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Ex-Guantanamo Chaplain: Suspicion of Muslims Hinders Terror War

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WEST ORANGE, N.J. (AP) - The former Muslim chaplain at the U.S. Army base at Guantanamo Bay who was once suspected of espionage says the military is discouraging American Muslims from helping more thoroughly in the war on terror by mistreating detainees and viewing Islam suspiciously.

James Yee, the Springfield native who was arrested on suspicion of espionage in his role as spiritual adviser to Muslim detainees at Guantanamo, claims he and other American Muslim service members at the detention center were also viewed with suspicion by military commanders.

In an interview with The Associated Press before addressing the American-Arab Anti Discrimination Committee's New Jersey chapter Saturday night, Yee said his case is one of the things that makes American Muslims wary of cooperating more fully in the war on terrorism.

"When someone like me gets thrown in jail for making positive contributions, people see that and don't want to have anything to do with the government," said Yee, who lives in Olympia, Wash. He said one higher-up referred to him as "that Chinese Taliban" during the 76 days he spent in solitary confinement in a South Carolina military prison.

Associated Press phone calls to U.S. Department of Defense public affairs were not immediately returned Sunday.

Yee grew up as a Lutheran in Springfield, where he was the only Asian in his school and one of only two minorities. He converted to Islam in 1991, drawn to the religion's diversity, as well as its focus on one God.

Once a highly regarded soldier encouraged by commanders to serve as the "poster boy for Muslims in the military," the Gulf War veteran returned to active duty in January 2001, and the next year was sent to Guantanamo, the U.S. military base in Cuba where suspected Taliban and al-Qaida prisoners are held.

In addition to seeing to the detainees' religious needs, he acted as a liaison between them and military commanders, passing along their grievances about how they were being treated. That, Yee said, made him fall under suspicion as well.

"My faith surely was under fire," he told the anti-discrimination group in his speech. "That fact that I'm a Muslim-American put me in the cross-hairs. Because when I prayed in the Islamic form of prayers, when I read the Quran in the classical Arabic language, it mirrored that of the prisoners. Some interpreted that to believe that meant that me, along with the other American Muslims, were also the enemy."

He was arrested in September 2003 -- two days after receiving the best officer evaluation report he had ever received -- and accused of spying and helping the Taliban and al-Qaida, offenses that carried the death penalty. But the actual charges filed against him dealt only with mishandling classified materials. Yee said the crux of the case against him stemmed from documents on his computer the military thought were classified.

In reality, he said, most were articles he had downloaded from the Internet for a postgraduate course in international relations he is pursuing. None contained any classified material, and the charges were dropped in March 2004, including lesser alleged offenses like adultery, storing pornography on his Army laptop and lying to investigators.

Those accusations devastated his family, which is still working to repair their relationships with each other, said Yee, 38.

Yee received an honorable discharge in January 2005, followed by an Army commendation for "exceptionally meritorious service."

He said military interrogators at Guantanamo used the detainees' Muslim faith against them during interrogations. Although he did not witness it, Yee said at least one detainee was made to bow in prayer with a Pentagram painted on the floor. An interrogator would scream, "Satan is your God now, not Allah!" Yee said the incident was told to him by detainees, and confirmed by translators who came to him in confidence.

He also said detainees and translators told him interrogators would throw the Quran on the ground and step on it. And he said he witnessed interrogators roughly handle the Muslim holy book while looking for contraband, causing pages to fall out and bindings to crack.

Earlier this month, the U.S. announced it would end its operations at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison, which became notorious as a symbol of detainee abuse after photos of American military personnel mistreating prisoners became public. Yee said closing down Guantanamo would be a good symbolic gesture, but wouldn't repair the U.S. military's tainted image when it comes to humane treatment of detainees.

"What can help that is opening up Guantanamo with true transparency," he said.

"The world has already seen the abuses at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib and Afghanistan," Yee told the AP. "If prisoners are being treated humanely as the U.S. says, they need to prove that. That's not to say you have to open up the military intelligence process.

Yee also said the Bush administration needs to reach out to U.S. Muslim groups, which he said are eager to improve America's security.

"Who better to root out extremists in the Muslim community than Muslims themselves?" he said.