

Guantánamo: A Useful Corner of the World グアンタナモという 有益な一画

Paul A. Kramer

Introduction: The United States' First Overseas Military Base

The story told here will be familiar to students of Asia: an American military base established overseas in the aftermath of war and occupation; contractual terms reflecting vast asymmetries of power; local society transformed by the facility's demands for raw materials, goods and labor, including sexual labor; recurring tensions with "host" governments over questions of jurisdiction and sovereignty.

What may be more surprising is that the story unfolds in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and that it begins as far back as 1898, the year the United States embarked on a career of overseas colonial empire involving territorial possessions in the Caribbean and Southeast Asia. Before the bases at Okinawa, Diego Garcia and Subic Bay, there was the installation at Guantánamo, the United States' first overseas military base, built in the aftermath of the Spanish-Cuban-American War, when the U. S. made Cuba's willingness to lease it land for bases and coaling stations a precondition for the withdrawal of its occupying army from the rest of Cuba.



Raising the American flag at Guantánamo, June 12, 1898. Hart, Edward H., photographer. "Hoisting the flag at Guantánamo, June 12, 1898," ca. 1898-1901. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Reproduction, Number LC-D4-21495

As this essay shows, over the course of the century that followed, the Guantánamo base proved to be a versatile instrument of American regional and global power, even as the United States' hold was challenged by harsh terrain, Cuban opposition, and shifting American priorities. With the triumph and consolidation of the Cuban Revolution, "Gitmo" emerged as an anomaly within the United States' growing network of bases, the only such American-governed space in "enemy" territory.

Since the advent of a "war on terror," the word "Guantánamo" has been transmuted from a place-name to a dark shorthand for torture, abuse and lawlessness, a terminology that, even as it does important work, ironically

detaches the base from its specific geography and history, not unlike the U. S. Navy's physical separation of the facility from the rest of Cuba since the late 1950s. By contrast, this piece's goal is to depict, in abbreviated form, Gitmo as embedded in a longer history of Cuban-American encounters which, in turn, shaped the more recent and familiar past and present. In doing so, it draws inspiration from several recent, book-length manuscripts on the base's history, listed below.

The essay's narration of the base's mutability over time is meant not only to illustrate the unsurprising tendency of powerful states to repurpose their domains rather than abandon them, but also to recall the consistency with which Gitmo's presence in Cuba has been opposed—by Americans as well as Cubans—and, in the teeth of the present crisis, to assert the possibility that landscapes of entrenched power might be altered, against the claims of permanence and necessity.

This essay was originally published in the New Yorker's [online edition](#), on July 31, 2013.

For more information on the history of the Guantánamo base, see [the Guantánamo Public Memory Project](#); [Caribbean Sea Migration Collection](#); Jana Lipman, [Guantánamo: A Working-Class History Between Empire and Revolution](#), (University of California Press, 2008); Jonathan M. Hansen, [Guantánamo: An American History](#), (Macmillan, 2011); Stephen Irving Max Schwab, [Guantánamo, USA: The Untold History of America's Cuban Outpost](#) (University Press of Kansas, 2009).

See also [Gitmo Public Memory Project](#)

[Caribbean Sea Migration Collection](#)

Paul A. Kramer is an Associate Professor of History at Vanderbilt University, with research and teaching interests centering on the United

States' transnational, imperial and global histories since the mid-19th century. He is the author of *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States and the Philippines* (University of North Carolina Press, 2006), winner of SHAFR's 2007 Stuart L. Bernath Book Prize and the OAH's 2007 James A. Rawley Prize, and numerous articles, including "Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 116, No. 5 (December 2011), pp. 1348-1391. He is co-editor of "[The United States in the World](#)," a series published by Cornell University Press. He is currently at work on a book-length project on the geopolitics of U. S. immigration policy across the 20th century. His other publications in *Asia-Pacific Journal* are: "The Water Cure: An American Debate on Torture and Counterinsurgency in the Philippines—a Century Ago"; "Race-Making and Colonial Violence in the U. S. Empire: The Philippine American War as Race War"; "International Students and U. S. Global Power in the Long 20th Century"; and "The Military-Sexual Complex: Prostitution, Disease and the Boundaries of Empire during the Philippine-American War."

Recommended citation: Paul A. Kramer, "Guantánamo: A Useful Corner of the World," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 11, Issue 32, No. 5, August 12, 2013.

Related articles

- Paul A. Kramer, [The Military-Sexual Complex: Prostitution, Disease and the Boundaries of Empire during the Philippine-American War](#)
- Paul A. Kramer, [The Water Cure. An American Debate on torture and counterinsurgency in the Philippines—a century ago](#)
- Paul A. Kramer, [Race-Making and Colonial](#)

Violence in the U.S. Empire: The Philippine-American War as Race War

•Catherine Lutz, [US Bases and Empire: Global Perspectives on the Asia Pacific](#)

•Catherine Lutz, [US Military Bases on Guam in Global Perspective](#)