

Chaplain, Red Cross Muzzled at Gitmo in 2004

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Chaplain James Yee served at Guantanamo Bay, ministering to Muslim detainees — and did not like what he saw. Yee spoke out, alleging serious mistreatment of prisoners, and argued from first-hand experience that “The people down in Guantanamo probably know as much about Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida as any private in the military would know what’s going on inside the Pentagon.”

In September 2003, Yee was found in possession of a list of Guantanamo detainees among his belongings at an airport in Florida: for this, he was charged with offenses including sedition and espionage, and kept in solitary confinement for 76 days. The charges were eventually dropped.

Yee was stirring up trouble at Guantanamo by reporting abuses — abuses that have been further confirmed by detainee testimonies and government documents, including two secret Camp Delta SOP manuals released by Wikileaks in the last three weeks.

Today Wikileaks released the 2004 manual for the base, together with a detailed list of changes over its 2003 predecessor.

By comparing the 2003 and 2004 SOP manuals, we can see how the rules changed in response to Yee’s activities. They did change — further restricting the freedoms of chaplains to serve detainees. The changes to the SOP manual are more directed towards preventing allegations of abuse, than towards addressing them.

In March 2003, the chaplain could access detainee areas unaccompanied, and could “speak freely with detainees”, but by March 2004, the chaplain is “assigned an escort” to visit detainee holding areas — potentially a form of surveillance. And the chaplain can “speak with detainees” - but apparently not so freely as before.

Furthermore, in other parts of the manual, the chaplain is again disempowered — from making announcements on the PA system (sections 16-3 and 16-5), from providing religious items (section 16-13). And guards are no longer encouraged to seek the chaplain’s advice on religious matters (section 16-14).

The Red Cross saw a similar fate. Between 2003 and 2004, the tone regarding the Red Cross in the manual became increasingly hostile.

Edits to the manual suggest that further hurdles may have been placed in the way of the Red Cross. Section 17-2 stipulates that the Red Cross “is restricted from all buildings without prior approval... except the Detention Clinic and the Detention Hospital.” Then, the Red Cross is required to be aware of “scheduled guard feeding times” and adjust their schedule accordingly.

The Red Cross is prohibited from passing mail between detainees in both manuals. The 2003 manual stipulates in chapter 13 that “At no time should [Red Cross] reps pass any mail between detainees”.

By 2004, the military saw fit to make the stipulation, if nothing else, louder: “AT NO TIME should ICRC reps pass any mail between detainees.”

In 2004, as in 2003, detainees are categorized — some categories being held from the Red Cross. In their first two weeks at Guantanamo, detainees are held in isolation, denied access to both chaplains and Red Cross personnel. Detainees remain in isolation for at least two more weeks, kept at the maximum “level 5” punishment and isolation level, until downgraded at the whim of US interrogators.