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Ex-Guantanamo Chaplain James Yee on Faith and Patriotism Under Fire



James Yee, a Muslim Chaplain, was posted in Guantanamo Bay, in 2002, but less than a year after serving there, he was accused of espionage by the military and faced charges so severe, that he was threatened with the death penalty. Yee was locked away in a Navy prison in Charleston, South Carolina, spent 76 days in solitary confinement and was subject to abusive treatment. In 2004, the government dropped all charges against him. [includes rush transcript]

We continue looking at the issue of torture and Guantanamo Bay. On May 5th, The University of California at Davis', Center for the Study of Human Rights in the Americas hosted a forum, which I moderated, about the treatment of prisoners at Guantánamo Bay. Former Army Chaplain James Yee was one of the featured speakers at the event.

James Yee, a Muslim Chaplain, was posted in Guantanamo Bay, in 2002, but less than a year after serving there, he was accused of espionage by the military and faced charges so severe, that he was threatened with the death penalty. Yee was locked away in a Navy prison in Charleston, South Carolina, spent 76 days in solitary confinement and was subject to abusive treatment. In 2004, the government dropped all charges against him and in October 2005, James Yee wrote a book about his experience called, "For God and Country: Faith and Patriotism Under Fire."

Here is James Yee speaking at the forum. I asked him how he ended up going to Guantanamo and to talk about what he saw and experienced there.

- **James Yee**, former Muslim chaplain at Guantanamo Bay

RUSH TRANSCRIPT

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AMY GOODMAN: This is James Yee talking about his own experience.

JAMES YEE: Starting with a little bit about myself, it was mentioned that I'm a West Point graduate, but I want to say that I'm also part of a family that's actually deeply rooted in the military. Not only did I graduate from West Point, but also I have a younger brother who graduated from West Point. I have another younger brother who's actually an Army doctor, currently serving on active duty at Fort Lewis, Washington. And being a third-generation Chinese American, my father was also drafted during World War II, and he served after being drafted during that time. So I actually come from a family that has its roots in the military, and that's something we're all proud of, in terms of serving the Armed Forces and being part of the military.

But with that, I was assigned in 2002 in November to be the Muslim chaplain

down in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, the controversial prison camp that we're all talking about today. And really, at first, I didn't know what my role was going to be when I was assigned to that mission, this Joint Task Force mission. I thought perhaps I was being sent down to Gitmo, as we call it, so that our government, the Pentagon could say, "Oh, yes, we do have a Muslim chaplain assigned to this sensitive operation, in where all of the prisoners down there are of the Muslim faith. We do have a Muslim chaplain there. And, of course, that means we're being sensitive to the religious needs of these prisons." I thought perhaps that was the reason why I was being sent down there.

But nevertheless I went down there with confidence in myself as a Muslim chaplain, someone who immediately after 9/11 was approached by senior leaders within the military to talk about Islam, to build bridges and to educate soldiers and service members about the Islamic culture. I went to Guantanamo with that same confidence in myself that I would do the same job, which I was recognized for in the immediate post-9/11 era.

But when I got down there, I actually found out what my role was going to be, and it was, one, to be an advisor to the camp commander who was down there, to advise the commander of the detention operation on this unique religious paradigm, where we do find that every single one of the prisoners caged in these open-air cell cages are Muslim. I was to advise on how their religious routine, how the religious practices of the prisoners affected the operation.

But I also would learn that I would be a chaplain to the prisoners. A chaplain to the prisoners. And I was in a unique position, where I had that opportunity or that position to be able to interact with the prisoners on a very personal level. And as a result, I was given authorized unescorted access into the prison cell blocks. And I would meet with the prisoners on a daily basis. Hour after hour every day, I would be in the cell blocks speaking with the prisoners and listening to them. Most importantly, I was listening to them. In the military, we say that a good chaplain is a good listener, and that's what I would do. I would listen to the prisoners.

And what did they have to say? Well, they would tell me much about what was going on in Guantanamo. What life is like for them as prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. And, of course, they had many complaints and many concerns, many complaints and many concerns, which often led to protests on the part of the prisoners, riots or disturbances. The prisoners even responded even more drastically with things like hunger strikes and even suicide attempts in protest of how they were being treated, or should I say, how they were being mistreated and abused.

In listening to the prisoners, I often learned what was going on inside the interrogation rooms down in Guantanamo. Now, realize that down in Gitmo, there are two operations. There's a detention operation and there's an intelligence gathering operation. The detention operation is run mostly by military police, guards, who handle the everyday needs of the prisoners. They bring the prisoners food, a change of clothes. They take them to showers, recreation, those kind of things. In the intelligence operations, you have mostly Intel officers, interrogators, military intelligence and others who we in the military only refer to as OGA, meaning other government agencies. Who are these other government agencies? Could be the FBI, the Defense Intelligence Agency, perhaps the CIA, whoever. But within the military, we only knew them as OGA. So that's the intelligence gathering operation; their mission, to try and glean information from the prisoners, if they have any.

As the Muslim chaplain, of course, I was assigned to the detention operation, really being unethical for a chaplain of any denomination to assist

interrogators in their role in trying to glean information from prisoners. So, I was assigned to the detention operation. And in the course of interacting with the prisoners, I would learn much of what was going on. And what would they tell me? They would tell me about the abuses, and one of the things that I've recently done was I wrote about my experience. I chronicled it in a book called *For God and Country: Faith and Patriotism Under Fire*. And one of the chapters that I entitle is a chapter I entitled "Gitmo's Secret Weapon."

Gitmo's secret weapon. Now, what was Gitmo's secret weapon? Well, from the viewpoint of a chaplain in the United States military whose role is essentially to advocate for the free exercise of worship for all individuals, to advocate for religious freedom, Gitmo's secret weapon was the use of religion against the prisoners, whether to try and break them or frustrate them in the course of trying to glean information from them or in the course of detaining them.

Now, how was religion being used against the prisoners? Well, prisoners would come and they would tell me that when they were taken to interrogation, they were, of course, shackled at the wrists and at the waist and at the ankles, as prisoners down in Guantanamo are shackled, and they would tell me that they would be forced to sit in the center of what was painted on the floor, a satanic circle. The interrogators would attempt to force them to bow down and prostrate, you know, like in the form of the Islamic prayer where Muslims bow down and prostrate, while the interrogator is screaming at that prisoner that "Satan is your god now, not Allah!" This is how religion was being used against prisoners.

But how else was religion being used? Prisoners would tell me that female interrogators, for example, would take advantage of conservative Islamic culture or etiquette, in where you find in an Islamic society very limited physical contact between members of the opposite sex, with the exception of marital relations or family relations like between a mother and her son or between a niece and her uncle, those kind of things. Prisoners would say that the female interrogators, in particular, would take advantage of this aspect of Muslim culture. How? By being very ready to take off their clothes or disrobe in front of the Muslim prisoners in the course of their interrogation. And when these Muslim prisoners simply didn't want to see a naked woman, they would close their eyes. So the guards would then be instructed to go behind the prisoner and force their eyes open.

Further, these female interrogators, of course, took steps to inappropriately touch Muslim prisoners, and it has even been confirmed in official military investigations like that of the Schmidt Report conducted by U.S. Southern Command, which has confirmed that female interrogators did grab the genitals of Muslim male prisoners in the course of their interrogation. I think I've been the only person to actually write about how prisoners told me that these female interrogators went even further and actually forced these male prisoners by the hand and forced them to touch the female interrogator herself in private areas, whether on the breast or in the genital areas.

Now, when I heard of these types of things, and when many of the other American Muslims who were serving down in Guantanamo, maybe as translators, many of them who attended my religious service for the American Muslim personnel, often confirmed much of what was going on, because some of them actually worked inside the interrogation rooms. And when we heard these types of things going on, we not only thought this was degrading to the prisoner, of course, to himself, but we thought this was also degrading to the female interrogator herself. And further, we thought it was degrading to all women in general, because essentially what these female interrogators were doing were simply posing or presenting themselves simply as a sex object in front of a Muslim prisoner.

But there were other things that were going on with regard to the use of religion against the prisoners, like, for example, the Koran desecration. Now, that's something we heard about last year from *Newsweek*, first reported by *Newsweek*, that the Koran was being desecrated down in Guantanamo. Now, this was news that outraged the entire Muslim world, that led to riots around the world, and even people died in these riots, in protest that the Koran was being desecrated down in Gitmo. I, myself, was outraged when I heard this news, because I knew firsthand from being down in Guantanamo and experiencing firsthand the anti-Muslim hostility down in Guantanamo, directed not only to the Muslim prisoners, but also towards the American Muslims who were serving down there. I, myself, was outraged.

And I can say firsthand, from being down in Guantanamo, that, yes, the Koran was being desecrated down in Guantanamo when I was there. I remember when I initially got down there, the guards themselves were actually allowed to search the Korans as a matter of security procedure. And I remember seeing them, how they took the Holy Koran. They would open them up, turn them upside down and shake them violently to see if anything dangerous would fall out. Of course, nothing ever did. And Muslims, ourselves, know that just hiding something in the Koran would itself be an insult to the holy book, as well as to Islam. But, nevertheless, perhaps there's a need, a necessity for security procedures, especially in a prison operation. But the guards would take the Holy Koran and shake it upside down. Nothing dangerous would fall out, but sometimes the pages themselves would tear right from the bindings, and the bindings themselves would rip and crack.

Now, this happened in front of the prisoners in these open-air caged cells. They can see everything that's happening. And the prisoners would be furious. They would be angered. And this is what led to the riots and the protests as to how the guards were treating the Holy Koran. But then they started protesting with more drastic measures, like hunger strikes and suicide attempts.

But what would drive the prisoners to the extent of wanting to kill themselves in protest of how the Holy Koran was being treated? Well, this occurred when interrogators within the interrogation booths were taking the Holy Koran and throwing it on the ground and then stepping on it. This also has been confirmed by the very same Schmidt Report. Prisoners would come back, and they would tell me that the interrogators would also kick the Koran across the floor inside the interrogation room. And when the prisoners came back, and these reports and incidents were made known to the general population of prisoners, this is when you had the chaos break out and the mass suicide attempts.

AMY GOODMAN: James Yee speaking at UC Davis, University of California, Davis, at a forum on Guantanamo. His book is called *For God and Country: Faith and Patriotism Under Fire*. He'll speak more after break.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: We return now to the former Muslim chaplain, James Yee, speaking at a forum on Guantanamo Bay, May 5, at UC Davis. He is author of the book *For God and Country: Faith and Patriotism Under Fire*.

JAMES YEE: So they wanted to stop these suicides—these suicide attempts, but they didn't know what to do so they turned to the Muslim chaplain. "What do we do?" And this is what I did: I authored a policy that gave proper guidance to all personnel down in Guantanamo on, one, how to properly handle the Koran with respect. It was a policy that actually allowed the prisoner himself to show the guard that there's nothing hidden in the Koran, and then that Holy Koran would be held and stored in a little holder high up in

his cell, and before he's even taken out of his cell and the door unlocked, he is again shackled at the wrist, at the waist and at the ankles, and only then can he be taken out of his cell to go to recreation or to the shower. So if there was a possibility that he was able to hide a fantasy weapon or some sort in that Koran, there would be virtually no possible way he could go, then, and retrieve that something and use it to harm anyone. So my policy took into account proper respect for the Holy Koran, but also security procedures necessary for any prison operation. And those are the kind of things I was praised for and recognized for during my time down in Guantanamo.

But this is how religion was being used against the prisoners, but what about physical abuse? What kind of physical abuse was occurring? Let me talk to you about some of that. One, in particular, is an incident, which is pretty humorous, but yet it's pretty sad to recall what actually ended up happening to this prisoner. There was a prisoner who had been returned to his cell, coming back maybe from recreation, and the guard, for whatever reason, failed to lock the door of that cell. Whether it was intentional or unintentional, it depends on whose side of the story you believe, the prisoner's or the guard's, but nevertheless, he's in a cell that's unlocked.

Adjacent to that prisoner is an empty cell. The prisoner who is supposed to be in that cell is down in the secured recreation area being guarded by one guard. On every cell block, there are four guards. The other three guards were now searching that cell as a matter of security. That's when the cell searches take place, when the prisoner is down in recreation. The prisoner who is now in an unlocked cell comes out of his cell and attempts to lock the three guards in that cell while they're conducting the search. Very clever. The fourth guard down the corridor, sees what's happening. He comes rushing down.

The four guards—they're probably all over 200 pounds—are no match for that one prisoner. They're easily able to manhandle that prisoner down to the ground, slam him down, face down. His hands are now cuffed behind his back. His legs are shackled. The incident should have stopped there. Perhaps that prisoner should have been punished, taken to solitary confinement, a cell which we call MSU, maximum security unit. But the incident didn't stop there. One of the guards continued to bludgeon that prisoner on the back of the head after already being shackled at the ankles and his wrists behind his back and, of course, it was a bloody affair. There was blood all over.

By the time I responded to the scene, the prisoner had already been taken to the infirmary, to the detention medical facility to get his head stitched up, but I wrote about how I witnessed and how I saw that pool of blood on the floor and what I thought what I saw in this pool of blood were chunks of flesh that had been from that prisoner's head.

I also witnessed how the other prisoners who witnessed everything that had just happened in these open cell cages, how they were all in a state of shock and how the other guards who were involved in this incident were themselves severely shaken, because they had to pull their own colleague off the back of that prisoner. Clearly this was an incident in which excessive use of force was applied. So, yes, there was also physical abuse that occurred down in Guantanamo.

I can go on with things that happened in Guantanamo, like the ages of some of the prisoners down there, as young as 12 to 14 years old. Prisoners as young as 12 to 14 years old were being held down in Guantanamo when I was there. I had access to them on a weekly basis, and I recall distinctly meeting with these youngsters and my conversations with the guards who oversaw the detention of these youngsters. I recall how sometimes—or once a

guard said, "Chaplain, these youngsters, these preteens, sometimes they do get out of hand, and they're like any other preteens. They gang up on each other, they make fun of each other. And sometimes they do have to be disciplined." Well I said, "Well, what do you do?" He said, "Chaplain, we give them a time-out."

A time-out. Now what's a time-out? A time-out is something I use with my own 6-year-old daughter when she's naughty, or when she's had too much chocolate. I give her a time-out to have her calm down and go to her room and be silent. This is what was being used on these youngsters, who senior military officials said of them, "They're not individuals on a little league team. These are individuals on a major league team called 'terrorism.'" Now, I questioned the logic on whether or not a time-out would be effective on a hardcore terrorist. Would a time-out be effective on someone like Osama bin Laden? The reality is, these individuals, these youngsters, these 12-year-olds, were not hardcore terrorists. They were there for over a year, and they've been, I believe, subsequently released.

These are the type of things that were going on down in Guantanamo, but my contributions down there I was praised for by the commanding general, Major General Geoffrey Miller. I received two official military awards signed by him and had been recommended for a third, received letters of recognition from the commanding general, and I had received a stellar officer evaluation report, the best that I had ever received, dated two days before I would be arrested and then charged and accused of things like spying, espionage, aiding the enemy. And I want to talk to you about that.

How did that happen? Well, I was coming home in September of 2003 for what I thought would be a short two-week break. I landed in Jacksonville Naval Air Station, the first stop where U.S. service members come back into the country after being in Guantanamo. The customs officials, they stopped and they searched my bags. It was interesting, because when they directed me to get my bags, I went to the pile of luggage where all of the luggage had been unloaded from the plane, but lo and behold, beside this pile of luggage, were my two bags already set aside, and I was wondering how that happened? Nevertheless, it was very convenient. I was able to grab those two bags and give them to the customs officials. Disturbingly, I would actually learn that it was the FBI—the FBI—who had contacted the customs officials, even as early as the day before my arrival and again the morning of my arrival, requesting them specifically to single me out, identify me before I even get off the plane, and have my bags searched. And that's what happened.

So we no longer have a routine customs search, but instead we have now a search being conducted by an extension of a law enforcement agency, the FBI, without probable cause, a violation, of course, of my Fourth Amendment right to be free from an illegal search and seizure. Didn't matter too much to me, because it's not like I had anything. But then, it would matter, because these customs officials would say, "Oh, we got some suspicious documents in his backpack," and then these suspicious documents were immediately, within seconds, handed over to several federal and military intelligence officers, who, by the way, just happened to be standing by. No, it wasn't a coincidence. It was a sting operation, and then these intelligence officers would say, not only were these documents suspicious, but they are classified documents, and then they would be able to get an arrest warrant, and then I was thrown in jail for which it ultimately would be for 76 days in isolation.

I was arrested in secret, held incommunicado. I never showed up at the airport in Seattle like I was supposed to have, where my wife and daughter were waiting. They didn't know what happened to me. My parents in New

Jersey had no idea what had happened. I essentially disappeared from society, from the face of the earth. But my family would learn of what happened to me ten days later, when government leaks to the media were then reported, first by the *Washington Times*, that I was now arrested and charged with these heinous crimes of spying, espionage, aiding the enemy, and mutiny and sedition, which is like trying to overthrow the government. All of these capital crimes, and, yes, I was threatened with the death penalty days after my arrest by a military prosecutor.

But now, I was sitting in a super-maximum security prison down in Charleston, South Carolina. Interestingly enough, the prison in which they sent me to is the very same prison in which they hold the U.S. citizen enemy combatants. Foreign enemy combatants, we know, are held down in Guantanamo and these other secret C.I.A. black sites that we've heard about. Enemy combatants declared by our U.S. president that are U.S. citizens are held in Charleston, South Carolina at the Consolidated Naval Brig, and that's where they sent me, and I believe it was a U.S. Southern Command public affairs representative—I believe it was on Amy's show—who said this was only a coincidence that they sent me to this very same prison. But I know it wasn't a coincidence, because of the way in which they transported me there.

I was taken from Jacksonville, shackled like prisoners are shackled down in Guantanamo, at the wrist and at the waist and at the ankles in what we call in the military, a three-piece suit, not a three-piece suit like you buy at the mall, made by Armani, a three-piece suit of chains. This is how I was shackled and then thrown in the back of a truck next to an armed guard, two other armed guards in the front. And down on the way, on this trip to Charleston, the guard pulls out of this bag these goggles—they're blackened out, opaque—puts them on my eyes so now I can't see a thing. He takes out these heavy industrial type ear muffs, the likes that you might see a construction worker wearing when he's jack hammering in the middle of the street, puts them on my ears, and now I can't hear a thing. We call this tactic "sensory deprivation." Sensory deprivation, it's something that I recently read that the American Psychiatric Association has included in a draft of their definition of torture.

Sensory deprivation. I was subjected to sensory deprivation, but I knew about this tactic, because that's, of course, how I saw prisoners being treated and subjected to when they are in-processed into Guantanamo when they are flown in from Afghanistan under this very same tactic of sensory deprivation; its purpose, which is meant to instill fear and intimidation. You, yourselves, maybe have seen the pictures with the prisoners wearing the hoods on their head. Well, I feared also that a hood would be then thrown on my head, but fortunately for me, that practice of hooding had just been stopped months before my arrest. I also feared of being kicked and beaten violently, especially after hearing some of the prisoners when I spoke with them down in Guantanamo, how they were kicked and beaten during their transport down to Guantanamo.

One prisoner, as I've written about, even said, "Chaplain, if you look in my medical records, you'll see that I've even been treated by Army medics for being kicked and beaten so violently when I was brought here." I feared that I was going to be subjected to this same type treatment. So when they threw me in a cell down in Charleston, South Carolina, in solitary confinement, in isolation, I was at least relieved that I was still alive. But what was life like in that prison cell for me for those seventy-six days down in Charleston?

One of the most ironic parts of this situation is that down in Guantanamo, as the Muslim chaplain, I was able to protect certain religious rights for the alleged, suspected, Taliban and al-Qaeda prisoners down in Guantanamo. I

was able to ensure that the call to prayer was made five times a day over a loudspeaker. I was able to ensure that in every cell, an arrow was painted, directing them towards Mecca so they can properly make their prayers. I was able to ensure that every meal that is served to Muslim prisoners in Guantanamo is what we call "halal," meaning "the meat." The meals are prepared according to Islamic guidelines, a concept similar to kosher. I was able to ensure that meal schedules were adjusted during the holy month of Ramadan to accommodate for the holy fasting of that month, but when I, a U.S. citizen, was taken into U.S. military custody and thrown into a maximum security prison, I was denied my religious rights.

Yes, the prison chaplain came to see me, and he knew that I was a Muslim chaplain and, of course, by this time, it's high profile, as it has hit the news. The chaplain asked me if I needed anything, and I said, "Yes, could you get me the five prayer times so that I can make my Muslim prayers during their correct time?" And I even gave him a website, www.islamicfinder.org. Type in the zip code and you can get the prayer times for Charleston, South Carolina. He said, "Sorry, I can't give it to you. The security section won't allow me to give you that type of information."

I said, "Well, how about just a quick confirmation to the northeasterly direction, so that I can at least pray in the right direction, northeast from North America?" Mecca is to the northeast from North America. He said, "Sorry. I can't give you that either. The security section won't allow me to give you even that information." And I interpreted that to mean that if he gave me the northeasterly direction, then I, of course, being a military soldier, would be able to determine which way was north, south, east and west, and that information would help me if I was able to escape from this super-maximum security prison, because then I would know which way to run.

The point is, I was denied my religious rights as a U.S. citizen in military custody, the very same rights that I was able to uphold for prisoners down in Guantanamo. With that, I have to say that after 76 days I was suddenly released. I was never charged officially with those heinous crimes. I was charged with some lesser offenses of mishandling classified documents, which the military tried to prosecute me on. I was facing still some 13 or 14 years in prison, went to a pretrial hearing.

The very first thing my now-civilian legal representation did was to simply ask for the results of an official review of these documents that they had seized from me to show that I had something that was classified, and again, disturbingly, we learn that the government and the military had never even initiated such a review of these documents, and so this pretrial hearing was delayed, delayed again, and then again and then again and then, all of a sudden, all of the charges that were brought against me were simply dropped.

I was returned to full duty back at Fort Lewis, reinstated as a Muslim chaplain. My record was wiped clear, after which I, of course, tendered my resignation, received an honorable discharge in January of 2005, and upon separation, I would receive another, a second Army commendation medal for exceptional meritorious service.

I didn't receive an apology. Yes, I am an eternal optimist, and I hope one day that I will receive an official apology, and I believe that by speaking out, speaking the truth, and making people aware of what's going on in Guantanamo and letting others know what happened to me, as a U.S. citizen held in this so-called war on terrorism, that one day all of this will lead to a well-deserved apology. Thank you.

AMY GOODMAN: James Yee, former U.S. Army Muslim chaplain at Guantanamo Bay,

author of *For God and Country: Faith and Patriotism Under Fire*, the book that chronicles his experience. James Yee was speaking at UC Davis, University of California, Davis, on May 5 on a panel—a conversation about Guantanamo that I moderated. The others there were University of Wisconsin Professor Alfred McCoy, who wrote the book *A Question of Torture: C.I.A. Interrogation from the Cold War to the War on Terror*, and Michael Ratner, President of the Center for Constitutional Rights, who wrote, with Ellen Ray, *Guantanamo: What the World Should Know*, and the CCR, the Center, has also published a book, *Articles of Impeachment Against George W. Bush*.



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