

January 22, 2009, TD Blog Interview with Almerindo Ojeda

Dr. [Almerindo Ojeda](#) is a Professor of Linguistics at the University of California at Davis, and the Director of that university's Center for the Study of Human Rights in the Americas and in particular, the [Guantanamo Testimonials Project](#), which has compiled hundreds of statements of various kinds from those involved with or affected by Guantanamo Bay, including detainees, soldiers, attorneys and others; a number of those statements are interviews from this blog. On January 22, 2009, I had the privilege of interviewing Professor Ojeda by e-mail exchange.

The Talking Dog: *The first question (to which my own answer is "across the street from the WTC"... and still the same answer on weekdays when I go to work in downtown Manhattan) is... Where were you on 11 September 2001?*

Almerindo Ojeda: I was walking towards the Peet's Coffee in my hometown of Davis, California. I walk there almost every morning (two miles each direction) to think things over, plan the day, do a little exercise and, of course, have my morning espresso. As soon as I arrived to Peet's that day, I found my wife. She had driven to Peet's and proceeded to give me the shocking news. By then, both towers had been hit. We jumped into the car and drove back home. No morning espresso that day...

The Talking Dog: *As a professional in linguistics, what was your source of interest in the area of human rights in the Americas? What was your interest in focusing on Guantanamo in particular?*

Almerindo Ojeda: None as a linguist. But I am a human being before I am a linguist. To answer your question, I got interested in doing something about human rights as soon as the worthiness of torture began to be debated in polite company in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. I had some experience, to be sure, with human rights violations. Even if only indirect ones. I was born and raised in Peru, which had its own human rights nightmare in the 1980s and 1990s. At this time, a brutal insurgency movement (the Shining Path) provoked the Peruvian Armed Forces into a savage response. After the insurgency was quelled, an old Philosophy professor of mine got appointed to head the [truth commission](#) charged with investigating the human rights violations of those decades. That appointment was profoundly inspiring for me. I also lived through the Central American wars of the 1980s. During these wars, a good friend of mine was murdered in Salvador. His name was [Ignacio Martín Baró](#). He was one of the six Jesuits whose murder led to the end of the conflict. That too, left a mark. Having said that, I must admit that giving testimony is a verbal act--so testimonies are familiar territory for a linguist. I must also admit that I am enjoying the linguistic specimens of Guantanamo propaganda I am collecting. Take for example the noun 'detainee,' which suggests a minor inconvenience, like being detained in traffic. Or the verb 'captured.' It describes what happens to fugitives, possibly of justice, and

hence to criminals. Or the locution 'total voluntary fasting'. It's Guantanamoese for 'hunger strike'. It places the discussion in a religious (if not fundamentalist) context. Or 'reservation,' which is Guantanamoese for 'interrogation.' It makes it sound like you are about to go to a restaurant. The list is endless. DoD manuals instruct Guantanamo personnel to refer to suicides as 'self-harm' incidents--an understatement that places suicides in the same category as biting your nails or slapping your forehead.

Interestingly, language is not entirely pliable, and sometimes fights back. Guantanamo personnel speak of 'going to reservation,' a phrase which we would never use for making good on a reservation made at a restaurant (and betrays the attempt to veil the reference to interrogations, which are something one would 'go to').

The Talking Dog: *Part of my own thinking in doing my interviews (albeit as they evolved... the original thought was to try to increase traffic to and interest in my blog... and because I was very interested in Padilla's case) is to provide a timely, if not "real-time," historical record from the standpoint of first-person accounts of what I hope we will all consider a rather troubling part of our history that we will rightly be ashamed of, using the new media of internet publication and somewhat older media (I often interview subjects by telephone and take notes long hand) to come up with an epistulary product. That said... as the Testimonials Project seems to be on that track (albeit doing a much more thorough job!) can you describe the philosophical underpinnings of the [Guantanamo Testimonials Project](#) ?*

Almerindo Ojeda: The immediate goals of the Guantanamo Testimonials Project are to gather testimonies of prisoner abuse at Guantanamo, to organize them in meaningful ways, to make them widely available online, and to preserve them there in perpetuity. At a more fundamental level, its goal is to shed light on human nature by plumbing the depths of human cruelty and triangulating the heights of the human spirit. And to begin the process of reconciliation with the rest of the world by the simple act of paying attention to what a victim--even an alleged one--has to say. At an epistemological level, the Guantanamo Testimonial Project renders a credible picture of the Guantanamo interrogation camp. This credibility emerges from the volume, detail, independence, and consistency of the testimonies it comprises, as it contains hundreds of testimonies from the prisoners and their lawyers; from a chaplain and a translator; from a marine and several guards; from physicians and psychologists; from prosecutors and other tribunal officials; from interrogators and their logs; from the FBI and the Red Cross; from foreign officials and intelligence services; from the Departments of Justice and Defense; from manuals of Standard Operating Procedures and even from a CIA mole.

The Talking Dog: *How big an endeavor is the Guantanamo Testimonials Project, in terms of staff, in terms of internet traffic, or whatever other criteria you find relevant? Do you find that (particularly the traffic part and general public interest) to be gratifying... or disappointing?*

Almerindo Ojeda: Financially, the Guantanamo Testimonials Project runs on empty. Yet, it is richly endowed by the dedication of a small number of volunteers (our valued Research

Affiliates) and by the awesome possibilities of computer technology. Immense thanks are also due to the widening circle of protagonists of the Guantanamo drama, be they prisoners, lawyers, guards, government officials, journalists, or fellow human rights workers, who have contributed to the project by providing testimony, sometimes embarrassing to themselves, and sometimes even in detriment to themselves. Currently, our website gets over 2000 visits a month from over 80 countries. The bulk of them come from the United States, Western Europe, Canada, and Australia. I think this is amazing. But I am sure we can get much better exposure. If there are public relations specialists willing to add their expertise to our pool of volunteers, we would love to hear from them...

The Talking Dog: *Following up on that-- and noting that a disproportionate source of testimonials, especially in the defense lawyer category, come from me, a singleton blogger not purporting to have journalism credentials, doing this entirely as a hobby-- can you tell me your view of overall media coverage of Guantanamo and war on terror issues, from the standpoints of local, national - USA and international... and would you describe it as "adequate", "inadequate," informative, misleading... something else?*

Almerindo Ojeda: This is interesting. On the one hand there is the investigative reporting like that of [Jane Mayer](#), who has done more than most to make sense of the dark side we have embraced since 9/11. Then there has been the media that has been on the Guantanamo beat. The best of them made their best to be honest witnesses (by traveling to Guantanamo to visit the facilities and cover the public portions of the trials) and to provide context to the story of the day. Where I think they missed out was in seeking out witnesses, be they prisoners or their captors, that would tell a more personal story. The kind that human rights organizations focus on. Although much can be gleaned from what the figures of authority, military or civilian, have to say, much is lost as well, particularly in how policy translates into fact.

Notable exceptions are [Andy Worthington](#)'s [Guantanamo Files](#), Amy Goodman's [Democracy Now!](#), the British [Guardian](#) and the [Independent](#), and the massive but belated [McClatchy interviews](#). Bloggers like [The Talking Dog](#) and Candace Gorman's [Guantanamo Blog](#) played a major role too in getting more of the "ordinary" voices out.

The Talking Dog: *You and the Guantanamo Testimonials Project recently brought to light [information concerning the specific role of health care providers vis a vis aiding interrogations](#) (part of the violations of both the ethics of their professions and the laws of war, in part discussed in my [interview with Dr. Steven Miles](#)). Can you describe your findings, how you came to that conclusion, and if the government has responded in any way?*

Almerindo Ojeda: The piece you are referring to provided evidence that, contrary to statements by the Department of Defense, interrogations at Guantanamo did affect the medical treatment of the prisoners. The evidence I provided came from military medical records that

indicated that interrogators intervened in the medication and the recreation regime of Mr. Salim Hamdan (ISN 149). I also found a passage in the [Camp Delta Standard](#)

[Operating Procedures](#) which said that the officer in charge of the interrogation section of Guantanamo could prevent, in conjunction with the Secretary of Defense, the administration of medical attention to prisoners in isolation. There are of course, many testimonies from prisoners and their lawyers that this kind of interference of interrogators in medical attention. But I decided to focus on information from military sources proper. The Department of Defense did not respond to this in any way. Things were a bit different on a more recent occasion, though. In May of last year we organized [an event in which Amy Goodman interviewed, via videoconference, three former Guantanamo prisoners from Sudan](#)

. In that interview, Mr. Salim Mahmoud Adem (ISN 710) claimed that fellow prisoners were drugged for interrogation purposes:

SALIM MAHMOUD ADEM: But I saw my neighbor, who was from Uzbekistan, they would inject into him, and he would sleep for three or four days on the metal in the cell, and then after that he became addicted. His name is Abu Bak [phonetic spelling]. And then Abdurahman from Afghanistan and Sultan al-Joufi from Saudi Arabia, and Yaghoub [phonetic] and Koleidad [phonetic] from Kazakhstan, Koleidad [phonetic] from Afghanistan, and others from Pakistan, and Dr. Eymen [phonetic] from Yemen who was a surgeon...

AMY GOODMAN: What about all of them?

SMA: All of them became addicted to the injections. Yaghoub, from Kazakhstan, left Guantanamo, and he became insane.

AG: Where were they injected?

SMA: In their arms or thighs, most in their arms. Once he was injected, he would sleep for days. He would eat and then sleep. He would eat and sleep. This injection might be monthly or semi-monthly. What I saw, one who left before me – Guantanamo before me – was in the chamber who became completely insane, and despite that they would punish him harshly. And because of all of this, we all became afraid of dealing with psychologists. Recently, when I was transferred to the sixth prison [Camp 6?], isolation, it was very cold and [there] were bright lights. We were cut off from the world, a great wall like the Wall of China, and we could not see the sun. Even if they took us to walk out, this room that we are in right now is much bigger than it. Two could barely walk in it.

The office of the Inspector General of the Department of Defense got wind of that interview and contacted us to see if we had any further information on the matter. I believe we do: Abu Bak from Uzbekistan is probably Abu Bakir Jamaludinovich (ISN 452), and Yaghoub from Kazakhstan is probably Yakub Abahanov (ISN 526).

The Talking Dog: *You also uncovered [underreporting of the number of juveniles held at Guantanamo](#). Again, can you describe your findings, how you came to that conclusion and how the government has responded (my understanding is that you actually forced them to do a "re-count"?) Have you come across any other "scoops" in the course of the project that you'd like to discuss?*

Almerindo Ojeda: Our findings there were that the State Department underreported to the United Nations the number of children seized and sent to Guantanamo. The number they reported was 8. Yet, according to their own data, the actual number is 12--an undercount of 50%. The way I arrived at this conclusion was simply to look at the in-processing dates and the birthdates of all the Guantanamo prisoners (as released by the Department of Defense) and do the math. I reported these findings to the Associated Press, who asked the Pentagon for a response. They said, for the first time publicly, that they had already sent their revised figures to the United Nations. The Associated Press asked when they had done this. They responded "it was hard to say. . ."

The Talking Dog: *Which category of the testimonials do you personally find the most compelling? Are there any particular testimonials that you find the most compelling, and why?*

Almerindo Ojeda: This is a really hard question. Every testimony is compelling for the witness that gives it. From the outside, I guess that the most compelling ones are the ones given by those that have nothing to gain from giving it--the testimonies of the captors, who speak out at considerable risk to themselves and their careers. But then there are the heart-wrenching testimonies of the victims, whose first person, detailed and dignified narratives overwhelm you.

The Talking Dog: *Where do you see the Guantanamo situation going now that we have inaugurated as President (my college classmate) Barack Obama? Do you see any possibility the framers of the prior policies might be brought to account for their actions?*

Almerindo Ojeda: President Obama issued four amazing executive orders just today regarding our responses to the war on terror. Much to celebrate about that, especially (1) [the recognition of Common Article Three of the Geneva Conventions](#) as a minimum baseline standard of treatment (2) [subordination of all interrogation practices](#) to those authorized by the Army Field Manual, (3) the [elimination of extraordinary rendition](#) (or torture by proxy), (4) the [closure of all CIA-run black sites](#), (5) the universal access to detainees by the International Committee of the Red

Cross, (6) the suspension of the discredited trials by military commission and, last but not least, (7) the closure of Guantanamo in a year or less.

My only concern with these orders are that they leave open what to do with the Guantanamo prisoners (of which there now are, if we believe official documents, exactly 242). Here I believe there are only two possibilities: charge or release. Those charged should be prosecuted in regular federal courts or regular military courts, and under exactly the same procedures as anyone else, including the inadmissibility of tortured confessions. Those released should be returned to their native countries if there is no risk that they will be abused there. If so, we should ask (not demand) allied nations take some. The rest, we should grant asylum to until the conditions in their countries allow for their safe return. September 11 changed many things, but not the Constitution. Love this country? Live up to it.

As to the Guantanamo Testimonials Project, its goals will not be met once Guantanamo is closed for good. The goals of the project will be met only when all the abuse that took place there has been entered. In a way, the closure of Guantanamo may initiate a period of growth for the project, as it should create an environment in which more people will come forth with critical testimony. I am looking forward, for example, to visual testimony of abuse. Every IRFing, for example, was taped. The ACLU is trying to get those tapes. Without much luck. I would also like to take a look at medical records. Or interview psychologists, interrogators, and guards. Not to mention all the newly released prisoners.

I think it is unlikely that the architects of the policies and practices of detention developed in the wake of the war on terror will be tried. At least in the immediate future. I find it much more likely that the Obama administration would launch a commission of inquiry that will gather evidence of abuse committed in the name of our security. Having history record the crimes these individuals may have committed is already a form of accountability. And may lead the way to others. The [Guantanamo Testimonials Project](#) may both make a contribution to--and benefit from-- any such commissions of inquiry.

The Talking Dog: *How do you anticipate the contents of the Guantanamo Testimonials Project will be viewed by Americans of the future in, say, 10 years, 20 years, 50 years, 100 years... or any other framework you prefer? Answer in any context-- a useful tool to see the moment, will people cringe at our willingness as a society to embrace "the dark side" (as many do over Japanese internment and slavery), or will we look back and decide "we weren't tough enough"... or is there any other way you'd like to answer.*

Almerindo Ojeda: If you look to history to predict the future, respect for human rights will only widen and deepen. Consequently, if only a fraction of the testimonies we have gathered in our project are truthful, the verdict on Guantanamo will only grow harsher with time. This means that our project may become a resource for anyone who wants to delve into the abuses that once took hold at Guantanamo and a cautionary tale for those that might want to revive it.

The Talking Dog: *Is there anything else I should have asked you but didn't, or anything else that my readers and the public should*

know about these critically important issues?

Almerindo Ojeda: I think your readers might be interested in a book I edited called [The Trauma of Psychological Torture](#) . It gathers historians, psychologists, ethicists, physicians, and one linguist (myself) around the topic of psychological torture. In that book I wrote an article called "What is Psychological Torture?" In it I try to lay the conceptual foundations for a legally binding definition of psychological torture. As I see it, the key is to avoid intractable problems like defining mental pain and gauging how much of it is necessary to reach to the level of torture, focusing instead on strictly verifiable practices like isolation, sensory deprivation, sensory overload, nudity, severe humiliation, and so on. Ban them and you have banned psychological torture.

The Talking Dog: *I join all my readers in thanking Professor Almerindo for that fascinating interview.*

Readers interested in legal issues and related matters associated with the "war on terror" may also find talking dog blog interviews with attorneys [Buz Eisenberg](#) , [Steven Wax](#) , [Wells Dixon](#)

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,
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,
[Neal Katyal](#) , [Joshua Colangelo Bryan](#) , [Baher Azmy](#) , and [Joshua Dratel](#) (representing Guantanamo detainees and others held in "the war on terror"), with attorneys

[Donna Newman](#)

and

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(representing "unlawful combatant" Jose Padilila),

[with Dr. David Nicholl](#)

, who spearheaded an effort among international physicians protesting force-feeding of detainees at Guantanamo Bay, with physician and bioethicist

[Dr. Steven Miles](#)

on medical complicity in torture, with law professor and former Clinton Administration Ambassador-at-large for war crimes matters

[David Scheffer](#)

, with former Guantanamo detainees

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detailing the capture and provenance of all of the Guantanamo detainees, and with

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of Human Rights Watch to be of interest.