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America Can, and Should, Close Down Guantanamo

By John D. Hutson and William L. Nash

Within days of taking office, President Barack Obama announced that he would close the prison at Guantanamo Bay by the end of this year.

Many of us in the military and intelligence communities greeted this as welcome news. The abuse once perpetrated at Guantanamo and our ongoing presence there serve as a powerful call to arms for extremists, a weapon in the arsenal of al-Qaeda and like-minded organizations eager to do damage to America and target our troops.

Closing the prison doors will make America safer and grant our soldiers a greater measure of security.

Yet it's not surprising that the discussion surrounding closure, and the possible transfer of prisoners to Michigan, has been heated. How to conduct the shutdown, what to do with the prisoners, what the decision means for our military policy - these are not simple questions with easy answers. We will grapple with these issues and more at an open discussion today at the University of Michigan Law School, and we expect the exchange to be passionate. Such discourse is crucial in an open society.

But an honest discourse concerning best practices should not be shaped by unfounded fears about our ability to do the job well.

The administration has undertaken a thorough evaluation of the cases of the men still held at Guantanamo, and is carefully determining the steps necessary to minimize the risk to America's security. Imprisoning these men in American prisons will not endanger American communities.

No less an authority than the American Correctional Association - the country's largest such group - said Americans "would be safe from harm and free from danger should any detainees be transferred to a facility or facilities within the United States."

The correctional system in the United States now holds 216 international terrorists and 139 domestic terrorists - including Ramzi Yousef, mastermind of the 1993 World Trade Center bombings, and Ted Kaczynski, a.k.a. the Unabomber. Since Sept. 11, 2001, we have successfully prosecuted no fewer than 195 terrorists, thirty in this year alone.

These convicted terrorists are placed in “supermax” or high-security prisons; some have been held in such facilities since the early 1990s. None have escaped or served as magnets drawing those who would hurt Americans on our soil. Transferring terrorist suspects from Guantanamo to U.S. prisons would mean bringing them to the most secure facilities in the world.

The federal courts have proven themselves up to the task. By contrast, after seven years and the investment of hundreds of millions of dollars, U.S. military commissions have yielded only three convictions - and two of the convicted have already been released.

The prison at Guantanamo Bay has sullied our name around the world. Terrorists or insurgents looking to gain followers invoke Guantanamo Bay to win recruits. Guantanamo's very existence adds exponentially to those we must fight. And our brave soldiers are paying the price.

We don't like to think about it, but the abuses that took place at Guantanamo Bay were both illegal and wholly contrary to the training and values with which we inculcate those who serve us on the battlefield. The torture did real damage to our efforts to collect useful intelligence, and redounds against us to this day. We can close our eyes to these facts and continue to allow the damage to unfold, or we can take steps to reverse the harm done and better protect ourselves.

We say clearly and unequivocally: close Guantanamo Bay. Our national values and our national security demand it.

Rear Admiral John D. Hutson (Ret.) was the Navy's Judge Advocate General from 1997 to 2000. Major General William L. Nash (Ret.) served in the Army in Vietnam and Operation Desert Storm and commanded the 1st Armored Division in Bosnia-Herzegovina.