

The following text may be printed, copy/pasted, or downloaded and emailed.

Detainee speaks of his ordeal

Former Army clergyman, wrongly imprisoned on terror charges, tells audience that U.S. law and anti-Muslim hysteria jeopardize civil rights

MARTIN C. EVANS
New York Newsday
April 18, 2005

America's freedoms are being challenged by anti-Muslim hysteria and abuses of the Patriot Act, said a convert to Islam and former Army chaplain, who spent 76 days in solitary confinement after being wrongly accused of aiding terror suspects at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

James Yee, who last March had all terror charges against him dropped, spoke yesterday at the Islamic Center of Long Island, in Westbury. Yee was invited to speak at the center by a congregant.

"This culture we have of eroding civil liberties is something which I call historically dangerous times, especially since 9/11," said Yee, a West Point graduate and veteran of the first Gulf War. "The government, in taking this approach in trying to make our country safer, in actuality our community is very much under siege."

Yee was arrested in Florida in 2003 as he was returning from Guantanamo, where he ministered to Muslim prisoners captured in Iraq and Afghanistan. Military prosecutors said his possession of diagrams of the Guantanamo prison facility indicated an intention to aid terror suspects held there.

His arrest sparked outcry from Muslims, who said he was being prosecuted for doing what chaplains are supposed to do - give comfort to prisoners. Civil libertarians were outraged when, after the espionage case collapsed, prosecutors charged Yee with adultery. The adultery charges were dropped last April.

Yee, a Chinese American who converted to Islam from Lutheranism and married a Syrian after serving in the 1991 Gulf War, listed several examples he said pointed to post-9/11 excesses. In one example, he mentioned the 2003 arrest of Sami al-Hussayen, a University of Idaho doctoral student who had helped set up a Web site for a charity later accused of supporting terrorism. Al-Hussayen, a Saudi studying on a student visa, was exonerated last year by a federal jury.

Yee, who lives near Seattle, Wash., also said Muslim travelers returning to the United States face extra scrutiny by customs agents.

"Any of these types of injustices, these stereotypes, are a wedge that breaks our civilization and our way of life," Yee said, referring to what some say are abuses of the U.S. Patriot Act, which broadens government powers in investigating terror suspects. "It is up to us to stop these sorts of things."

After hearing his talk, Hoda Spiteri, a North Babylon resident of Egyptian heritage, said Yee's experience raises troubling questions about the security of America's civil liberties. "It was an eye-opener," she said. "It was very frightening, especially to me, as someone who travels."