

OP-ED

Those who serve at detention facility uphold our values

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Once again, the detention centers at the U.S. Naval Base in Guantánamo are making headlines. This time, as a result of President Obama's State of the Union address, in which he reiterated his intention to close the facility.

The implications of the president's campaign promise, followed by an executive order signed during the first days of his presidency, have been debated ever since by our elected representatives in Congress and leaders around the world. Questions ranging from the cost of maintaining the detention centers to the rates of recidivism among the detainees who have been transferred overseas are used by those who support or oppose the shutdown of the detention facilities to further their arguments.

Amid the rhetoric, however, one item that has gotten lost and rarely made it into the discussion about the future of Guantánamo has been the impact of this, at times, negative debate on the mission handed down to the men and women who serve on the Joint Task Force responsible for the care and custody of detainees.

Since the Task Force's creation over a decade ago, members of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force and Coast Guard, have assumed and carried out their difficult duties, guarding some of America's most dangerous enemies, with stoic determination. And while local commanders have praised their professionalism and dedication, especially in the face of regular abuses on the part of the detainee population, their service has not gathered the same level of recognition or support outside the remote Navy outpost.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were, at times, also fiercely debated and criticized, but never were the American troops serving their country in those battlefields mistrusted, their integrity questioned. On the contrary, even the most ardent opponents of the wars always made it a point to praise and highlight the sacrifice of our military members serving overseas, even when they disagreed with the strategy, the policy or the politics of these wars.

Not so with those serving in Guantánamo, where some of the core criticisms leveled against the detainee operations conducted there tend to fall, directly or indirectly, at the feet of the service members who perform them. And while our country continues to debate the future of the detention centers in Guantánamo, we should not forget about those who serve there, away from their friends and families, putting their country's interests above their personal ones.

During his remarks to Congress and the nation, President Obama declared that Guantánamo is not “who we are.” After serving and getting to personally know hundreds of young men and women in uniform serving their nation in Guantánamo, I must say that I respectfully disagree with the president.

The pledge made by these members of the military to uphold our nation’s values in difficult circumstances — and in the face of constant criticism — make them great examples of what America has to offer the world. Their commitment to treating with the utmost dignity and respect those who have threatened our life and liberty is not an easy one, but it is accomplished everyday in Guantánamo and it should be lauded, regardless of what side of the debate about the facilities closure you take.

It is precisely because these men and women take the higher and tougher road every day when they report to duty that I believe they represent our nation’s best. Indeed, they represent the best of who we are.

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