

We can handle them

BY JAMES A. GONDLES JR.

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The Obama administration's announcement that it will soon move detainees from the U.S. detention facility at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, to the Thomson Correctional Center in Illinois has some saying that this transfer will endanger national security and risk unleashing terrifying criminals into our neighborhoods. This type of overheated rhetoric implies that the U.S. military detention officers, the Federal Bureau of Prisons and civilian corrections professionals have never encountered such dangerous individuals before.

Listening to the current debate, one might think that we have never before incarcerated terrorists in U.S. prison facilities and that we don't know how to handle them.

This is nonsense.

Every day, U.S. prisons hold watch over the nation's most dangerous, most ruthless and most cunning individuals. Some of them have no regard for the law and no respect for human life. Some of the most violent are held in Supermax prisons. None has ever escaped.

Even before the 9/11 attacks, international terrorists were being incarcerated without incident in U.S. prisons. And since 9/11, more than 150 others have been safely held in U.S. facilities.

Among the highly dangerous inmates now in Supermax facilities are Zacarias Moussaoui, the alleged 9/11 ``20th hijacker," who is serving a life sentence; Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, who helped plan the 1993 World Trade Center bombing; and Dandeny Muñoz Mosquera, former chief assassin for Colombia's Medellín Cartel.

All presumably have networks of equally dangerous associates who they wish would help them escape. Yet this has not happened, because we make sure it cannot happen.

As corrections professionals, we don't care about the motives (political or otherwise) of the offenders, whether they are called detainees, terrorists, murderers, rapists, drug traffickers, gang members or sociopaths. If they have been deemed a danger to public safety, they are confined appropriately and securely within well-guarded facilities by trained professionals, with specific units tracking and responding to criminal and counter-terrorism intelligence.

Whether an individual is part of a drug cartel, a criminal street gang or a terrorist organization with political objectives, U.S. corrections systems and corrections professionals (both military and civilian) have the ability, training and facilities to handle them.

The American Correctional Association, the nation's largest organization representing corrections professionals, has taken no position on the closing of the correctional facility in Guantánamo Bay. That decision is for others to make.

We do, however, care that the debate surrounding this issue be driven by facts rather than unfounded fears. Corrections and law-enforcement professionals in the United States are second to none. We want to assure all Americans that the public will be safe from harm and that the terrorists will be properly and effectively detained -- whether in Cuba or in a single facility or multiple facilities across the United States.

We can handle whatever prisoners we are sent. Terrorists roaming the United States undetected certainly pose a threat to national security. Terrorists behind American prison bars do not.

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