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Whose conspiracy? The father of a Guantanamo Bay detainee describes his rude political awakening

By TERRY HICKS and VIRGINIA MARSH

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I think I was like a lot of Australians before this happened. I didn't vote for this government, but you accept that they are the elected government and so you trust them. I'd mutter about things but I'd never jump up and down. I used to see all these people rallying against this and that and think to myself: "Haven't they got anything better to do?" Now my eyes have been opened. I can see that things aren't correct and proper in some instances and you've got to do something about it.

Our politicians found David "guilty" long before there were any charges. Early on in the piece Senator (Robert) Hill (Australia's defence minister) said he was one of the 20 worst people in the world. Every country that is represented at Guantanamo Bay has asked for their people to be released - except Australia.

David has always been full-on. He could have been good at anything. If he made up his mind he was going to do a particular thing he did it. I never tried to stop him. When he was working in Japan training racehorses, he saw television footage of the Kosovo crisis. He rang one day and said: "I've decided to join the KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army)." I wasn't sure what the KLA was. I thought it was an airline. We don't know how he got there but he did. He only spent six weeks there - it was the tail end of things - but a lot of the people he met were Muslims.

When he came back he went to Christian churches. He'd seen a lot of horrific things and he was trying to appease his mind. But they didn't help him. He couldn't settle down. So he went to the mosque and he attended the Islamic College here at Gilles Plains. There's nothing wrong with that college. A lot of people said David had been recruited from there but I was the one who took him into the travel agent and sorted out the airfares. So, you could say I was the one who recruited him - I was the one who sent him overseas. I knew he was going to attend Muslim colleges in Pakistan.

Last year I spent a month in Pakistan trying to find any information, based on the letters David had written to me while he was there. I felt a lot better afterwards. We went to the Madrasses, we spoke to the Imams. It was satisfying to look at the place David had attended: an absolutely huge place just full of people, all studying. It was one of the most peaceful places I have ever been in. It was absolutely magnificent. That was in Pakistan. White, black, yellow, pink, whatever colour, they were there. I should say just about every country was represented. The only radical I met was a Northern Alliance bloke and all! he wanted to find out was why an Australian had to go all the way over there when he had a good life here.

David was arrested by the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan in December, 2001. The Australian government keeps saying he was caught on the battlefield. We know darn well he wasn't. I met his arresting officer. The Americans rocked up about 10 days later.

Most of the foreigners were paid for, I know that. The Americans put up a bounty for anyone who could do in so-called terrorists and foreigners who were wandering around the place.

I don't think about him every day. If you don't shut off you end up in turmoil. The 10 o'clock hour at night, when you are sitting quietly, that's when you start wondering how he's going.

The worst moment was when President Bush said six people were going to face a military tribunal and the death penalty (the US subsequently said it would not apply the death penalty). I

was in Bangkok airport and I looked up at the TV screen and Mr Bush was making his speech. My argument all along has been that if David's done anything wrong he's got to go through the law system and he's got to wear it. But not a death penalty.

When David faces that commission, six out of seven people could say he's not guilty, but there is another person who gets the final say. That's the president of the US. He can overrule all that. He has the last and final say. Incredible. One bloke.

As told to Virginia Marsh

Terry Hicks is the father of David Hicks, one of two Australian prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, and one of four who are facing a military commission at the US base in Cuba. At the first hearing in August, David, 29, pleaded not guilty to charges of conspiracy to commit war crimes, attempted murder by an unprivileged, belligerent conspiracy and aiding the enemy. His lawyers say the US government has refused to provide the particulars of his alleged crimes, such as who he was to murder and how he aided the enemy. Terry Hicks has spent several years campaigning for his son's release.