



Written by [Thomas R. Eddlem](#) on December 31, 2013

Last Innocent Uighurs Leave Guantanamo Prison

The Eastern European nation of Slovakia agreed to take the last three ethnic Uighur prisoners who have been detained at Guantanamo since 2002, [according to](#) the Associated Press December 31. The Uighurs, ethnic Turkish Muslims from China, were innocent religious pilgrims caught up in the dragnet during the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2002.



The Uighurs have become symbols of the injustice of the Bush/Obama-era detention policies. Not one of the [22 Uighurs detained at Guantanamo](#) — the last three for more than a decade — was ever given a trial or charged with a crime. Moreover, they were subjected to abuse under the Bush administration, which [refused to give them either status as civilian criminal suspects or prisoners of war](#).

The Uighurs — [declared innocent and cleared for release by the U.S. government as early as 2004](#) — sat in legal limbo for a decade as the U.S. government sought a nation to which they could be released. U.S. officials refused to repatriate them to China because they feared the detainees would suffer torture there; some ethnic Uighurs have waged a [low-grade guerrilla war](#) for independence in the western Chinese province of Xinjiang.

More than 150 prisoners remain at Guantanamo. “The Pentagon said in a statement Tuesday,” the Associated Press [reported](#), “that the release brings the Guantanamo prison population to 155.” President Obama campaigned in 2007 and 2008 on a [promise](#) to close the Cuban-based prison within a year of taking office, and even signed an [executive order](#) the week of his inauguration in 2009 toward the same, but afterward he backpedaled. The Guantanamo prison currently has no scheduled closing date planned, and [PolitiFact.org has classified](#) Obama’s 2008 campaign promise as a “broken promise.”

Uighurs were far from the only innocent people caught up in the Afghan and Iraqi dragnet in 2002 and 2003 who ended up in Guantanamo. Seton Hall Law School Professor Mark Denbeaux found in a [study](#) of the Guantanamo prison population that only seven percent of the detainees in Guantanamo were captured by U.S. or coalition forces in the Afghan or Iraq wars. Most — such as the Uighurs — were captured by bounty hunters promised huge sums for finding Taliban and associated forces. And in many cases, the U.S. government was deceived by the bounty hunters.

Denbeaux’s findings contrasted with the claims of senior Bush administration officials — such as former Vice President Dick Cheney — who repeatedly claimed of Guantanamo inmates that “these are the worst of the worst.” Cheney began making the [claim in 2002](#) and repeated it as late as June 1, 2009 at the National Press Club, where he [said](#) of Guantanamo prisoners:



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These are bad actors, these are the worst of the worst.

And:

The ones that are left — Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Abu Zubaydah and so forth — these are the worst of the worst.

But a subsequent study by Denbeaux's research team revealed that Cheney knew (or should have known) that his claim was false at the time he made the statements. "A recently declassified Memorandum from Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld," dated Apr. 21, 2003 to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Denbeaux [revealed](#) in 2011, "undermines both of these claims, revealing that GTMO was not populated with 'high-value' enemy combatants, but rather with 'low-value' detainees."

Photo of Guantanamo: AP Images



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