



# The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

in-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

## Guantánamo: A Useful Corner of the World

### グア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 its 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 Guantanamo, 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](#)

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