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Wrong Place, Wrong Time

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ENEMY COMBATANT: A British Muslim's Journey to Guantanamo and Back
Moazzam Begg

Even the most die-hard supporter of the war on terror is hard put to justify the Guantanamo Bay detention centre. How can you retain the moral high ground and fight for values such as personal freedom if you are keeping hundreds of people caged in subhuman conditions, for years, without charge?

The UN has said it should be closed, as have a growing chorus of Labour ministers including, last week, Peter Hain. President Bush's most faithful supporter, Tony Blair, can do no better than calling it an "anomaly".

So the first account of life behind the razor wire has turned its author, former detainee Moazzam Begg, into a celebrity, a regular feature on talk shows over the previous week. Arrested in Pakistan in January 2002 for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, Begg spent three years in detention at Bagram, then Guantanamo, one of nine Britons held there. His book confirms the leaked stories that have emerged: of torture, beatings to death, being forced to wear the infamous orange jump suits and share communal toilet buckets, of maggot-infested cells, and prisoners kept awake by bright lights and loud music (the blasting of the Bee Gees' Saturday Night Fever into a cell was a whole new form of torture to me).

Perhaps most cruel of all for a devoted family man, for two nights he was made to suffer the screams of a woman in the next cell, whom he was led to believe was his wife.

It is hard to read this and not be ashamed that it is being done in our names, by a country that professes to be the great defender of freedom. Surely such treatment would turn anyone against the west? Yet Begg shows a remarkable lack of bitterness, while pointing out that most of his fellow inmates were innocents who were simply caught up in the fighting in Afghanistan in 2001.

Although his account is horrifying, this is nothing we have not heard before. I was more struck by the complete pointlessness of much of the questioning. At the processing centre in Kandahar, two men in FBI baseball caps ask Begg when he last spoke to Mullah Omar or Osama Bin Laden, as if he would pour forth information.

Later, at Bagram, his interrogators accuse him of planning the assassination of the Pope on the basis of photographs on his laptop: this, he points out, is simply the history of websites he had looked at. At Guantanamo, he finds he has more in common culturally with his guards than with fellow inmates, most of whom are uneducated Afghans, and ends up discussing movies with some of them. But he is condescending on the dim-wittedness of many of his American captors, one of whom asks him to "stop using big words".

While I read this book with growing discomfort about the treatment of the detainees, I also felt uneasy at the way Begg glosses over visits to training camps of militant Pakistani groups as if they were school trips. The most moving part is his account of growing up as a Muslim in Birmingham in the 1970s and 1980s. His mother died of breast cancer when he was six and he was brought up by his father, a bank manager and frustrated poet, who tells him stories of fleeing India at Partition on the so-called Death Trains.

Subjected to “Paki-bashing” on the streets of Birmingham, he learns martial arts and joins a gang. Not surprisingly, when he hears of the rape of Muslim women in Bosnia, the sense of a religion under siege becomes acute. His life is changed by a holiday to Pakistan that leads to a visit to a training camp in Afghanistan. The commitment of the fighters he meets so impresses him that when he returns home, he gives up going to pubs and nightclubs, and opens an Islamic bookshop.

Trips to Bosnia and Chechnya follow, as well as a period living in Peshawar. Begg claims he took his family to live in Afghanistan in 2001 to drill wells and support a school. Even though it was a question repeatedly asked by his captors, he offers no answer as to why a man who worries endlessly about the welfare of his family might have moved them from a comfortable lifestyle in the Midlands to Taliban Afghanistan.

His attempts to defend the Taliban as not as bad as they were painted seem odd for a man clearly so well read and who witnessed some of their victims hanging from lampposts. Similarly, he dismisses hearing about September 11 in a small paragraph, saying that, as he did not have television in Kabul, he had no idea of the scale of the attack.

This seems odd. Most Afghans listen to the radio and, as a keen news and movie buff, Begg was surely familiar with the World Trade Center. He says the first time he was aware of what it really meant was October 17, yet this is nine days after the bombing of Afghanistan started.

Only when the Taliban fled Kabul did he leave and escape to Islamabad. It was there, in January 2002, that he got the midnight knock that marked the start of a Kafkaesque nightmare in which he found himself in a legal no man’s land — an “enemy combatant” rather than a prisoner of war and thus deprived of rights under the Geneva Conventions. It is a shocking story that might open the eyes of those who still believe “Gitmo” is the best available option.