

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

Comment & Debate: A hero of Guantanamo:

As the Camp Delta hunger strikers grow weaker, the US Senate is denying them justice

Victoria Brittain (op-ed)

The Guardian

November 17, 2005

Fawzi al-Odah weighed just 44.5kg (7st) last week when his lawyer, Thomas Wilner, visited him in Guantanamo. In August 2002 he weighed 63.5kg (10st). The young Kuwaiti is one of the hundred or so men in the US prison camp who have been on sporadic hunger strikes since August. During Wilner's previous visit in September, he tried, on Fawzi's father's instructions, to persuade him to end his hunger strike. But Fawzi told him: "Tell my father I'm trying to be a hero like him, and if he was here he would do the same as I am doing." Khalid al-Odah, Fawzi's father, was a US-trained Kuwaiti fighter pilot who fought in the underground during the Iraqi invasion.

Fawzi was brought to that meeting with his lawyer from the prison hospital with a plastic tube protruding from his nose, which bled intermittently. He has since been in Camp Delta, where the force-feeding continues.

He appears to be completely innocent: his story has been investigated and told in detail twice, by two respected US journalists, Roy Gutman in Newsweek and Peter Jennings in a special TV report on Guantanamo. Both reports were devastating to the official line on the war on terror. Fawzi was also the man named in one of the supreme court cases that successfully challenged the refusal of habeas corpus to the prisoners. Is he still being held precisely because his case has deeply hurt the Bush administration's credibility before the country's highest lawyers, and in the mainstream media?

Fawzi was a university student in Kuwait who spent two vacations teaching in poor areas of Pakistan, and who went on to help refugees on the Afghan border when they fled US bombing in October 2001. Those who sold them to the Pakistani authorities, who handed them over to the Americans, told both US reporting teams that the soft city boys from Kuwait were clearly nothing to do with any of the Afghan fighters.

Wilner, a quintessential establishment Washington lawyer, has represented the 12 Kuwaitis in Guantanamo since April 2002 and has been to the prison camp 10 times. Five of his clients were recently released and are back in Kuwait. Fawzi remains in Cuba. Last week the US Senate approved a plan, sponsored by Senator Lindsay Graham, that would severely limit the chance of Fawzi, and the other prisoners, ever being given access to the US courts. The plan defies a supreme court decision of June 2004 - although not one prisoner has been brought to court since, amid legal battles between the Bush administration and lawyers such as Wilner.

Another of Wilner's clients is Abdullah al-Kandari, who was on the Kuwaiti national volleyball team. Wilner saw him changed by the hunger strike from a happy, outgoing, strongly pro-American young man to a withdrawn, cadaverous, weak figure. Abdullah was one of those who shouted out to the visiting Congressional delegation that they were not being told the truth. He was punished.

Wilner's affidavits on these two prisoners and another, Saad al-Azmi, who was sexually harassed by his female interrogator, reveal that cruel and unusual punishment is still the order of the day in Guantanamo.

The Senate has been grossly misled by the administration about conditions in the prison, and the nonexistent cases against many of those held, or it could never have approved Senator Graham's plan, slightly modified this week. Graham will join many others, such as Alberto Gonzales, General Geoffrey Miller, Donald Rumsfeld and President Bush, who will be harshly judged by history for what has happened at Guantanamo.

Fawzi al-Odah, whether he lives through this horror or dies, will be remembered by many people as the hero he wanted his father to know about.

Victoria Brittain is a journalist and research associate at the London School of Economics.

E-mail: v.brittain@lse.ac.uk