nothing of the sort, was almost beside the point. Detainees had experienced so much Koran desecration by the summer of 2006 that rumor alone could fuel an uprising. They’d been given every reason imaginable to not trust the military when it came to their holy book.

Also, detainees had been kept completely in the dark as to the fate of the three brothers who’d attempted to overdose in Camp 1. Yousef al-Shehri and Murtadha al Said Makram were still in a coma at the start of this new hunger strike, but detainees weren’t made aware of that. They had no way of knowing if the men were alive, dead, in stable or unstable medical condition. They wanted answers, but military officials certainly had no incentive or desire to be forthright with the captives.
The hunger strike may have been one of the few ways they could hope to pressure camp officials into providing an update.

The new wave of hunger strikes may also have started as a response to the now nearly-completed construction of Camp 6. Just as Camp 5 had done, the newly built camp signified just how indefinite their indefinite detention might actually be. The steel and concrete structure certainly didn’t suggest that their release was imminent, it only suggested that their detention was permanent. More than that, the new camp looked to be a replica of Camp 5, and for all detainees knew it may have been designed to function like Camp 5. One facility to constrict the men to the slow insanity of solitary confinement was already one too many. The thought of another, which meant that even more men would now meet the mental degradation of supermax conditions, must have been agonizing.

The 70 to 80 men starving themselves may have had any of these reasons in mind when they opted to stage a new wave of hunger strikes. They weren’t, however, doing it because it was an “Al Qaeda practice” or to “elicit media attention,” contrary to the narrative put forward by camp officials. In fact, that the hunger strikers’ motivation wasn’t attracting media or publicity was made evident by the fact the protest inexplicably died out only a few days into June, a full week before press were scheduled to arrive on the island to cover the military commissions.

On Thursday June 1 the number of detainee hunger strikers peaked at 83. By Sunday June 4 that number fell to just 18. In the following days it would dwindle to just a handful. And whereas the military started the month of June force-feeding six hunger strikers, by June 4 they were strapping down only four men into the restraint chair for forcible feeding.

The military offered no explanation for the rise and then sudden decline of the hunger strike. Neither detainees nor their lawyers offered any explanation either. It was anyone’s guess. Common sense and past history, however, suggest that detainees may have quit their protest out of justifiable
fear of being strapped into the “torture chair,” having a tube thrust up their nose and liquid pumped into their body at ever accelerating rates. Then again detainees may have only wanted to display a quick surge of force after the May uprising had been put down, a way of showing the military that they weren’t going to be so easily quieted, or have their will for resistance snuffed out. The reason for the surge and rapid disappearance of the May-June hunger strike, however, would remain a mystery.

Compounding that mystery was the fact that one of the detainees to quit the hunger strike had been a long-term hunger striker. Ali Abdullah Ahmed, was a Yemeni detainee who’d been hunger striking non-stop since July 2005. He’d refused to quit starving himself even as the military forced a feeding tube into his body twice a day, everyday, for months. More than nine months to be exact. He didn’t give in either when the military ramped up their efforts to break his strike by pinning his body to the torture chair for forcible feeding. He’d been only one of three detainees to continue his hunger strike despite the torture chair. It was a resiliency that detainees respected, perhaps marveled at. He knew that strapping his body to the chair for force-feeding was a punitive measure, even though doctors and medics assured him it was for his own good. They may have told him that the restraint chair was medically necessary, but in their own notes they would admit it was to break his hunger strike, writing: “Detainee will be observed continually and he will be reminded of how his behavior must change (he must eat voluntarily) to avoid the use of medical restraints for present and future feedings.”

It didn’t matter. Ahmed continued hunger striking anyway, despite hating force-feeding, His body rejected it, despised it, and yet faced it every single day. That’s how much the resistance movement meant to this man. He gave the military the impression he’d be defiant to the bitter end. There was every reason to believe Ahmed would stay resisting or die in the attempt. And yet, for reasons unknown, here he was at the beginning of June quitting his hunger strike.
Why did he choose to quit? Why now? He’d endured so much for so long, and yet day after day for nine months he refused to allow the military to subjugate his body, not without a fight anyway. But on June 3 he quit his hunger strike. Would he continue to resist in another way? Was there even another way for detainees resist anymore? Did he have something else planned, handing in the hunger strike for a new bodily tactic?

The military had no answers, but they welcomed the idea of a highly resistant detainee apparently having the resistance sapped from his skinny body. They observed him for a few days to make sure that he would indeed begin eating again. And he did. He ate three meals a day for three days in a row, which was the required performative act to signal to the military that a detainee renounced his hunger strike. On June 6 guards escorted him out of the disciplinary isolation block they’d been holding him in for months to separate him from other detainees while they force-fed him. The military may have wondered if Ahmed was pulling a ruse. Maybe he would return to hunger striking as soon as he was back in general population. Maybe he’d go right back to performing acts of resistance. In a little more than 72 hours they’d have their answer.
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Wind shedding its skin on the cactus and scrub brush. Wet sage smelling like a spiritual ceremony. Drizzle licking shirt collars and window sills. Lightning running through cloud cover like an electric spine. It was the only night light. The sky’s grey ink blotted out the full moon, the stars.

The storm had been gathering for days, if not weeks. The island was trapped on the fringe of a tropical depression. The pressure was surging. Preparations had been made. Precautions had been taken. But no amount of ready was ever ready enough. Not for this. There’d been forecasts, sure, but no one could predict the amount of damage that could ensue, if it ensued.

Nothing would be the same. Everything was spiraling to this moment, when the sky would close up, the lights would go out, and thunderclaps would shiver the island deep into its bones. The time was now. The storm was here.

Ali Abdullah Ahmed arrived at the detainee clinic forty-five minutes after midnight. His body strapped to a backboard stretcher, burst through the clinic door like a battering ram. Although carried by five guards he blew into the room as if propelled by some ancient gust of wind. This was a tempest centuries in the making. There were other forces at work. Time had come.

Guards had carried Ahmed before. Numerous guards. Numerous times. Transporting him here or there about camp. Before, they had only carried “ISN 693.” Before, they’d only carried “Alpha 5” or “India 9” or “Oscar 11”, wherever he’d been housed at the time. Before, they’d only carried “Hunger Striker 3.” To interrogation rooms, to other blocks and cells in the middle of the night, to the hospital, to the “feeding block,” to the rec yard, to his tribunal, to isolation units. Guards had carried Ahmed. Before tonight he’d only ever been carried as an anonym, a number. Before tonight he’d only ever been carried as 68 inches and one hundred some-odd pounds of foreign flesh. But not tonight. Tonight Ahmed demanded acknowledgement. His body, in the
throws of crisis, demanded recognition. Tonight guards were forced to carry a human being, maybe for the first time. They may not have known his full name, they may not have known his story, but they knew his face, recognized his face, catalogued his face, and would not forget his face, nor the events of his body.

Upon seeing Ahmed on the backboard medics immediately yelled out to the guards to take him to the exam room in the back. There were only two exam rooms in the clinic. They hustled him to the last one on the left - Exam Room 10.

Once inside, guards lowered Ahmed’s body, still attached to the backboard, onto the gurney in the middle of the room. Escort Guard 61, per standard operating procedures, then shackled one of Ahmed’s arms to the backboard. As hospital corpsman rushed in guards rushed out anticipating there may still be another emergency back in Alpha Block. As they filed out of the exam room one of the guards informed the medics that they hadn’t been able to detect a pulse. Perhaps feeling the weight of the moment Escort Guard 61 stayed behind in the exam room while the rest of the team sprinted back to Alpha.

Ahmed lay on the gurney unresponsive. Dressed in regular tan pants and tan shirt, his uniform indicated that he’d recently been compliant and cooperative with guard staff, at least somewhat. He hadn’t “earned” the “privilege” of the white uniform, but neither had he been so belligerent as to warrant the orange uniform. In a lot of cases hospital staff knew exactly what to expect from a detainee in their care based on his uniform color. White, orange, and tan were often signifiers for cooperation in the clinic as much as they were signifiers for cooperation in the prison block. But that wasn’t the concern now. Now it wasn’t the color of Ahmed’s uniform that caught medics’ attention. It was the hue of his skin. Ahmed had been blessed with a radiant olive complexion all his life. But now…now Ahmed’s skin was turning an ever-darkening shade of blue.
The head Nurse from the detainee hospital, who’d already made her way from across camp to the clinic, stood over Ahmed’s body. She’d hastened to his side as soon as guards had hurried him into the exam room, as had medical Corpsman 58. The two of them looked down onto Ahmed’s body, visually scanning him from the top of his thick, matted black hair to his shoeless bare feet.

The blue of Ahmed’s fingers and toes. The purpling of his nails. The navy ring around his lips and mouth. Blood not circulating. Blood lacking oxygen. Medically speaking the body was cyanotic. Practically speaking, though, the body was in crisis. The hospital Nurse and Corpsman 58 needed only a quick observation to know they were dealing with the single greatest emergency they’d ever faced at Gitmo.

Their latex-gloved hands checked for Ahmed’s vitals. The Nurse placed her index and middle finger together on his wrist, held it there and waited for a rhythm to rebound into her fingertips. Nothing. She pressed harder. Still nothing. His forearm, wrist, and hand were pliable. That was a good sign. Lack of a pulse was not. Making matters worse, he was cold to the touch. Even through the latex gloves she could feel the chill of his skin.

Corpsman 58 took his turn searching for a pulse. He placed his fingers on Ahmed’s neck at his adam’s apple and pressed down gently next to the windpipe. The corpsman’s fingers disappeared into a thicket of overgrown neck hair, while they scraped against Ahmed’s thick, unruly beard. Just as the Nurse had done Corpsman 58 steadied his fingers, pressed down into the neck, and waited for Ahmed’s rhythm to relay back into his own skin. Waiting. Waiting in vain for Ahmed’s pulse. Corpsman 58’s tempo was a timpani drum. But not Ahmed’s. His wasn’t beating. Nothing. The orchestra of Ahmed’s body had come to a cold stop.

The Nurse and Corpsman 58 then took turns checking for signs of respiration. They hovered with their ear above Ahmed’s closed mouth listening for the inhale or exhale of breath, any
breath, a whisper of breath, the mere hint of a breath. But nothing. With chaos clamoring all around the clinic, the rustling of medical instruments, the din of closets and drawers opening and closing, the rumblings of voices on the phone and over radio, the blaring of boot-heels pounding here and there, the sound of sneakers shuffling back and forth, within all of this, within this cyclone of commotion the Nurse and corpsman listened, listened as if nothing else was happening. They shuttered everything around them into a drowned-out muffle while they listened for a faint exhaustion of breath desperately trying to escape Ahmed’s body. But no such breath arrived. They looked at his chest, watched and waited for it to rise, for his ribs to expand, even slightly. A bodily crisis like Ahmed’s was a game of millimeters, an enormous event played out on a micro scale where each tiny somatic detail mattered, mattered enormously. But size and scale no longer mattered here. It didn’t matter what the dimensions, Ahmed’s chest wasn’t rising. Not even a millimeter. Not even for a millisecond. His body had ceased breathing.

The next steps were critical. Every decision the medics made, every intervention, every improvisation, carried with it a weight almost too burdensome to bear. They were locked in a battle against Ahmed’s lifeless body, a body evading their grasp with each passing second. A battle of Time and Body.

The repercussions for losing were severe. Detainees don’t die at Guantanamo. They’re not allowed to. Ali Abdullah Ahmed knew that better than most. It was a painstaking lesson he’d been forced to learn every day, twice a day, for the nine long months that medics shoved feeding tubes up his nostril, down the back of his throat, directly into his stomach. But now here he was, in the clinic again, strapped to a bed again, challenging the military again, trying to retake ownership of his body again. His life. His death. He was closer than ever to being free.

With no pulse and no breath the Nurse and Corpsman immediately began CPR. The Nurse put one hand on Ahmed’s forehead and the other under his chin. In one motion she gently
tilted his head back and lifted his chin to prepare his airway. She then placed a Bag Valve Mask (BVM) over Ahmed’s nose and closed mouth. Creating a “C” with her thumb and forefinger she pressed the BVM to his face, creating a seal. He was ready for artificial respiration.

At the same time that the Nurse was preparing Ahmed’s body Corpsman 58 was readying his own body for the intense labor of chest compressions. He’d been trained in CPR for a long time, and he knew the placement of his hands and body in relation to the victim’s chest had to be just right, had to be perfect if there was any chance at resuscitation. Corpsman 58 paralleled his hips to Ahmed’s chest and shoulders. He placed the heel of his hand on the center of Ahmed’s chest, directly on top of the breastbone between the two pectoral muscles. He placed his second hand squarely on top of the first. With his shoulders positioned directly above Ahmed’s sternum and his arms straight, he took a quick breath. On his exhale he began pressing downward, hard and fast, using the weight of his body and the strength of his arms to try and pump life back into Ahmed.

Together Corpsman 58 and the Nurse began cycling the CPR in rapid bursts. Thirty quick chest compressions, two even ventilations from the BVM held tight to Ahmed’s face. Thirty compressions, two ventilations. Thirty compressions, two ventilations. Pressing down on his chest with force and fury. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven…twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty!Breath…breath…Again!

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven…twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty!Breath…breath…Again!

Corpsman 58 pressed down on Ahmed’s chest with force and fury. There was a frustration there. Press. Press. PRESS! PRESS! The corpsman was panting and sweating, working incredibly hard.

They cycled through the CPR protocol numerous times. Pressing then breathing. Pressing then breathing. No change. Ahmed wasn’t responding. They were getting nowhere.
The Nurse decided to take invasive action. CPR wasn’t working. Ahmed’s body wasn’t responding. More drastic methods were required. She needed to set up an IV, and quickly. Even more she needed an injectable that could jumpstart Ahmed’s heart. It may already have been too late, but every passing second was a second lost. She turned to Escort Guard 61, who was still standing shell-shocked in the exam room watching the resuscitation efforts. “Are you qualified in CPR,” she asked him urgently. Without missing a beat the guard answered affirmatively; it was more reaction than forethought. Without missing a beat herself the Nurse ordered him to take over respiration duty from her. She then scrambled to assemble the IV equipment.

Escort Guard 61 darted into action, grabbing the BVM from the Nurse. He held it on Ahmed’s face forming a “C” shape around the mask with his hand to seal it just as he had seen her do. It may have dawned on the guard at that point that a man’s life was partially in his hands, and they were only meagerly medically qualified hands at that. He had no choice though. He was following the Nurse’s orders, and she was a superior officer. All he could do now was hold the mask tightly on Ahmed’s face, listen to the count wheezing out of Corpsman 58’s laboring body - “twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty!” - and then pump the BVM bag, forcing air into Ahmed’s unresponsive lungs for “One…Two…”, before the cycle would begin all over again.

Escort Guard 61 and Corpsman 58 continued delivering CPR on Ahmed’s body for more than five minutes straight while the Nurse attempted to start an IV. They cycled through 30 compressions, 2 respirations so many times they couldn’t keep track. The corpsman may have been physically exhausted but he showed no signs of slowing or losing strength. It was almost as if he was accumulating power the more fatigued he became. He performed his chest compressions so vigorously that one may be forgiven for thinking he was trying to bulldoze his hands straight through Ahmed’s ribcage, collapsing his entire chest like a building demolition. The physical violence of saving life - it had become a recurring theme at Guantanamo by now. It had become a
recurring theme of Ahmed’s own body. He’d been pumped full of food, pumped full of liquid, pumped full of medicines, pumped full of methods that molded his body by breaking his spirit. Now his lungs were artificially pumped with oxygen, now his heart was being artificially pumped with whatever blood was willing to still circulate.

While the guard and corpsman worked at CPR efforts, the Nurse started an IV on Ahmed. She prepared the IV tubing, hung the bag from an elevated stand, and brought it near Ahmed’s body. She extended his right arm in front of her and looked for prominent veins, an easy entry point that would help pierce through the madness of the exam room. There wasn’t enough time to miss a vein and make multiple attempts on Ahmed’s arm. She had to get it right, and she had to get it right now. With that she placed her gloved hand on the inside of Ahmed’s elbow and felt around for a workable vein, pressing his elbow pit, squeezing and pulling the skin. Finally finding a suitable candidate, she disinfected the site. She took the catheter in her hand and inserted the needle shallowly through the skin in Ahmed’s arm. Lacking consciousness he gave no resistance and no response. That the Nurse had in her care an unfeeling subject made pushing the needle a few extra centimeters deeper into his arm that much easier. After inserting the needle to the desired depth she pulled it out swiftly while simultaneously advancing the catheter into the vein. She placed sterile dressing over the entry point, inserted the IV tubing into the catheter, screwed it, locked it into place, and finally exhaled. It was as if she had stopped breathing throughout the entire procedure, a feat only Ahmed, laying on the gurney incapacitated, was able to actually achieve.

Corpsman 57 burst into Exam Room 10 looking immediately for a way to lend assistance. He’d been at the chow hall with Corpsman 54 on their scheduled lunch break when they’d heard the emergency call over the radio and rushed back. How could he help? What could he do? What exactly was wrong with the body laying on the gurney in front of him? What had happened? There was no
time for answers though. The Nurse, having just set the IV in Ahmed, ordered Corpsman 57 to run and get an oxygen supply line for the BVM.

Almost as soon as he had entered the exam room he rushed back out. He was on the hunt for an oxygen tank. Seized by the mayhem he bolted around the clinic looking desperately for the item. For all he knew that tank could be the very thing that’d keep Ahmed’s body alive and intact. He was determined to find it. He wasn’t about to let his lunch break be the thing that kept the medics from saving Ahmed in time. He’d only been in the exam room for a brief moment but he could recognize from the desperation on the face of the medics that every second counted. He wasn’t sure how long the escort guard and corpsman had been doing CPR, but the sweat dripping off of them suggested it’d been awhile, which is why he knew that the oxygen supply line was so vital.

Corpsman 57’s determination paid off when he discovered the appliance in the main treatment room. Taking it, he sprinted to the back of the clinic, and darted through the last room on the left. He knew exactly what to do. Without saying anything he brought the oxygen supply line directly to the BVM in Escort Guard 61’s hands. While Corpsman 58 continued to furiously perform chest compressions, Corpsman 57 tried to connect the oxygen bag to the device. Ahmed’s jostling body, being pumped up and down, made connecting the thing somewhat difficult. All bodies and all things were in motion. Ease, stillness, and Time, were luxuries none could afford at the moment. Corpsman 57 fumbled around trying to attach the reservoir tubing from the supply line to the mask. Ultimately it was his patience in panic, not his nimble fingers, that got the device connected.

And then he looked at Ahmed’s body. It was the first time he’d actually fully taken in the spectacle of the body before him, the body being jostled around, the body being worked on,
pumped on, breathed into, punctured with needles, the body receiving everyone’s undying attention. Corpsman 57 looked down upon Ahmed’s face. It was haunting.

Ahmed’s eyes were wide open, exaggeratedly so. Almost a caricature of open eyes. Taken together with the brows and lashes they seemed suspended in some indiscernible expression, something between surprise and horror and wonder, as if the last vision Ahmed captured was so overpowering, so incomprehensible that his eyes froze at their most open aperture, ceased functioning, and remained forevermore unable to look upon anything again.

To Corpsman 57 it seemed as if Ahmed’s eyes were transfixed on the ceiling. They were staring straight up, unflinching. There was no movement, not a flicker, not a twitch, not even the phantom illusion of a response. And the colors were so stark. The striking brown eyes Ahmed was known for were now only a thin eroded beach drowned by the black pool of his pupils. His eyes were fully dilated. The irises were now nothing more than gold-flecked halos ringing perfectly carved spheres of obsidian, two large precious stones inlayed precisely into ivory. For a moment Corpsman 57 wasn’t sure if he was looking at the eyes of a man or riches in a treasure chest.

His gaze moved down Ahmed’s body. He noticed more textures, more hues and tones. Each color caused more medical alarm. Corpsman 57 could see that Ahmed’s feet were turning blue, an ominous and unmistakable blue, a midnight blue. Even more, the feet were puffy. The skin was stretched and strangled tight around his ballooning feet. Corpsman 57 had only been at Gitmo for two months, but this was the worst condition he’d seen any person in at the camp — detainee, soldier, or civilian. But it wasn’t the blue of Ahmed’s feet and lips, nor the whites of his eyes or the expansive black of the pupils that gave the medic the most pause. It was the purple. Running the length of Ahmed’s neck, from lower jaw to lower jaw, was a lavender garland of bruising, thick like a belt, twisted like a birthday ribbon.
The scan of Ahmed’s body took the medic only a matter of seconds, even if it felt like hours of visual investigation. But his attention quickly turned from the body on the gurney to medics that surrounded him. Corpsman 58 was still leaned over Ahmed’s torso pumping away savagely on the chest cavity, as he’d done for close to ten minutes now. It was obvious that the engine powering Corpsman 58’s CPR efforts was running out of steam. He was red in the face, dripping sweat, wheezing out the numbers with each chest compression. No order needed to be given, no question needed to be asked, Corpsman 57 merely hurtled to the other side of the table and relieved Corpsman 58 at the end of “twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty!” As Corpsman 57 took over chest compressions Corpsman 58, without even considering taking a breather, took over BVM respiration from the escort guard. His arms may have been tired from the rigorous exercise of CPR, but he wasn’t about to sit around and do nothing. The specter of Ahmed’s lifeless body was spurring everyone in Exam Room 10 to action.

Everyone included Corpsman 54 who dashed through the exam room door wanting to know how she could be of assistance. Like Corpsman 57 she’d been over at the Caribbean Cafe for chow, but hurried back to the clinic when she’d gotten the emergency call over the radio. The Nurse, having finished setting the IV, told her they needed a defibrillator and quickly. Corpsman 54 wasted no time. She darted back out the exam room to find the AED machine. Her search didn’t take long. She knew exactly where it was, because medics had been prepared to use it no less than three weeks ago when on the morning of May 18 detainees began arriving at the clinic having overdosed on pills. She hadn’t used the AED machine on the overdose victims, but she was prepared to use it now.

Corpsman 54 wasn’t gone for a minute before she sprinted back into the exam room with the defibrillator. She finally looked at Ahmed’s inanimate body, a body being worked on exhaustively. She knew what she had to do. She didn’t need an order from the Nurse. She didn’t need to permission. She’d been trained to use the AED, she knew when to use the AED, and she
knew that time was right now. So did Corpsman 57 and 58, as they abruptly stopped performing CPR in order to give Corpsman 54 her space.

She approached Ahmed’s body machine in hand. She needed to place the pads of the defibrillator on his chest, but he was still in his tan uniform shirt. She’d either have to lift up his shirt or cut it open in order to access his bare chest. As she looked down at Ahmed’s body, however, she realized that those options were going to prove difficult.

Tied tightly around Ahmed’s torso was a white tube of rope-like cloth. Touching the cotton material Corpsman 54 quickly deduced that it was some kind of self-fashioned belt made of either torn up t-shirt or bed sheet. Why this white ligature was tied around the outside of Ahmed’s tan uniform she didn’t know. Nor did she know why Ahmed had tied it so uncomfortably tight. She tried to move it down but it wouldn’t budge. A firm knot tied directly in the center of the belt, right above Ahmed’s bellybutton, prevented any movement. Corpsman 54 tried to untie the knot but it was cinched too tightly. Her fingers and fingernails dug deeply into the narrow crevices of the knot, but no amount of dexterity or strength was going to unfasten this expert knot. Ahmed it seemed had intentionally tied the belt in such a way as to make it impossible to remove or untie. It was a knot laced with skill and purpose.

She knew from protocol she needed a perfectly dry body for the AED to work. Using a cloth she wiped away any perspiration that may have residued on Ahmed’s body. But there wasn’t much. Corpsman 54 touched her gloved hand to Ahmed’s whiskered breast. He wasn’t clammy, but he was slightly cool to the touch. The chill of his body meant she needed to act immediately. She placed the first electrode pad on Ahmed’s top right pectoral muscle, directly under the collarbone. She placed the second pad on his left abdomen across his floating ribs. She then pressed on the pads to ensure they’d adhered to the skin properly. Finally she checked that the electrodes were securely
connected to the AED. She knew she’d lost time fumbling with the knot and belt, but the machine was now ready to go.

“CLEAR,” Corpsman 54 yelled, filling the exam room. “Stand clear!” She removed her hands from Ahmed’s body and let the AED analyze the rhythm of Ahmed’s heart. The Nurse and other corpsmen stepped back and stood still. The flurry of activity that had begun the moment Ahmed’s body burst into the exam room was suddenly, almost magically, suspended. As if a switch had been flipped. Ahmed was the only person attached to the machine, but there was an invisible electric tension connecting everyone in the room. Their bodies had been transformed into conductors of anxiety, an anxiety that tethered them together in silence and anticipation.

These particular AED machines usually took anywhere from 10 to 20 seconds to analyze the victim’s rhythm. That seemed a small eternity for the team assembled to save Ahmed’s life. But there was nothing they could do now but wait, wait for the machine’s direction. The defibrillator would announce in its electronic voice either “No Shock Advised, Resume CPR” or “Shock Advised, Please Stand Clear.” Corpsman 54 stared at the AED, ensnared in suspense.

The machine had an orange button with a lightning bolt insignia. If a shock was advised the orange button would light up. All Corpsman 54 had to do at that point was press the button and the defibrillator would send a one thousand-volt electric current into Ahmed’s body, jumpstarting his heart and shocking him back to life. Or so she hoped. Right now all she could do was wait on the orange button. The orange button. The orange button. Her sweaty thumb leaning harder on the trigger, staring at it as if nothing else mattered. The orange button. The orange button.

“SHOCK NOT ADVISED, RESUME CPR”, the machine thundered out into the silence of the exam room. It hadn’t worked. For whatever reason the defibrillator refused to deliver the potentially life-saving shock.
The message whiplashed the medics back into action. The Nurse and corpsmen jumped back into the scene. They knew the protocol. A “no shock” advisement meant two more minutes of CPR before the machine could analyze the victim’s rhythm again. So they went back to work with the compression and respiration. The electrodes remained on Ahmed’s body as they pumped away. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven…twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty! Breath…Breath. Again!

After the fifth cycle of CPR the corpsmen quit, knowing the AED should by now be rebooted. Again, Corpsman 54 took the machine in her hands. “CLEAR!” “Stand Clear!” The defibrillator went to work analyzing Ahmed’s rhythm. Again, another 10-20 seconds of waiting. The scene repeated itself, only this time the tethered anxiety was knotted with doubt. Would the defibrillator work? Could they jumpstart Ahmed’s heart? What else could they possibly do to bring this body back to life?

The night was getting late and the medical team had already taken so much time, maybe too much time. Perhaps twenty minutes had passed, and they seemed to be getting nowhere. In all that time Ahmed’s lifeless body had become prismatic, refracting ominous colors - deep blues, blue-greys, blacks, and purples. Ahmed’s skin and tissue were becoming one with the midnight sky. His very figure was transforming into that inky star-specked drift beyond the reach of the cloud cover, beyond the reach of the storm, beyond the reach of anything, anyone, or any time. Beyond the beyond, from whence he was created. He wasn’t coming home. He was becoming home.

“SHOCK NOT ADVISED, RESUME CPR.” The message echoed throughout the exam room, hollowing out the medics’ hope. Once again the defibrillator failed. The crisis consuming Ahmed’s entire anatomy had turned the otherwise vital and sophisticated device into a useless hunk of plastic and wires. It was a remarkable feat. For years medics and camp officials had battled Ahmed’s body, trying to keep him alive. For years they’d remained victorious, using nothing more than the most rudimentary of technologies - a metal box, a chair, plastic straps, aluminum buckles,
rubber tubing. But not this time. This time Ahmed was winning. Everyone in Exam Room 10 knew it. The AED’s disappointing announcement cemented that knowledge.

Perhaps that’s why Corpsman 54 abandoned the AED and immediately launched into chest compressions. The machinery wasn’t going to win this for them. But maybe the physical effort of CPR still held a chance. It was now Ahmed’s lifeless body pitched in battle against the laboring bodies of medics.

They resumed CPR. Corpsman 54 took over chest compressions from Corpsman 57 without so much as a look or an ask. She was determined to jumpstart Ahmed back to life using only the power generated from her hands and arms. She pumped away on Ahmed’s chest while another corpsman continued respiration. “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven…”

Medics were only a few cycles into CPR when the Senior Medical Officer (SMO) arrived in civilian clothing, no doubt roused from sleep by the emergency phone call. He immediately moved bedside. As he visually assessed Ahmed he fired off a series of questions to the assembled medical team about what interventions they’d attempted thus far. The doctor hardly needed their report though, he could clearly see nothing they’d tried had been successful. Ahmed was without pulse, without oxygen, and getting colder.

The doctor’s assessment was quick. He knew his decision about what to do next would have to come even quicker. There was only time enough for one last ditch effort. There could be no postponing and no second-guessing. Waiting a second longer than absolutely necessary would prove disastrous. The entire resuscitation effort rode on his decision, so he had to make it quickly and with confidence.

Everything depended on Ahmed’s breath. That was the doctor’s determination. Without oxygenation and ventilation all other life-saving efforts would fail. Ahmed had already gone many minutes without oxygen. How many exactly, the doctor didn’t know. But his body had been in the
clinic for at least 20 minutes without any respiration, and that was already too long. Ahmed’s brain and other vital organs depended on oxygen. Without it he was risking irreversible damage, or perhaps more accurately he was risking even more irreversible damage.

The doctor ordered tracheal intubation. It was an invasive emergency procedure, but less invasive and more successful than the alternative, which was a tracheotomy. He had to create a fresh, unobstructed airway. The plan was to open Ahmed’s mouth, pass an endotracheal tube past his tongue and glottis, and directly and securely into his windpipe. Then place the catheter and connect it to the oxygen supply line. On paper this procedure seemed easy, in practice it almost always proved difficult.

First the doctor and corpsmen had to get the mouth open. But that was proving impossible. Ahmed’s jaw was clenched shut. They pried on his mouth with their hands, pressed on it with their palms, tore at it with their fingers. They tried with every muscle in their bodies to pull it apart. Nothing worked. Ahmed’s mouth wouldn’t open. It was as if his jaw had been wired shut, or had suddenly developed superhuman strength. Either of those options would have been preferable to what the doctor suspected it was. Rigor mortis. It tended to set in the small facial muscles first.

The doctor and corpsmen could no longer rely on brute strength. They’d have to employ some kind of instrument, which may not work anyway given that Ahmed’s body was creating a steely armor against any and all intervention. The doctor chose a laryngoscope blade, a short sickle-shaped metal tool regularly used in intubation procedures. The irony of showing up to save a dying man with a sickle may not have dawned on the doctor. What did dawn on him was that the laryngoscope was small enough, sharp enough, and strong enough to possibly pry open Ahmed’s mouth.

He inserted the instrument into Ahmed’s closed lips, scratching gums along the way. He wedged the blade between Ahmed’s upper and lower teeth. Gaining a small amount of leverage the
doctor then wrenched on the tool's handle, up and down repeatedly, trying to crowbar Ahmed’s mouth open. He needed the mouth only slightly ajar, just large enough to insert the endotracheal tube. It was another game of centimeters, but those centimeters were hard to come by. Ahmed’s body was too resistant. The Nurse and corpsmen watched in amazement at how much force the doctor was using. Ahmed’s lips, teeth, gums, and tongue were now collateral damage, expendable organs in the mission to open the man’s mouth. The doctor was driven, fighting relentlessly for centimeters. Jamming on the laryngoscope, twisting it for leverage, jacking the handle up towards Ahmed’s nose, slamming it back down towards his chin, again, and again, and again. It was a terrifying spectacle. The line between medicine and torture was almost indistinguishable. Ahmed’s body had gotten used to that blurred line, though. Nearly nine months of daily force-feeding ensured that. Now here he was again, on a gurney, enduring the doctor’s strenuous efforts to make him do something his body was resisting. Yet the doctor continued anyway, working the laryngoscope like a tire-jack to Ahmed’s mouth.

And then came a CRACK, like a sturdy branch snapped violently from a tree trunk. Everyone in the exam room heard the sound. It bullwhipped them to attention, pausing them mid-movement. One of Ahmed’s teeth had been shattered. The doctor’s blade had crudely fractured the lower left incisor, leaving a chilling echo reverberating around the exam room. The grotesque sound of a body part being chipped and splintered. The break was so ear-piercing and vicious that the surrounding corpsmen were certain that multiple teeth had been busted, not just one.

The doctor didn’t pause for long. The broken tooth was nothing more than a mere casualty in the war on Ahmed’s body. The laryngoscope grated against the broken tooth, prying the jaw open ever so slightly. The doctor wielded the tool with no amount of delicacy as he secured more and more leverage, until finally Ahmed’s mouth was open wide enough to peer into. The last-ditch effort to intubate Ahmed was now a possibility.
Only now they were faced with a new problem. Lodged deep down Ahmed’s throat was some kind of cloth material, quite substantial in size. It filled his entire airway. There was no way to snake the endotracheal tube down his windpipe with it in the way. Ahmed’s body seemed to be providing endless obstructions to the medical team’s resuscitation efforts.

The doctor acted swiftly. He had taken too much time already just trying to pry the jaw open with the laryngoscope. Now he’d need another tool to extract the cloth. Still holding Ahmed’s mouth open he yelled out to a nearby corpsmen to get him hemostats, a special pair of forceps usually used in surgery. The corpsman quickly retrieved the hemostats and handed them to the doctor.

The doctor inserted the forceps into Ahmed’s held-open mouth. The tip of the tool pinched a thick corner of the cloth. Snatching enough of the material to be towed out of the throat the doctor tugged back toward himself. The cloth didn’t budge. He tugged again. Still nothing. The cloth, or whatever it was, was crammed so snugly in Ahmed’s throat that it couldn’t easily be dislodged. The doctor pulled with more force, yanking harder and harder. Finally the object gave way.

Once extracted the doctor placed the material and the forceps alongside Ahmed’s body. The Nurse and corpsmen briefly glanced at the cloth to see what exactly had given the doctor such grief. The white material was folded repeatedly on itself, thick and layered. Some thought it might be a nylon sock, others a washcloth. Whatever it was, none could guess why it was in Ahmed’s throat or how it had gotten there. But now that it was removed the medical team promptly began trying to intubate him.

Here again they were stymied. An intubation procedure even when performed under ideal conditions was complicated. But here were medics, stressed to capacity in a life-saving scenario fraught with troubles and obstructions, attempting to perform the procedure on a highly resistant
body. All manner of problems existed. The tube was misplaced, or the placement of the tube couldn’t be confirmed with certainty, or there simply wasn’t an adequate enough mouth opening. They needed to get Ahmed oxygen immediately but the endotracheal method just wasn’t going to work.

The only option left was nasal intubation. The doctor and corpsmen wasted no time switching strategies. With a certain degree of effort they inserted a tube up Ahmed’s nose and snaked it down his windpipe to create an open airway. This was truly the final effort to retrieve Ahmed from the clutches of death.

In the end none of it worked. The intubation didn’t work. The AED machine didn’t work. The IV and atropine didn’t work. The oxygen supply line didn’t work. The Bag Valve Mask didn’t work. The CPR and chest compressions didn’t work. The authorities had thrown every available medical apparatus at the crisis yet still failed to keep him from death. With more defeat than hope the doctor tested Ahmed’s corneal reflex and then did a final cardiac thump. He then checked his watch. It was 1:15am on Saturday June 10, 2006. Ali Abdullah Ahmed was dead. In truth, he’d been dead a long time. He was already elsewhere.

The entire scene, all of it, was bizarre in its familiarity. Barreled into the clinic, strapped down, poked at, prodded, pried open, penetrated, objects inserted into apertures, nasal tubes thrust down corporeal chambers. It was as if here in Exam Room 10, in these, his final moments, Ahmed was fated to live out experiences that had racked his body for the ten torturous months he’d hunger struck and been force-fed. Only now they couldn’t afflict him. They couldn’t touch him, affect him, control him. Not now. Not anymore. The noose he’d knotted in his cell made certain of that. The rag he’d stuffed in his mouth before he dropped from the sink made certain of it too. The body that swung from the ceiling, toes dangling centimeters above the floor, was his again. There was no more
keeping him alive against his will. There was no more controlling, disciplining, managing, and subjugating his body. There was no more indefinite detention, and no more medical intervention.

The suicide note, scribbled in Arabic, found on the inside pocket of Ahmed’s shirt was short and to the point. It explained everything the military needed to know. And it contained a power they’d never be able to comprehend.

* * *

*I didn’t like the tube in my mouth, now go ahead and accept the rope in my neck.*

***

Ali Abdullah Ahmed had only been in Alpha Block for a few days. After giving up his hunger strike he was placed back in general population, and they chose Camp 1 Alpha Block. Camp 1, according to the military’s still-in-place classification system, was designed to hold more or less compliant detainees, those who hadn’t given the military a good deal of grief like those in Camps 2, 3, and 5, but also those who hadn’t been so compliant as to warrant them enjoying the minimum-security and communal living of Camp 4. The military may have moved him here because although he had been a determined hunger striker, so determined that he refused to quit even when they used the roughest forms of force-feeding on him, the military didn’t believed he posed much of a threat. A number of guards and medical characterized Ahmed as being generally polite and having an amenable disposition. In a sworn testimony after the Ahmed’s death, one of the guards who discovered his body would say that “I recognized the detainee from cell 5 as a human being so his death was more emotional. He was also one of the more compliant detainees. I never had a problem with him.” In other words, it was a logical decision for the military to move Ahmed to Camp 1 Alpha Block. However, it was a decision that would prove both fortuitous and fatal, because that is exactly where two other detainees were caged - Yasser al Zahrani and Mani al Utaybi. Together, the three would hang themselves simultaneously on the evening of June 9, 2006, becoming the first deaths ever at Gitmo.
Yasser al Zahrani was just 17 years old when he arrived at Guantanamo, making him one of the few dozen juveniles the military detained at Gitmo. A Saudi citizen who’d been encouraged by local sheiks to perform the duties of as devout Muslim and travel to Afghanistan to fight the Northern Alliance and other Afghan warlords trying to topple the Taliban government. He arrived in Afghanistan in July 2001, months before the US military invaded, and even though the Department of Defense would later state that because Zahrani had only been a post watchmen for the Taliban and hadn’t actually engaged in any actual fighting of US troops and that this fact was a “primary factor” that “favors release or transfer,” he remained held at Gitmo for four years. At Gitmo Zahrani had taken part in numerous hunger strikes, and been a major participant in the resistance movement. Joining the hunger strike in July 2005 with a majority of other detainees he would not give up starving himself until the military intervened with force-feeding via restraint chair. In that time he lost more than fifty pounds, which was as astonishing as it was grotesque given he began his hunger strike already weighing only 140 pounds. Needless to say, although he had given up his fast when the torture chair had been implemented, he was committed to detainee resistance.

Mani al Utaybi was also a Saudi citizen, and also one of the major participants in the resistance movement. He had always taken on the military during the course of his detention. In the Pentagon’s Detainee Assessment report for Utaybi, the military characterized him as belligerent, argumentative harassing, and very aggressive. Like Ahmed and Zahrani, he had been a fervent hunger striker, refusing to give up until the military threw him onto the restraint chair. But until that point he had fasted for more than half a year, losing an incredible amount of weight in the process, dropping to a mere 89 pounds. Like Ahmed and Zahrani too, the military’s rationale for keeping him caged at Gitmo was rather spurious. Utaybi belonged to a conservative religious organization that the military suspected, but never proved, helped finance Al Qaeda. Because Utaybi admitted his membership to American forces after he’d been captured by authorities in Pakistan, he was
transferred to Gitmo.\textsuperscript{461} The reasons for continuing Utyabi’s detention were spurious, in fact, that the military had actually just cleared him for transfer out of the camp a few days prior to June 9, 2006. However, the camp officials didn’t bother providing this information to him, information that was critical, and may have actually prevented him from sticking his head through a noose on the evening June 9.\textsuperscript{462}

How quickly these three detainees were able to organize themselves once Ahmed arrived on Alpha Block is anyone’s guess. It would have had to have been rather quickly, though, especially considering not a single suicide had been successful at Gitmo despite the literally hundreds of attempts. Having three detainees perform the feat at the same time on the same block would take serious coordination and organization. There’s reason to believe that once Ahmed arrived on Alpha block on June 6 that such coordination took place immediately.

Government investigators would later find multiple letters written by all three men addressed to various audiences, including fellow detainees, friends and family, and the Muslim world in general. The earliest dated letters written by the three about their impending suicide was June 7. That’s a full two days before the act, but it’s only 24 hours or less before Ahmed had arrived on the block, which suggests that almost as soon as he arrived the three began planning their suicides.

The suicide letters also reveal something else. They suggest something of a block-wide or camp-wide coordination in the triple suicide. The letters written by Ahmed, Zahrani, and Utaybi explaining their suicides, their rationales, what they hoped to achieve, were discovered in the cells of other detainees. Presumably, the three had written their letters and then given them to fellow detainees in order to have them delivered to their intended addressees. Multiple detainees, in other words, aside from the three themselves, seemed to be in on the suicides to some degree. That there were multiple players involved, perhaps helping to organize and think through the logistics of
pulling off a hanging, no less a coordinated triple hanging, may help to explain how it was pulled off successfully, especially when hundreds of other attempts had failed.

The coordination of these suicides, organizing them as an action, is precisely why they would be successful where others had been broken up by guards. These suicides were very well crafted, all the various scenarios to avoid possible interruption of the act by the military had been accounted for and taken into consideration. They acted with guile and stealth, and took advantage opportunities provided them by chance, circumstance, and concessions awarded thanks to the resistance movement.

The first element they used to help them pull off of their action was Tropical Storm Alberto, which, at the time, was pelting the whole of Cuba with massive downpours. The storm forced the military to close the recreation areas in multiple camps throughout Gitmo. That included the recreation area for Alpha Block detainees. The closure meant detainees would be unable to not only exercise but shower, since rec time included shower time. More importantly for the purposes of the planned suicide, the closure meant that detainees would be unable to do their laundry, as they had taken to washing their bed sheets and uniforms in the shower. Instead detainees would have to wash their laundry using the sinks in their cells. On the day of the suicides multiple detainees in Alpha block spent their afternoon and early evening washing their laundry in their cells and then hanging their sheet and uniforms along the steel mesh was of their cage to dry. Among the detainees hanging sheets on their cages were Ahmed, Zahrani, and Utaybi.

That detainees could hang their sheets along their cages was a source of contention for many guards. It prevented them from being able to observe the detainees, keep an eye on them. However, it was something that camp officials had chosen to allow. They granted that privilege to detainees in Alpha Block just a month or two before, because by granting them their demand rather than denying it they could hopefully avoid an organized outburst or, worse yet, a rejuvenated
resistance movement. Although the resistance movement had been all but snuffed out after the restraint chair, the military was still very wary of doing anything that would spark collective actions. Investigations later would criticize camp officials for their willingness to give into detainee demands in the months and weeks leading up to the suicides.

Regardless of what criticism would be laid at the military’s feet, the laundry policy was in place at the time of the suicides, and the three detainees took full advantage. They needed only a few uninterrupted minutes in order to asphyxiate themselves. In fact, an expert in the field of strangulation and asphyxiation deaths was later brought in by the military during their investigations to help explain the suicides. The expert stated that in typical self-inflicted strangulations in prison the individual is usually unconscious within two minutes and dead within four minutes, and if it was a full-suspension hanging where the person’s feet were fully off the floor then the amount of time to death would be slightly faster than four minutes. The sheets hung up by Ahmed, Zahrani, and Utaybi, on the walls of their cages, which precluded the military from seeing what they were doing, afforded them those four minutes or less.

The second element the three took advantage of to aid their suicide, by ensuring their bodies wouldn’t be seen, was the lighting. Complaints about the 24-hour overhead lighting forced the military to change the lighting system in Alpha Block. Again, this was done by the military to avoid an uprising or a reinvigorated resistance movement. The threat of the resistance movement alone, it seemed, won concessions that would have been impossible otherwise. The potential specter of empowered bodies had efficacy even when they weren’t currently activated.

As an appeasement to detainees the military changed the lighting system so that one half of the block would be darkened entirely, while on the other side of the block the lights would stay on but dimmed. The lights would then alternate the following day so that detainees on the opposite side of the block could enjoy sleeping in the dark, while the others had to go back to some amount
of overhead lighting. The military wasn’t going to black out the entire block, but this was as much as they were willing to concede. Many guards complained that this made it difficult for them to keep close observation of the detainees, especially when coupled with the hung sheets on the cages. Ali Abdullah Ahmed was located in cell A-5, Zahrani in A-8, and Utaybi in A-12, which meant they occupied the same side of the block. On the evening of June 9, their side of the block was darkened, thus making it extra difficult for guards to observe anything happening inside their cells.

The final element that the three detainees employed guaranteed them a quicker a death if the failsafes of the hung sheets and the darkness didn’t buy them enough time. That was the use of a gag. All three detainees were found with rags or cloth material of some kind in their throats at the time of death. This may have served a few different purposes. On the one hand, stuffing a rag in their mouth would’ve muffled any sound that crept from their body and into their voice during strangulation. It muffled any cries, any gurgles, any chokes, any last struggles before death. On the other hand, a rag in the mouth works in conjunction with the fabric nooses they constructed to assure that asphyxiation occurs rather quickly, which it presumably.

In the end the careful coordinating these three men did brought about the result they sought. They hung themselves on the evening of June 9, 2006, and were discovered shortly after midnight. There was nothing the military could do about it. Resuscitation efforts for all three were unsuccessful. Critical medical intervention on all three was unsuccessful too. The military would later admit that by the time their bodies were discovered and delivered to the clinic they had already been dead for hours. Ali Abdullah Ahmed, Yasser al Zahrani, and Mani al Utaybi had finally found a way to do something with their bodies that the military absolutely could not control, and they’d done it in such a way as to ensure there would be nothing the military could do to prevent their bodies from doing it. They hung themselves on the evening of June 9, 2006, and were discovered shortly after midnight.
How do we understand these acts of suicide? What are we to make of three detainees coordinating actions that not just harmed their bodies but actually destroyed their bodies. How do we understand these self-immolations, these acts of political suicide? Hunger strikes, noncooperation, armed confrontation, all the forms of collective action detainees had taken over the course of a year, these are methods that, in general, we are somewhat familiar with. They are so much more common globally and have so much more historical precedence than political suicide. Indeed, there is a healthy amount of literature dedicated to the kinds of collective action detainees had mobilized up to the point of June 9, 2006. While hunger strikes, noncooperation, and resistance more generally, are quite complex in their own right as methods of social behavior and bodily action, they are also, at this point in 2014, a somewhat well-recognized and understood form of action, even if that understanding is vague and imperfect.

Suicides are different. Suicides are resistant to understanding. Suicides when they function as resistance, are even more resistant to understanding. Suicide in general behaves this way. Suicide tends to leave nothing but questions, questions with answers that can only be hinted at, guess work, attempted to be beheld and understood, but never completely, not thoroughly, just mere suggestions.

A person commits suicide and the loved ones left behind have only questions. The questions are endless and eternal and very often have little resolution. Why? What could I have done to help? What was wrong? How could this person have done this? Where is that person now? How do I honor them? How do I come to grips with the effects of the loss? What could things have been different? What changes could have been made? How could I have been a better, more understanding son, daughter, wife, husband, father, mother, sister, brother, lover, friend? Why? Why? Why? Death in general often leaves a trail of questions behind it. Suicide even more so.
Down desolation row go those questions, and if answers ever do come back from that edge of
darkness they come back threadbare, decomposed, with more holes than substance.

But the suicides of Ali Abdullah Amed, Yasser al Zahrani, and Mani al Utaybi are powerful,
powerful acts, acts perhaps with more substance than holes. They are acts that demand
contemplation, most certainly. They are gestures. Gestures that require gestures in kind. And so I’d
like to use my body to gesture back. My contemplative, seated and altered, surrounded by candles
and altered, lack of sleep, uncomfortable, not nearly as uncomfortable as those in Gitmo, un-
incarcerated, back aching, fingers typing, feet grounded in Los Angeles, writing Body.

In these next few pages I’d like to, in some cases humbly, in some cases brashly, try to come
to terms with the suicides of these three men, men with bodies, men with experiences, men with
families, men with desires and hopes and aspirations, men with histories, men with the capacity and
capability to stick their heads through makeshift nooses and dangle undiscovered for hours while the
light in their eyes dimmed to a darkness. What follows is less a theorization, and more an attempt to
make sense of what these bodies are doing, because they are most certainly doing something. What
are these hanging, swinging, asphyxiating, now lifeless but empowered bodies doing?

One way to try to understand what these suicided bodies are doing is to situate their actions
in context. These suicides are the culmination of a year-long escalation of tactics used by detainees
to combat their detention conditions, their mistreatment, and their lack of legal access. These
suicides aren’t stand-alone acts. Nor are they the results of singular individual decisions arising out
of nowhere with no history or context. The death of three young men on the evening of June 9,
2006 is the conclusion of a resistance movement that began the previous June, when detainees in
Camp 5 began a mass hunger strike.

Certainly it is also true that one could see these suicides as the culmination of four year’s
worth of indefinite detention, which saw deteriorating conditions and increased humiliation,
punishment, discipline, inhumane treatment, and torture. There is no denying that. In fact, the scattered number of detainee suicide attempts from January 2002 to June 2006 seem to show that these factors alone are enough to drive detainees toward acts of suicide. But by and large those suicide attempts, with the exception of the mass hangings in August 2003, were singular events performed by individuals for individual reasons. In most cases, detainees attempted suicide as a rather spontaneous response to a specific instance of abuse, or had simply reached a breaking point and found an opportunity to take their own life. The coordinated suicides of Ali Abdullah Ahmed, Yasser al Zahrani, and Mani al Utaybi are different, however, both in form and function. Their acts were embedded within a protracted and organized prisoner resistance movement that employed numerous embodied resistance tactics, of which suicide was one such method.

That movement of embodied resistance began at the end of June 2005, when slightly less than a hundred detainees in Gitmo’s Camp 5, the supermax isolation unit, began a coordinated hunger strike. That hunger strike grew in both participation size and militancy in July 2005 when detainees in other camps joined. Among those first hunger strikers were Ali Abdullah Ahmed, Yasser al Zahrani, and Mani al Utaybi.

The result of that June-July hunger strike was the formation of a Prisoners Council in which detainees selected six trusted and respected leaders to represent them in negotiations with camp officials to improve camp conditions and treatment, as well as clarify their legal status and expedite the necessary proceedings that would lead to their release. After the military disbanded the detainees’ chosen democratic body, repressed any opportunities to improve conditions, and physically brutalized at least one detainee during interrogation with a refrigerator, the detainees turned to embodied resistance again, organizing a renewed and reinvigorated hunger strike with hundreds of participants that would last through Fall 2005. Some of those hunger strikers vowed to starve themselves to death during the course of the renewed hunger strike, but were ultimately met
with military repression again, this time in the form of force-feeding. A small band of committed detainees continued their hunger strike despite the military’s torturous force-feeding regime, among them, again, were Ali Abdullah Ahmed, Yasser al Zahrani, and Mani al Utaybi.

In order to put an end to the detainees’ protest movement the military carefully made some rather horrific alterations to the force-feeding regime, hoping, it seems, to not just break detainees’ bodies but break their spirit of resistance. And while this physical repression worked in the short term to dissuade some hunger strikers from continuing their protest, it ultimately gave way to more detainees joining the hunger strike, once again reinvigorating the movement, so that by the end of December 2005 the number of detainees hunger striking was nearly as high as it had been during the height of the movement. And again, among those long-term hunger strikers were Ali Abdullah Ahmed, Yasser al Zahrani, and Mani al Utaybi.

As detainees rededicated themselves to challenging their detention using a campaign of bodily endurance, the military amped up their level of bodily repression. Hoping to physically overpower, punish, and intimidate the hunger strikers camp officials instituted the use of a restraint chair during force-feedings, a device which was quickly designated “the torture chair” by the numerous hunger strikers who faced the wrath of its restriction. The restraint chair temporarily put to rest the, at that time, more than 6-month campaign of bodily resistance organized by detainees, as only three rather “hardcore” detainees continued the hunger strike despite the use of restraint chairs. Among these three was Ali Abdullah Ahmed, who remained hunger striking until only a few days before his death.

Despite having only three detainees consistently hunger striking throughout Spring 2006, the detainees’ campaign of bodily resistance was reignited again on May 18 when three detainees attempted to commit suicide by medication overdose in Camp 1, the very camp that Ali Abdullah Ahmed, Yasser al Zahrani, and Mani al Utaybi would commit suicide by hanging more than two
weeks later. The overdose suicide attempts on May 18 prompted the military to perform a shakedown of the entire camp, resulting in invasive searches of the men’s bodies and possessions. The detainee response was quick, fierce, and somewhat organized, resulting in a physical altercation in which detainees brandished improvised weapons to fight off soldiers armed with riot gear, pepper spray, and non-lethal rounds of ammunition. And while this detainee uprising was brief, it also added fuel to a resistance movement that was on the verge of being extinguished. The follow-up to the uprising and the military’s vigilant and unsparing repression was the rebirth of mass hunger strike, the bodily method of resistance par excellence for detainees throughout their campaign. That hunger strike of late-May and early-June petered out, it seems, in order to make way for the coordinated and most drastic form of bodily resistance detainees had ever employed — the triple hanging of Ali Abdullah Ahmed, Yasser al Zahrani, and Mani al Uraybi, who had been active participants in the resistance movement every step of the way.

What this summary shows is that the hunger strikes, noncooperation, acts of defiance, armed uprising, suicide attempts, and triple hanging are part of a very specific and organized movement by detainees to resist the strategies of discipline and control used by the military in the war on/through/against their bodies. They are not separate unrelated incidents. They are, instead, discreet parts of an unofficial campaign coordinated quite bravely and intelligently by detainees working to obtain humane treatment and self-determination. Each tactic employed by detainees and each strategy of repression by the military against said tactic form a grand narrative of collective action beginning in June 2005 and ending in June 2006. In fact, this cycle of collective action followed by systemized repression followed by more collective action followed by more repression followed by more collective action is what often occurs with many social movements. Small victories for movements are often followed by defeat, which is followed by regrouping, re-strategizing, reorganizing, all of which lead to more collective action.
Inherent in understanding these suicides as the culmination of a year-long resistance movement is recognizing that these suicides function as a form of resistance. Just as the hunger strikes and other acts of defiance functioned as embodied resistance tactics, the triple hanging of Zahrani, Utaybi, and Ahmed, functions as an embodied resistance tactic. While this characterization of their suicides may be uncomfortable or off-putting, and in some respects challenges the way these suicides were framed initially, there is evidence to support this reading of their deaths.

To begin with, we can gather from the letters and suicide notes the men left behind that they seemed to have intended their deaths to perform as a kind-of resistance. For instance, in a letter dated June 7, 2006 addressed to fellow detainees, a letter which was subsequently discovered after the suicides by an NCIS investigation team, Ali Abdullah Ahmed states:

*I am informing you that I gave away the precious thing that I have in which it became very cheap, which is my own self, to lift up the oppression that is upon us through the American Government and the Red Cross evenly together.*

In other words, Ahmed seems to believe that taking his life, or more precisely, “giving away” his life, is an act that will have a certain amount of political efficacy. It will, he seems to hope, lift the oppression from his fellow detainees. We don’t know whether he believed the act alone would be sufficient enough to coerce the military to cease their oppression, or whether "he believed the act would coerce others to act on behalf of detainees and thus, in an activist chain of events, lift the oppression from the caged men. What is evident, however, is that Ahmed believed his suicide to function as a resistance against the generalized oppression of detainees at Gitmo, one that perhaps had the potential to be powerful enough to affect conditions at the camp, in the same way his hunger strikes had attempted to do, even if they came up short.

Yasser al Zahrani discusses his suicide in similar terms. In a letter addressed to his fellow detainees and the broader Islamic world dated June 8, 2006, and also discovered after the fact by NCIS, Zahrani contextualizes his death like this:
“I will sacrifice my worthless soul for your sake (Allah’s lions) hoping that this might have you released from your captivity. Thus might benefit Islam and all Muslims!” 465

Again, as with Ahmed’s characterization of suicide, Zahrani believes that his death has the ability to lift oppression from his fellow detainees, and perhaps even free them. He also believes that his sacrificed body may have the potential to help end oppression for the entire Muslim world, a scope of efficacy much larger than Ahmed’s stated aspirations. But here, Bahraini, just like Ahmed, understand his suicide as a political tactic capable of operating the way his other embodied tactics had, not merely resisting oppression and rejecting oppression, but perhaps ending oppression in some significant way.

The third detainee, Mani al Utaybi, likewise situated his suicide in the context of resistance. In the suicide note found on his body at the time of death is written:

*I got out of the cages whether you like or not.*466

Although concise, Utaybi’s statement suggests that he viewed his suicide as an act of personal defiance and dissent against the military. He wrote other letters which would illustrate that he believed, similarly to Ahmed and Zahrani, that his suicide had the potential to benefit the detainee population as a whole. But in his suicide note here, he qualifies his suicide specifically as an act of personal resistance against his captors.

In each of the three detainees’ cases it seems apparent from the notes and letters they left behind that their suicides were politically charged. Either they were framed as acts of resistance formidable enough to end the military’s war on detainee bodies and liberate them from oppression, or acts of open defiance against their military captors. What is also evident is that these suicides were not the byproduct of psychosis, depression, or mental disorder.

Following the deaths the military was quick to inform the media that each of the detainees had recently been screened by professionals in the camp’s Behavioral Health Services (BHS) unit, the medical department of health professionals tasked with monitoring and treating detainees’
mental health. None of the three, the military told the press, exhibited signs of suicidal ideation. In addition, the Pentagon’s senior medical professional Dr. William Winkenwerder stated, “none of the men had ‘ongoing psychological illness’” and none of them were on prescription drugs. In fact, prior to their suicides all three detainees were issued a recent clean bill of mental health. The military’s public statements weren’t spin or PR maneuvers to deflect blame either, the statements were backed up by medical files later declassified as part of a Freedom of Information Act request.

According to the nearly 900 pages that constitute Ali Adullah Ahmed’s medical records, he was never diagnosed with suffering from any psychiatric condition. In four years of detention mental health clinicians at the camp never diagnosed him with clinical depression or any other mental disorder for that matter. Only once, in July 2002, shortly after he arrived at Gitmo and began a short hunger strike did doctors check Yes in the boxes for Depression and Mood Problems on his evaluation form. However, the medical notes accompanying this evaluation also indicate that at the time Ahmed was requesting a cell move which was not granted to him by camp officials, while simultaneously suffering from kidney stones, an abscess in his cheek that required surgery, scrotum pain, tooth aches, food allergies, and sleeplessness, all of which coincided, no doubt, with the general mental shock of being hauled across the globe to a place he didn’t know, and stuffed into a tiny cell. Yet, this was the only occasion in his four years of detention that doctors documented signs of depression or mood problems.

Ahmed’s final mental health evaluations took place mere weeks before his suicide. A check-up conducted by a psychiatric technician from the camp’s BHS unit on May 14 revealed that Ahmed exhibited no signs of mental distress, or antisocial or borderline traits. His mood was categorized by the doctor as “mellow”, his affect was “congruent”, his thought process was “goal directed”, his eye contact was “good”, his communication was “normal”, and the doctor did not observe or note any signs of “self-injurious behavior.” According to the technician, Ahmed smiled at him and told him,
“I’m good. I’m not crazy. They know me no crazy,” and then stated that he didn’t want to talk anymore to BHS.\(^{470}\) Ahmed’s limited interaction with the technician and refusal to participate further wasn’t anything new. In fact, in practically all of his weekly or bi-weekly BHS evaluations he repeats to technicians, “I am good. Everything is good,” before dismissing them and telling them he no longer wants to talk. Yet despite his refusals to participate, which could have been part and parcel of detainees’ overall campaign of noncooperation, health professionals consistently note that he is polite in his refusal and exhibits no antisocial traits, nor depressive symptoms, nor thought disorders, nor suicidal ideation. Now, given that these evaluations took place weekly or bi-weekly over the course of a few years, and doctors, without any deviation, regularly diagnosed Ahmed as displaying no signs of psychosis or mental disorder, it seems safe to say that he did not take his life because of mental instability or depression.

Yasser al Zahrani and Mani al Utaybi, similarly, were not diagnosed as suffering from depression or psychological disorder. Their medical histories, unlike Ahmed’s, have not been declassified or become in any way available yet. However, one would presume that in the same way the military hadn’t lied about Ali Abdullah Ahmed’s mental health when they told reporters immediately after the deaths that he exhibited no signs of concern and was okayed by psychologists, that they were similarly telling the truth with respects to Zahrani and Utaybi. Though lacking hard medical data for these two detainees, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence from fellow detainees about the two men’s disposition that corroborates the military’s assessment.

Tarek Dergoul, a British detainee released from Gitmo in 2004, had known both Yasser al Zahrani and Mani al Utaybi intimately, as he had spent a good deal of time in cells next to them at one time or another. After the announcement of their deaths he spoke fondly of their glowing disposition. In an open letter written on June 14 Dergoul said of Zahrani:

\textit{Yasser al-Zahrani was a beautiful brother; he was 5’8”, had long hair (before it was shaved off), was softly spoken and had a very nice voice. He used to sing nasheeds for us (Islamic songs) and all the brothers loved him as he was}
always optimistic. He would sing morale boosting nasheeds for the other detainees nearby to him. He was very well known to everyone in the camp.471

Dergoul had similar sentiments about Utaybi, as well:

As for Manei, he was also another beautiful brother. He had a slim build and was extremely funny. He used to recite poetry, in fact this was the thing he was best known for and he also used to sing nasheeds for us. He was beautifully funny guy, and he was always on the forefront of trying to get our rights.472

It was the detainees’ very spirit and character, and lack of depression or psychosis, that made Dergoul believe that there was no way these could be suicides. He wrote, “Their iman (belief in God) was very strong, there was high morale and it comes as a complete shock to my system when it is said to me that they could have committed suicide.” But of course, Dergoul didn’t understand that their high morale and spirits didn’t preclude them from also using their bodies to selflessly extinguish their life for a greater cause, even though he knew that they had been committed resisters who were “always up for a protest: a hunger strike or a non-co-operation strike.”473

Although Dergoul hadn’t known the men in almost two years prior to their suicide in June 2006, the mindset and disposition of Zahrani and Utaybi apparently hadn’t changed. Mohammad al-Deehani, a Kuwaiti detainee released in November 2005, told Agence France-Presse after the suicides that he knew both Zahrani and Utaybi very well, and that they seemed mentally stable.

“When I saw them before leaving, their morale was very high although they looked weak because they had taken part in the hunger strike.”474 In other words, to those who knew Zahrani and Utaybi personally from their time in Gitmo the two didn’t appear to experience any mental health issues. In fact, in both Dergoul and al-Deehani’s recounting, the two were known more than anything for their strong convictions and determined resistance, especially with regards to their frequent hunger strikes.

Although the medical records and anecdotes seem to show with a great degree of validity that none of the three suffered from depression or mental disorder, and that right up until the time of their deaths they weren’t suicidal on account of depression or psychosis, many human rights
organizations, lawyers, and pundits were quick to chalk up the triple hanging to depression and mental anguish anyway. More than a few claimed these suicides were acts spurred by despair. In fact, “desperation” or “desperate” were the most common and repeated words used to characterize the men and their actions.

Kenneth Roth, head of Human Rights Watch, stated that, “These people are despairing because they are being held lawlessly.” Mark Denbeaux, director of Seton Hall Law School’s Center for Policy and Research, said after visiting the camp in early June that, “a stench of despair hangs over Guantanamo.” Barbara Olshansky, deputy legal director at the Center for Constitutional Rights, said of detainees, “Their despair and hopelessness has increased as the years have gone by without justice, it should not surprise anyone that some of the men were pushed to such desperate measures.” Even a former detainee believed that these suicides were committed as acts of desperation. Shafiq Rasul, a British detainee released in 2005, stated firmly:

There is no hope in Guantanamo. The only thing that goes through your mind day after day is how to get justice or how to kill yourself…Killing yourself is not something that is looked at lightly in Islam, but if you’re told day after day by the Americans that you’re never going to go home or you’re put into isolation, these acts are committed simply out of desperation and loss of hope.

These are just a few examples among many. The number of pundits, human rights organizations, activists, and lawyers who qualified the Guantanamo suicides as desperate, or similar adjectives, abounded. It also became something of a recurring theme with each subsequent detainee suicide at Guantanamo.

Characterizing the three men and their actions as desperate is certainly understandable. Given the sheer amount of inhumane treatment, dehumanizing detention conditions, and cruel punishment detainees in general, and these three men in particular, had faced in more than four years of indefinite detention makes characterizing their acts as desperate an almost default explanation. However, I’d like to challenge us to think about these suicides differently. Trying to come to an understanding of what these bodies are doing, how these suicides function, and what
they do, provokes a different kind of analysis, and thus a different insight. My fear is that we risk losing something important about these suicides by conceiving of them as desperate acts of three hopeless individuals. And, as I’ll explain later, formulating their deaths this way actually does a disservice to the men, violating them in a way not entirely dissimilar from the ways they’d been violated by the military. But more than that, I’d like to challenge us to think about these suicides as something other than desperate acts of desperate men because the detainees themselves thought of them differently.

The letters drafted by Ahmed, Zahrani, and Utaybi prior to their suicides, which were left behind for fellow detainees, family, and loved ones, illustrate quite clearly that the men weren’t desperate. In fact, the detainees go out of their way and state emphatically that they are not desperate, nor are their actions motivated by desperation. Ali Abdullah Ahmed, for instance, repeats in a number of letters that his suicide has nothing to do with desperation. In a letter dated June 7, 2006 addressed to no one, that reads almost like a press release for his impending action, Ahmed writes:

“my intention was to put an end to these ordeals, I’m not desperate and I swear to Allab not afraid, rather to the contrary.”

In a letter also dated June 7, 2006, addressed to the “entire Muslim world,” Ahmed reiterates the claim when he states:

_O my loved ones don’t ever think I’m afraid of what had happened to me or I have been afflicted with desperation, and may God forbids._

Finally in a letter drafted to his wife in Yemen on an unspecified date just prior to his death he uses the motif to reassure her that he is of sound mind and body and will meet her again in Paradise.

_Don’t assume O my wife that I have not become afraid or despaird, and what has made me endured all the past five years is able to make me endure more._
Yasser al Zahrani’s letters made similar claims. He was equally emphatic in letting his various audiences know that his suicide wasn’t an act of desperation. In a “testament to whoever wants to read it,” drafted on June 4, 2006, Zahrani states:

I am fully contended doing that [suicide], and after I had thought about it, perhaps this may help remove the oppression from us, and towards this, there would be neither fear nor desperation and no one forced or lured me into this doing and with that I’m indebted to Allah.482

In a letter addressed specifically to his family, and older brother in particular, Zahrani urges them not to despair or be desperate on account of his death, because he himself didn’t despair. On June 5 he tells them:

Don’t be in despair, for the desperate have disbelieved in our faith. However, we fear no one except our Islam and Lord.483

In a letter written for his other brothers, his fellow detainees, he writes:

I have decided this time to come up with a very truthful (honest) answer that is going to be explained in the following lines through sacrifice and speaking with a comfortable soul which doesn’t know the meaning of desperation and boredom.484

Mani al Utaybi’s reflections on despair and desperation with regards to his act of suicide were never articulated. Not once in letters written prior to his death does he even mention the words or their equivalents, nor is the tone of his letters despairing. In fact, as seen above in the suicide note found on his body, he framed his act specifically as a form of resistance. So again, these acts of suicide shouldn’t be seen as despair, or acts of desperation. Ahmed, Zahrani, and Utaybi, as can be seen in their letters, weren’t hopeless men who hung themselves out of despair. The entire tone of their letters reveals men who are less despairing and more optimistic, more empowered.

Certainly this doesn’t negate the fact that these three men were in a desperate situation. Indeed, Gitmo is a site constructed precisely to produce desperation. Desperation and its cognates are the result of finely-tuned military strategy. Every day in every way the military attempts to
manufacture not only a general atmosphere of despair but bodies of despair, despairing bodies. The
military’s aim is to have that despair be internalized by detainees, literally brought into their body,
embodied despair. They do this by ensuring detainees’ treatment remains a level below humane,
that the conditions of their confinement remain sparse and isolating, that their sense of impending
doom remains indefinite but perpetual. In other words, insofar as a person is detained at Gitmo
they exist in an arena saturated with desperation. This is a means of continuing war and an effect of
continuing war on detainee bodies. Despair is part and parcel of the overarching strategy of making
detainee bodies controllable, manageable, subjugated. What is a body sapped of resistance if not a
despairing body?

So, in that sense, of course, of course, of course, these three detainees were in a desperate
situation, as were all detainees at Guantanamo. However, and this is a critical “however,” these
three detainees also believed that they had the ability to subvert, evade, resist, escape, transform, or
obliterate that desperation. Every single detainee who had participated in the year-long resistance
movement had been convinced of the same thing, too. Every hunger striker, every man who’d
taken part in collective action, every man who’d been individually defiant, every man who’d chosen
not to cooperate, every man who’d smashed his Camp 4 barracks to pieces to make a weapon, every
man who stood up for himself or stood up for others, every man who defended himself or defended
others, which is to say nearly every detainee who ever passed through the gates of Gitmo, believed at
one time or another that they could actually do something about their situation, including eradicating
despair. And it was more than just a belief, more than just a desire, more than just a feeling, or
aspiration. Detainees actually did do it. In the course of the resistance movement they actually did
decimate the military’s strategy of despair, along with most of the military’s other strategies.

So, yes, of course, Ali Abdullah Ahmed, Yasser al Zahrani, and Mani al Utaybi recognized
they were in a desperate situation. How could they not? But a desperate situation did not a
desperate act make. The desperation they felt at Gitmo was the very thing they resisted, and the very reason they chose to resist. This was the whole point of the resistance movement, to shuffle off the military’s control, to evade and undermine the military’s means of enacting war on/through/against their bodies. When they hunger struck they did so as a way to empower themselves, through an art of resistance. When they hunger struck they did so to have some agency in determining their own lives, their own actions, their own futures, rather than letting the military’s imposed desperation determine their lives, actions, and futures. When they hunger struck they seized control of their own bodies back from the clutches of the State. Their suicides were no different in this respect. The three men were determined to continue their resistance, even escalating it, all in an attempt to seize their body back from military authority. That required maneuvering through a dense fog of despair. But their suicides were absolutely not a form of giving into that dense fog of despair. When they took their lives on the evening of June 9, 2006 the three detainees weren’t giving in, and they weren’t giving up. They were resisting. They were defeating despair.

When we frame the suicides as desperate acts by desperate individuals who’d hopelessly come to a last resort, what we actually do is rob the deceased of the very agency they were trying so desperately to embody. These suicides, like all detainee forms of resistance, was about imbuing the body with agency, reconfiguring the body as something more than docile, transforming the body from disempowered object to an empowered subjectivity, converting the body from that which is inscribed upon by forces of power to that which inscribes itself upon the world. When we frame the suicides as acts of hopeless desperation we actually deny agency to these detainees in a way not dissimilar from the military. We relegate these bodies, who performed one of the most courageous feats a human being could possibly ever perform, to little more than helpless victims, thus rejecting the empowerment of their bodies, and the empowerment of their act. In fact, we disempower their
bodies, disempower their acts, and disempower them as subjects, thus participating, whether we intend to or not, in the continued subjugation of these bodies. The three men committed suicide precisely to escape this formulation. They refused to be objects any longer. They refused to be victims any longer. They killed themselves. They weren't murdered. They killed themselves. That means something. It means something significant. It’s the difference between I want my existence ended (despair) and I want to end my existence in order to do something (agency). It’s the difference between I want to die and I want use my death to actually do something in this world.

Finally, a final question presents itself. In thinking though these suicides, trying to come to terms with them, contemplating how they function, making sense of what these hanging, swinging, asphyxiating, now lifeless but empowered bodies are doing, we are confronted with a question that cannot be ignored. How do Ahmed, Zahrani, and Utaybi’s suicide’s work in relation to their Islamic faith? Given that suicide is prohibited in Islam, as it is in nearly all spiritual traditions, what are we to make of the fact that these three deeply spiritual men committed suicide despite the prohibition?

To begin, I’d like to acknowledge that these were, in fact, men devoted to their Muslim traditions and faith, and wholehearted devotees of Allah. Ali Abdullah Ahmed had become a Hafiz whilst in detention, memorizing every word and syllable of the Koran. This was something he had been proud to announce in each of his letters prior to death. Four years of detention had afforded him, if nothing else, time to embody his faith completely. There was no separation between his body and his spirituality. Islam spoke, worked, and moved through his body, and his body spoke, worked, and moved through Islam.

Yasser al Zahrani, although just a kid, had done the same. He’d memorized the Koran, which meant that he spoke the direct words of Allah, and the words of Allah spoke through him. Similar to Ahmed, Zahrani often mentioned this accomplishment in the letters preceding his suicide. Zahrani was well-known and well-liked by his fellow detainees, and most remembered him
specifically for his spiritual devotion. German detainee Murat Kurnaz remembered him an optimistic good who knew the Koran by heart and therefore often led the men in the prayers, despite being just a teen.485

Mani al Utaybi too was well-known and well-like. Although in the single letter he wrote before taking his life he never stated whether he too had become a Hafiz whilst caged in Gitmo, he certainly reveals himself a devout Muslim. British detainee Tarek Dergoul remembered Utaybi as a man who was known throughout the camp for reciting Arabic poetry and singing Nasheeds, Islamic vocal music that recounted Muslim tradition and history. He also taught many of his fellow detainees Tajwid, the technique of reciting the Koran correctly.486

From what we know of these three, either through their writing or from personal anecdotes from detainees who knew them well, it seems clear that they were incredibly devoted Muslim men. They would have no doubt been aware that suicide is forbidden in Islamic tradition. So how then, do we square their religious observance with their actions, actions which seem to violate their religion?

It’s important first of all to look at the prohibition within the Koran. By reading it closely and taking into historical and linguistic context a space actually opens up wherein we may be able to come to terms with Ahmed, Zahrani, and Utaybi’s hanging bodies. The most cited passage in the Koran illustrating the seemingly unequivocal ban on suicide appears in An-Nisa, Sura 4, ayah 29 (Chapter 4, verse 29). Most translations render this chapter and verse similarly, so I quote here from the most recent Penguin Classics edition translated by N.J. Dawood.

Do not kill yourselves. God is merciful to you, but he that does that through wickedness and injustice shall be burned in fire. That is easy enough for God.487

On the face of it this appears a clear prohibition of suicide. Four words — “Do Not Kill Yourselves” — seem to foreclose any ambiguity. Or do they? Perhaps this passage is more complex than it appears.
The crux of the problem hinges on the Arabic pronoun “anfusakum,” meaning “yourselves.” The pronoun represents a “one,” an individual addressed in the plural, while also representing a “people,” or broader community. Thus, Allah’s decree in the fourth Sura may be taken as either, “Don’t kill yourselves” or “Don’t kill one another.” The famous Persian historian and Islamic scholar, Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, interpreted the quotation as, “Don’t kill your own kind,” taking the pronoun “anfusakum” to mean all Muslims. It appears similarly in the translation by Islamic scholar and revered European Muslim, Muhammed Asad. In his authoritative version of the Koran, complete with copious references to historical meaning and interpretation for each line of Koranic text, he renders the passage thus: “Do not destroy one another.”

The conflicting interpretations are actually instructive. What becomes ambiguous in language reveals something unambiguous about Islamic philosophy. The individual is both a “one” and “plural.” He is simultaneously an individual and a community, responsible to his fellow community of believers in life and deed, while responsible to himself in life and deed. A man of faith is his spiritual community, and they, in turn, are him. This inseparable connection of the individual to the Islamic community, to one’s brothers and faith, and one’s brothers in faith, has its grounding in numerous treatises from master Islamic scholars. They also have their grounding, I believe, in the suicides of Ahmed, Zahrani, and Utaybi.

In performing acts of suicide the swinging bodies of the three men are also performing something else. They are enactments of brotherhood, chivalry, and sacrifice, all of which arise from their deep spiritual devotion. In sliding their necks through the nooses and stepping off their sinks they come to embody the “I’s” interchangeability with the community, the singular’s translation to the plural. In other words, their suicides are not violations of Islam, but pious adherences to foundational tenets of Islam.
Brotherhood is a relationship fundamental to the Islamic spiritual tradition. But it is not limited to biological family alone. It extends to the whole community of believers, wherein brotherhood is as strong and genuine as kinship. This had been true at Gitmo among detainees for some time, and only intensified as they struggled together early in their resistance movement.

Islamic philosopher and Suf mystic, Al-Ghazali, otherwise known as “The Proof of Islam,” set out in the 12th century to illuminate the sacred relationship of brotherhood. Believing that a contract of brotherhood represented a path toward religious purification Al-Ghazali composed On the Duties of Brotherhood, a treatise that illustrated how a Muslim may fulfill that contract. According to al-Ghazali there exists 8 duties that bind brother to brother in spiritual journey towards Allah and Paradise. These are: joining two bodies into the pursuit of one enterprise, providing sustenance, speaking no ill of a brother, speaking well of a brother, forgiving mistakes, delivering prayer, remaining loyal, and providing relief from discomfort. (Al-Ghazali On the Duties of Brotherhood) Although each of the eight duties has specific requirements, they can all be said to spring from the first duty — treat thy brother as thyself. Throughout his thesis al-Ghazali says in various ways that when brotherhood is fully realized it is as if there is one self, but with two bodies. Brotherhood is so deep that it implies almost no separation between self and other, in terms of action, intent, and provision.

However, al-Ghazali is quick to point out that brotherhood implies more than mere equality. A Muslim should always strive to treat thy brother better than thyself. A Muslim should always seek to place a brother’s interests on a higher plane than one’s own. A Muslim should always shoulder the burdens of thy brother, endure his pain, fight his pain, and ask for nothing in return. Furthermore, a Muslim should always provide personal assistance in all matters without being asked, and should perform in this manner not out of a sense of altruism, but out of a sense of brotherhood. In these ways, brotherhood in the Islamic tradition requires deep, deep sacrifice. And
fulfilling the requirements of brotherhood, when taken to the limits of honor and selflessness, may mean even offering one’s own life in exchange for a brother’s freedom.

In arriving at some understanding of the triple suicide we may also consider the concept of chivalry so central in Islamic tradition. Here it is necessary to turn to the 10th century Sufi scholar and saint Ibn al-Husayn al-Sulami’s spiritual guide and collection of sayings, The Way of Sufi Chivalry. First, I’d like to acknowledge that although Sufism is the mystical path of Islam, and we have no reason to believe either of the three detainees belonged to Sufi sects, that many of Sufism’s doctrines were never deviations from Islamic orthodoxy. Sufi systems of spirituality, such as al-Sulami’s, were not grafted onto original orthodox conceptions of Islam. Rather, they were rooted in Koranic revelation, and supported and grounded in Islamic orthodoxy, meaning they had universal applicability to all Muslims. Al-Sulami’s collection of provisions in The Way of Sufi Chivalry synthesize both the mystical and the orthodox into a code of chivalry intended to guide Muslims toward spiritual awakening, purification, and perfection in their religious observance.

In his book al-Sulami provides more than a hundred specific sayings that serve as advice to Muslim men. Similar to the duties of brotherhood, the codes of chivalry are characterized by the fulfillment of responsibilities toward others. For al-Sulami a devout Muslim must be a chivalrous man given to benevolence and unselfishness. Above all the chivalrous man, walking the path toward Allah, must perform a life’s worth of personal sacrifice. He characterizes the chivalrous man thus:

The ideal, noble, and perfect man whose hospitality and generosity would extend until he had nothing left for himself; a man who would give all, including his life, for the sake of his friends.490

Such sacrifice, for al-Ghazali, is truly chivalrous. More than that, such sacrifice is a requirement those devoted to Allah. In addition, this sacrifice, this chivalrous act, he suggests, should not be performed out of a sense of heroism. Rather, it is one’s moral duty as a Muslim.

Notions of suffering and sacrifice are found everywhere in Islamic scholarship. On occasion they are elucidated in relation to suicide specifically. Renowned Islamic philosopher, saint, and
master, Ibn Arabi provides one such example, in which he illustrates how suffering the pangs of death and self-slaughter can function as acts of sacrifice and acts of supreme religious devotion.

Arabi’s book, Divine Sayings, is a collection of 101 hadiths. Officially referred to as hadith qudsi, these are the sacred sayings of Allah reported to the Prophet Muhammad, but which aren’t officially included in the Koran. In the 82nd hadith, Ibn Arabi reports the following as it came from Muhammad:

Our Lord, ever blessed and exalted is He, wonder at a man who goes forth to fight for the sake of God and then, when he is put to flight with his companions and he knows what his situation is, returns until his blood is shed. God then says to his angels: “Behold my servant! He returned out of desire and love for that which is with Me, until his blood was shed.”

Here we have a servant of Allah who is pitted in a fierce battle, caught in the confines of war. He could retreat to safety. He could salvage his life. In the end, he refuses those options. Instead, he sacrifices his body by walking faithfully and heart-strong directly into certain self-destruction.

Here we have a God, too, Allah, who does not in any obvious way show displeasure with the selfless gesture. In fact, the opposite. The man, in the eyes of Allah, is to be revered, to be beheld by the angels for his courage and determination to die. By sacrificing himself in certain bodily destruction the man’s name is tragically written in crimson mist upon the earth. However, in Paradise the man’s name is joyously written in the tears of Allah.

There is something in each of these precepts, these foundations of not only Islamic faith, but prescribed Islamic behavior and performance, ways of being in the world, ways of embodying Islam, modes of Islamic corporeality even, that are present in the suicides of Ali Abdullah Ahmed, Yasser al Zahrani, and Mani al U Laybi. Although I have spent much time analyzing their suicides as resistance, they also function as brotherhood, chivalry, and sacrifice. They operate, in other words, according to, and in honor of, Muslim tradition, despite the seemingly contradictory prohibitions against suicide. That the Guantanamo triple hangings, in addition to being the culmination of a
year-long resistance movement, are performances of spiritual sacrifice in honor of Allah is made evident by the letters composed by the three detainees prior to the night of June 9, 2006.

From the opening lines of each of the men’s suicide letters we can see that their acts of self-destruction are meant to be framed as acts of religious devotion. Whether the letters were addressed to family, or fellow detainees, or the wider Muslim world, all three men begin by invoking Allah and thanking Allah with the Alhamdulillah — “All praise and thanks to Allah,” or “All praise due to Allah.” Although this is often customary, it is also a way for them to ground the rationale for the acts they are about to perform directly within their faith as devout Muslims and their devotion to Allah.

From the introduction wherein they announce their faith, each detainee then attempts to explain to their audience how their suicides are meant not only to serve as veneration for Allah, but bodily sacrifices for their fellow detainees. In his letter to his wife, Ali Abdullah Ahmed assures his wife:

*Our separation was for the sake of Allah and my departure of this life is also for the sake of Allah….It’s time to serve Allah’s religion.*

In his letter to the Muslim world at large Ahmed writes:

*Praise be to Allah and gratitude for five years of captivity, demeaning and slavery and sorts of torture under the hands of those who cares none for you and are disbelievers…what I have done is only one of the basics of the religious duties that make one become close and proud when finally meets with Allah.*

Yasser al Zahrani’s words concentrate almost exclusively on defining his suicide as an act of sacrifice for his brothers of Guantanamo. In a letter written on June 4, 2006, several days before he would finally lay down his life for the perceived benefit of others, Zahrani states:

*I am fully contended doing that [suicide], and after I had thought about it, perhaps this may help remove the oppression from us, and towards this, there would be no fear nor desperation and no one forced or lured me into this doing and with that I’m indebted to Allah; this soul is cheap for the sake of Allah and the removal of oppression and I ask of Allah to accept it from me and to bestow upon me the highest paradise and resurrect me among the green birds.*
Citing numerous examples of religious disrespect perpetrated by the military at Guantanamo, violations that Zahrani interpreted, correctly, as acts of war, in an American crusade to not only enact war upon their bodies but eradicate the strength Islam provided to their bodies, Zahrani announces:

*I ask Allah to remove the oppression from the nation of Islam…* We don’t fight the enemy with armament, but we fight them with this religion, and know that our struggle to remove the oppression depends upon our commitment towards Allah’s religion…*I say to the Muslim’s youth, sacrifice your precious life and get prepared to remove the oppression from your repressed nation (O Allah I have made known, so bear witness.*) 495

Mani al Utaybi shares Zahrani’s analysis that Guantanamo operates as a war zone and that the military’s violations against detainee bodies and religion are strategies of war. In his letter he similarly frames his suicide as a tactic to combat the military’s war on detainees:

“*The enemies of Allah have declared war against us. I ask Allah to through our work to glory His book and religion I ask Allah save his believers, those who worship Him. I ask Allah to release them from their captivity, and to diminish the infidels.*” 496

In a letter addressed directly to his Guantanamo brothers written on July 8, a little more than 24 hours before he hung himself, Zahrani’s intentions with his suicide become concise and unmistakable. His writing is as lucid as it is powerful, and may serve as a summary for the sacrifices of all three men, when he declares:

*I will sacrifice my worthless soul for your sake (Allah’s lions) hoping that this might have you released from your captivity. Thus might benefit Islam and all Muslims.* 497

It is clear that Ali Abdullah Ahmed, Yasser al Zahrani, and Mani al Utaybi, believed wholeheartedly that their suicides not only complied with the spiritual codes of Islam, but that they were observances of devotion to Allah. They are not selfish acts of giving in or giving up, and they certainly can’t be regarded as acts of desperation, not after reading their words. In fact they are incredibly selfless acts of resistance, on one hand, and sacrifice, on the other.

In a very significant way the suicides function the same as the various forms of embodied resistance detainees had performed for the past year, including and especially the hunger strike.
That should come as no surprise given that these three detainees were major participants in the year-
long resistance movement, and committed hunger strikers. The values and meanings inherent in the
performance of their suicides are reflective of the values and meanings inherent in the resistance
movement. The resistance movement had always been about, in one way or another bodily sacrifice,
acting on behalf of another. That’s what it meant to take collective action. Even if those weren’t
the explicit reasons a detainee had for joining the resistance movement this is what the resistance
movement produced — a collectivity, a connectivity, a community founded on values of selfless
sacrifice for a shared cause. The resistance movement was always about more than just protesting,
letting the world know that war was being waged on the bodies of detainees at Guantanamo. The
resistance movement was first and foremost about imbue counteracting those strategies of war in
order to defend the body of oneself and the bodies of one’s brothers. By resisting they enacted
agency, embodied agency, giving agency to their bodies and the bodies of others who were obliged
to activate their own bodies in concert with other resistant bodies. Resistance mobilized the men,
moved them into a movement, a movement that moved, moved through cells, through bone,
through tissue, through muscle, through skin, through space, through concrete, through steel,
through cage, through razor wire, through metal gates, a movement that connected a body to
another body, transforming the singular into the plural, into a brotherhood, into a collective, a
collective that may have been incapable without the assistance of resistance. The struggle of
resistance forged these men in a holy fire and made them grow stronger in their bonds and deeper in
their faith, even as the military tried daily to disconnect those bonds and desecrate their religion.

For an entire year the men of Guantanamo gathered a storm the US military could barely
weather. They organized themselves across race, nationality, ethnicity, and language. They starved
themselves, repeatedly, incessantly. They endured pain and punishment and suffering and never
relented. They’d survived the military’s war on their bodies. They’d attempted numerous times, in
numerous ways, to seize their bodies back from control of the State, shuffling off their subjugation. Sometimes, in some ways, they’d been successful. But insofar as they made the attempt they succeeded. Insofar as they resisted they succeeded.

On June 21, 2005 a few dozen detainees in Camp 5 refused their food. They weren’t starving themselves, they were giving themselves a different kind of sustenance. They weren’t shrinking their bodies, they were extending them like cables to reach each other.

On June 9, 2006 three detainees in Camp 1 stuffed rags in their mouths and put nooses around their necks. They weren’t taking their lives, they were offering them. They weren’t burying their bodies in the earth, they were extending them like antennae to reach heaven.
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480 Ibid, 614.

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