Guantanamo's Past Resonates With Present

May 26, 2009 2:15 AM Ryan Rivet
rrivet@tulane.edu

The U.S. Naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, is back in the headlines after Congress refused to fund the Obama administration's plan to close the detention camp there. While the future of the prison continues to be debated, one Tulane historian is examining the past of the military base, as well the adjacent town from which its name is derived.

Historian Jana Lipman observes U.S. foreign policy through the eyes of Cuban workers who for nearly four decades worked at the U.S. Naval base at Guantanamo Bay. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

“My work is relevant to the present, but it centers on the '40s, '50s, as well as the '60s,” says Jana Lipman, assistant professor of history and author of the book *Guantanamo: A Working-class History Between Empire and Revolution*. “It looks at the Cuban men and women who worked on the base and looks at U.S. foreign relations through their eyes.”

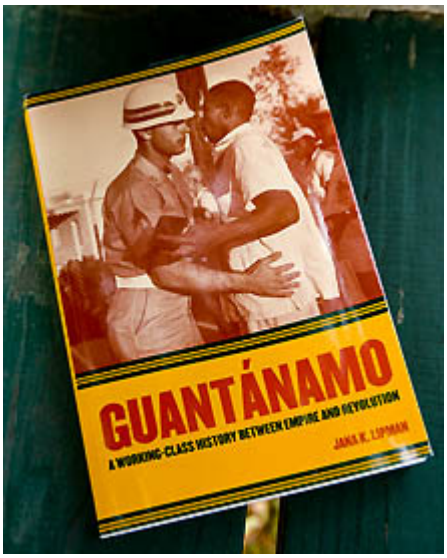
Lipman's book focuses on the town of Guantanamo, which is about 10 miles from the base. She says the two have a shared history and economy from 1898 when the United States obtained the base following the Spanish-American War until the United States sealed off the base in 1964.

“You had about 2,000 to 3,000 people working on the base at any given time, which was substantial and was only surpassed by the sugar industry in Guantanamo,” Lipman says.

Lipman says the base has proven to be a bellwether for the way U.S. foreign policy has played out ever since.

“The base is the first U.S. base on foreign soil,” Lipman says. “If you think about military bases all over the world today, this is a kind of prototype. It demonstrates that when the U.S. intervenes someplace militarily, it often stays far beyond the end of the war.”

Following the revolution on the island in 1958, the U.S. government began a process of isolating the base from the rest of Cuba. It was a move that ultimately would enable the United States to establish the detention center there, contends Lipman.



Jana Lipman's book looks at U.S. foreign relations through the eyes of the Cuban men and women who worked at the Naval base at Guantanamo Bay.

“The isolation is what has given the base its power in the war on terror, and in many ways made it the model in the post 9/11 world,” Lipman says. “I think it's highly unlikely that the U.S. would be able to have the prisons there today if there were 3,000 Cubans commuting to the base.”

Lipman says the legal questions swirling around the detention center, which is now known as Camp Delta, are not new. Cuban base workers have repeatedly asked whether U.S. or Cuban laws governed the base, or if the base existed outside any legal framework.

She points to the case of Lorenzo Salomon, a young Cuban worker, who in 1954 was accused of stealing $1,500 worth of cigarettes. U.S. military officials detained him on the base for two weeks without trial. When he was released, he complained of being tortured during his detention and criticized the lack of legal representation.

Base workers took up his case in a vocal, public campaign. They did not claim Salomon was innocent. Instead, they argued that he had been wrongly held without due process and in opposition to democratic practices.

“The Salomon case resonates with the present. It deals with detention and questions of the law back in 1954,” says Lipman, who has visited the town of Guantanamo for her research. “Obviously stealing cigarettes is not equivalent to terrorism, and I don't want to make that analogy, but on the other hand, the question of which legal standards apply to the base has never been resolved.”