

“Bus Stop”

Patricia A. Bronte

s will no longer be a bus stop.” Neatly printed above a bench in front of the McDonald’s at Guantánamo Bay Naval Station, this sign captures the nebulous status of the prison camp that transformed a sleepy fuel station into a sprawling metropolis of thousands of military personnel and a similar number of civilian workers and contractors. The sign, which I was not allowed to photograph, has hung in that spot for each of my six visits to the prison camp in the past year. During that year, President Bush assured world leaders that he will heed their calls to close the prison; the Supreme Court criticized the Administration a third time for violating the law in its treatment of the prisoners; three prisoners died; more than 100 prisoners were returned to their home countries; the Pentagon built a large medium-security facility and then re-built it as a super-max prison; fourteen prisoners were transferred from secret prisons to Guantánamo; and a Republican Congress tried for a second time to take away the prisoners’ right to the Great Writ of Habeas Corpus—the right to demand that the President justify the prisoners’ indefinite detention. A recent AP study shows that the hundreds of prisoners released from Guantánamo have almost uniformly been exonerated by their home countries (including our ally, Britain)—despite the Administration’s insistence that the same men were once dangerous terrorists. Tellingly, the U.S. does not even bother tracking the movements of these “no longer” dangerous terrorists.

For my clients and the other 400 or so prisoners, not much has changed during this year or, for that matter, in any of the five years they have been imprisoned. Their federal cases have been bogged down in seemingly endless appeals. After three favorable Supreme Court decisions, they are no closer to their day in court than they were five years ago. Their only contact with their families is through heavily censored mail that takes several months to reach its destination. Interrogations ceased long ago for most, but curiously not for all, of the prisoners. Measures to

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prevent suicide, such as forced feeding of hunger strikers and round-the-clock lighting, continue unabated. Indeed, suicide prevention seems to be the primary mission of the prison camp now – understandable, given the staleness of any intelligence the prisoners ever possessed, the growing despair among the prisoners, and the unwelcome attention that suicides attract.

The sign’s ambiguous phrase, “no longer,” has featured prominently in the Administration’s detention policy, mainly as a way to avoid admitting error. When military tribunals decided in 2004 and early 2005 that 520 of the prisoners were “enemy combatants,” they labeled thirty-eight other prisoners “no longer enemy combatants”—as though several years at the prison camp had somehow converted the men from enemy fighters into friendly pacifists. The administration apparently prefers the miraculous conversion theory to a simple admission that innocent men were captured by mistake. Likewise, every time a new batch of prisoners is released, the Pentagon explains that these prisoners are “no longer” a terrorist threat and that the remaining prisoners are really the worst of the worst. Then the Pentagon releases a few more prisoners and proclaims anew that those who remain are really the worst of the worst. And so on.

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