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WELCOME TO CAMP AMERICA

By Katherine Oktober Matthews, September 12, 2017



“The first twenty prisoners arrived at Guantánamo Bay from Afghanistan on January 11, 2002,” writes American photographer Debi Cornwall, in her new photobook *Welcome to Camp America*. It’s good to be reminded of this fact – that there is a point of time in recent history in which the detention center, within the naval base slangily called Gitmo, did not exist. It’s something that, even 15 years on, is easy to forget.

Welcome to Camp America uncovers Gitmo from three interwoven perspectives: the residence and recreational facilities available to U.S. soldiers stationed there, gift shop products, and portraits of former detainees who have been cleared and released. Intermingled with these photographs are documents justifying the use of ‘enhanced interrogation’ techniques (we all know this is torture by now, right?) as well as the transcript of a statement made by a man at Gitmo following a violent beating by soldiers. It’s a lot to take in, and because they’re all mixed together, the effect is one of emotional dysfunction, keeling rapidly between laughter and abuse. It’s sickening. And, because of that, also rather brilliant.

Cornwall, who worked for twelve years as a wrongful conviction lawyer representing innocent exonerees in civil rights suits in the United States, turns her attention to Gitmo in text and images in part because of the location’s unique status as a kind of ‘outer space’ refuge from international law. It’s a matter of semantics. Because the men held there are called ‘detainees’, not prisoners, they are no longer guaranteed the protections of the Geneva Conventions. Gitmo doesn’t have a ‘prison’, it has a ‘detention center’.

She explains: “Of the 780 men who have been held there, only eight have been convicted in the military commissions, and five of those convictions were overturned on appeal. Nine captives have died.” Hundreds who have been held for years at Guantánamo without charge or trial are later cleared and released (and not always to their own countries). It’s difficult to

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overstate the disruption and damage this can cause. Yet, even the statistics themselves have a numbing effect. Can any of us truly imagine what it is like to be wrongfully imprisoned by a country that prides itself on “liberty and justice for all”?

Cornwall’s portraits of the released men – always shot from behind, to be consistent with the “no faces” rule at Gitmo – are sometimes frustrating for lack of ability to get closer to them, to understand their situation. We learn, in the accompanying captions, some biographical details: his profession, how long he was held at Guantánamo, when and to where he was released, whether charges were ever filed. The cold impersonality is itself like a military file. In this way, the photographer doesn’t hand to you the sympathy you might be expected to feel – you’ve got to do the hard work of being human on your own.

Guantánamo Bay has quickly become institutionalized in America’s collective unconscious, something which becomes apparent through Cornwall’s images of the absurd and tacky paraphernalia produced and sold as from any tourist destination – stuffed animals, coffee mugs, beer cosies, golf tees. Perhaps it should disturb us that hell has a gift shop.

“Gitmo is the best posting a soldier could have,” Cornwall’s military escort reportedly told her. “There’s so much fun to be had here!” And, it’s true, we see bowling lanes, a swimming pool, a putting green and lounge chairs lined up along the beach. Cornwall doesn’t explicitly state it in the book, but perhaps implied by the inclusion of FBI reports of aggressive treatment of detainees, the invitation for ‘fun’ at Gitmo is not extended to the detainees.

There is something familiar and friendly about the American brand of violence and power. What Cornwall is able to capture so effectively is the optimistic attempt to put a smile on everything, no matter how horrifying. Somehow, the effects of knowing that you are conducting torture can be lessened through a bright blue t-shirt that screams, “I ♥ Guantanamo Bay Cuba”, or a little stuffed iguana on sale for \$4.99.

The incidents described in *Welcome to Camp America* are highly reminiscent of the famous Stanford Prison Experiment of 1971, in which students were randomly assigned to roles of ‘prisoners’ and ‘guards’ and placed in a prison-like environment. Quickly, everyone fell into their roles: ‘guards’ became authoritarian and subjected some to psychological torture, while ‘prisoners’ passively accepted or even joined in with the abuse to comply with those in control. So enthusiastic were the students in playing the part of enforcers that the experiment had to be terminated after six days.

Reading through the real-life documentations of events at Gitmo, with the clinical descriptions of abuse and unjustified detainment, triggers an awareness for the arbitrary designation of humans to play one role or the other. While a faith in justice tends to reassure many of us, who believe ourselves to be ‘good’, that we could or would never find ourselves giving or receiving such treatment, every serious study of the use and misuse of power demonstrates otherwise.

In an experiment, the researchers or the participants can elect to end it at any time, should things become uncomfortable or unethical, releasing all from their temporarily affected roles with the freedom to return to their lives. The ‘detainees’ of Guantánamo, held by rules ambiguously outside the Geneva Conventions and U.S. law, do not have any such emergency exit.