



Gitmo prisoners too close to home?

Written by Chuck Kurtz

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Suspected terrorist detainees now are being held in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, 90 miles south of the Florida coast, 1,761 miles from Johnson County -- a nice, safe distance.

But how would the county's safety be impacted if those detainees end up just 30 miles away at Fort Leavenworth once the Guantanamo Bay facilities are closed?

"Would it concern me on a personal level? Yes," Johnson County Sheriff **Frank Denning** said. "I would be concerned about putting them into not only the center of the United States but also bringing them into our mist just due to the very nature of the training those particular individuals have had; they are specifically trained for a specific purpose."

But on a professional level, it would be business as usual for the Johnson County Sheriff's Department, he said.

"If we had an escape (from Leavenworth), once we were made aware, just like when we've had escapes from Lansing (the state penitentiary), they (the military and federal officials) would tell us, and I have every reason to believe they would, we would handle ourselves as we would in any other escape because there would be a risk to the community and there would be a risk to the police officers."

The difference is that the terrorists likely would have the outside help of terrorist cells or sympathizers looking for a way to gain recognition.

"That's exactly what you have to be on the look out for," Denning said. "We have some of that going on even with the election of President Obama. A lot of these groups are back in the headlines, they are recruiting. Some say they are legitimate militia and others we know are subversive groups."

"That's not to say they would have anything in common with (terrorist detainees), but the message is the same."

Denning said Johnson County officers are trained in identifying possible terrorist cells and whether they are international, domestic or local. The department is connected and works with Homeland Security initiatives and receives some confidential intelligence data.

"But as far as hands-on training, how do you handle the actual person, the actual terrorist? No," he said. "We would have to use our basic approach to handling folks who are violators of the law."

The detainees are prisoners captured during the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan and therefore are under the jurisdiction of the Federal Government and the military. Ironically, the government is not required to release information to local law enforcement agencies on the detainees. Denning said if Fort Leavenworth is selected as the site to house the detainees, it's doubtful local law enforcement agencies will be informed on the background of the detainees or even when they are transported into the fort.

"I don't think we would even know if they made a decision to bring them here, when they bring them here, or how many are brought here," Denning said. "And that's part of my concern: Would we know and would we have the appropriate information that we would need when they were to bring (the

detainees) here amongst us?

“We would like to know.”

There is a precedent for Denning’s fears. When **Fidel Castro** several years ago released hardened criminals as part of an influx of Cubans into the United States, when they were captured, charged and convicted of crimes, they were sent to the Federal Penitentiary at Leavenworth.

“When that happened, that was a known public thing,” Denning said. “How many are still there? I don’t know. How many they have federally moved throughout the country and who are held for different things, we, locally, would not even be made aware of nor would we be privy to (that information).”

Another concern, one which Denning said he thinks the public is not fully aware of, is the fact the detainees probably would not be placed in the penitentiary at Leavenworth but instead would be housed in the disciplinary barracks (DB) at Fort Leavenworth. The DB is a maximum security facility that houses military criminals accused of acts such as rape and murder. It’s less than 5 years old.

“If (the detainees) are getting ready for some sort of trial, can the Federal Government actually house them (in the penitentiary) without them actually being sentenced by a court?” Denning asked. “That’s a question right now I can’t answer. I think I know the answer because it would be just like us, I can’t keep anybody that hasn’t been before a judge.

“A lot of people think they are going to the (penitentiary), but I’m sure they would go to Fort Leavenworth because they are military detainees and have not been officially charged in the United States with anything. And that’s the other rub. Why are they talking about bringing them here?

“It’s a bad idea – just a bad idea.”

Guantanamo Bay was ordered by President Obama to be closed by January 2010. The deadline is quickly approaching to logistically achieve the president’s campaign promise. Denning said he’s not sure it can be accomplished at this late date.

“What I’m reading between the lines is that I don’t see a big hurry to shut the door down there; that it’s not a bad place to have them,” he said. “I don’t want to turn this into a political slant, but it’s like a guy told me once, ‘You’ve got a lot of good ideas and you’ve got a lot of things you want to get done and promised to do.’

“But you know what changes? It’s the day when you walk through the door like I did and sit down on this side of the desk. You’re it; everything stops right here. I’ve got no phone to pick up and go, ‘Sheriff, here’s the deal. What do you think?’ And I would get an answer on the other end.”

And Denning said he thinks Obama is experiencing that kind of realization now.

“It was a campaign promise, it was an idea, but now, when you look at it in its totality and you now have more information than you had initially now that you’re entitled, now you have to make a business decision versus a political decision: What’s the best way to handle this?” Denning said.

“I’m not saying anything’s wrong, I’m just saying things change once you have the ability to assess the entire situation and get all the facts.”

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