

Tanya Domi:

Hi. This is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research. Informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi:

Philip Luke Johnson is a PhD candidate in Political Science at the Graduate Center at CUNY. He is also a lecturer in the undergraduate writing program at Princeton University. His dissertation research is supported by fellowships from The Graduate Center, the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, and the Center for US-Mexican Studies at the University of California San Diego.

Tanya Domi:

His research has been published in Critical Military Studies and Perspectives on Terrorism. Johnson discussed some of his research on Mexico during Episode 78 of the Thought Project Podcast.

Tanya Domi:

The United States observed the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks with little if no discussion of bringing justice to the attackers who carried out the hijacking of four passenger planes and crashed them into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a Pennsylvania field, killing 2,976 people. But just recently, a US military tribunal at Guantanamo Bay has begun its deliberations. The charges proposed could render the death penalty, including conspiracy, murder, and violation of the laws of war, and terrorism.

Tanya Domi:

The Guantanamo Bay prison was established under controversial terms. The US government declared constitutional protections did not apply to these terrorists, and having been located offshore with little access to the American public and journalists, the prisoners were locked away outside the reach of standard American judicial practices that had successfully prosecuted terrorists before and since 9/11.

Tanya Domi:

Even though the defendants were arraigned in May 2012, the case remains in a pretrial phase. The government has been litigated by the defense over the issue of defendants' statements issued while being subjected to "enhanced interrogation techniques". Also known as torture.

Tanya Domi:

Graduate Center PhD candidate Philip Johnson recently authored What Will it Take to End Indefinite Detention at Guantanamo Bay. He is our guest today. Welcome back to The Thought Project, Philip Johnson.

Philip Johnson:

Thank you. Great to be back again.

Tanya Domi:

We recently observed at the 20th anniversary of 9/11 here in New York City and throughout the country, the Guantanamo prison was established to punish those attackers and to incarcerate them in a place that was quite controversial at the time. That place was Guantanamo Bay, and the first men that were arrested were transferred there in 2002.

Tanya Domi:

But just now, they're beginning the first major trial of five men, the attackers who actually hijacked, that helped and abetted the attackers that hijacked four aircraft. These five men are now going on trial and it's called pretrial, which is just insane. I just want to say that's insane.

Tanya Domi:

But there's reasons why, and this facility was built on a uniquely situated strip of permanently leased land to the United States from the Cubans, and this facility was built at the Guantanamo Bay naval station, while declaring at the same time that the US Constitution did not apply to these prisoners, placing them outside the reach of US Courts, and the full denial of due process.

Tanya Domi:

Let me just ask you the first-off question, because when we think about that and we look at that, do you think this is a lawless construct and a lawless act by the United States Government?

Philip Johnson:

Well, yes I do, but with some qualification, right? Because it is certainly lawless in the sense of who is detained there and the conditions under which they're detained without convictions or anything like that. But the Guantanamo Bay naval base is loaded with legality. It has speed limits, it has protected species, it has a very small, orderly military base similar to what you would find in the United States or elsewhere, including civilian workers, contractors, things like that.

Tanya Domi:

Sure. It's called OCONUS. It's overseas outside of the continent of the United States. But you're absolutely right.

Philip Johnson:

Certainly, the argument is that Guantanamo Bay is outside of the US Constitution, and yet only certain parts of Guantanamo Bay are, for practical purposes, outside of US law.

Tanya Domi:

I personally think, as someone who's a human rights scholar, is that this violated so many norms. These prisoners are going on trial under a military tribunal, which has different procedures and which actually is administered by a US military judge, and there's different trial procedures in military commissions. And yet, just thinking about that, when 24 Democratic senators sent a letter to the Pentagon, the current Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, said that he agreed. He gave the nod to closing it. That tells you something about how maybe the military views this vs how civilian leadership has proceeded to derogate from so many norms on establishing this facility.

Tanya Domi:

The Bush administration declared the use and application of extraordinary rendition by establishing black sites throughout the world. You've written about this. They detained alleged terrorists in those locations, they suspended their due process, and it also became widely recognized that people were tortured in these facilities, in these black sites, committing egregious violations of the Convention of Torture, which is US Law.

Tanya Domi:

Many of these prisoners ended up in Gitmo. You actually assert that it was intended that they would go there and that Gitmo has been used as ... Consequently, one of the unintended outcomes is that Gitmo has been used as a recruiting tool by [tourists 00:07:50] or extremists globally. What are your thoughts on that?

Philip Johnson:

Why wouldn't they, in the sense that if even US Presidents, including Bush in his second term, spoke against the continued utility of Guantanamo Bay, because it damaged American reputation abroad, that creates conditions for people who are against the United States to load up their propaganda with talk and images of Guantanamo Bay, especially the characteristic orange jumpsuit that detainees were pictured in early on.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah, with hoods over their heads when they were delivered there.

Philip Johnson:

Right. That becomes a powerful image, right? It's associated in many parts of the world with the abuses of Guantanamo Bay, and it ends up being echoed in Islamic State propaganda, to the extent that they have ... Some of the violent videos produced by Islamic State featured their victims in orange jumpsuits to sort of-

Tanya Domi:

It's true, and hoods too.

Philip Johnson:

Yeah. Exactly. To sort of repeat that.

Tanya Domi:

They did the same thing. Yes. Very interesting. Killing a number of civilians, including reporters and humanitarian workers.

Philip Johnson:

Exactly.

Tanya Domi:

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You actually wrote a very interesting article and you lay out some of the history of Guantanamo Bay. This just didn't happen out of the air somewhere. Tell our listeners about this interesting history US practices there, including detainment of Cuban and Haitian refugees most recently, even in the 1990s.

Philip Johnson:

Guantanamo has been used to hold people before, and especially I think sort of inconvenient populations, quite large ones. In the 1990s, first Haitian and then Cuban emigres tried to reach the United States, mostly Florida, by boat. Tens of thousands of Haitians, and then Cubans were sort of intercepted by the Coast Guard. They made claims for asylum, but if they were delivered to the United States, they would have been put into the asylum system.

Philip Johnson:

Instead, they were delivered to Guantanamo Bay, which is not formal US territory or soil, where their asylum petitions couldn't be processed or didn't have to be processed. They could have been processed. They were held in very dense, very simple camps, sort of tent camps, on old air strips, so fairly exposed to the weather and in pretty rotten conditions.

Tanya Domi:

Pretty abysmal conditions.

Philip Johnson:

Yeah.

Tanya Domi:

Even Kosovar refugees were contemplated by Bill Clinton that perhaps he was going to place them there, though he didn't. That might shock a number of Kosovar Americans now. I know many of them, and ... So these practices have been used in the past and in pretty nefarious ways.

Philip Johnson:

With Clinton, it would have been ... The logic was humanitarian in a sense. It was "We have to get these people out of harm's way," but that logic still impacts very awkwardly this idea that Guantanamo Bay has mostly been a way to keep people at arm's length and not in the best of conditions. It's not a very humanitarian environment to lead people in refugee camps where they can't request asylum and they also can't leave the base and volunteer to go home or anywhere else, right?

Tanya Domi:

So they have very little agency whatsoever.

Philip Johnson:

Very little. Yeah.

Tanya Domi:

They're very controlled. I would also say that you point out that there's a lot to be said about the consequences of not shutting this place down, that in fact Trump contemplated putting Americans

there. I actually don't recall that. I was surprised when I read your article. He did so many terrible things, but that wasn't one that I recalled.

Philip Johnson:

Right. And he's better known for during his campaign saying he wanted to load Guantanamo up with bad dudes, right? Loosely defined. This talk of quarantining sick Americans returning to the US there I think was probably more just a sort of internal conversation within ...

Tanya Domi:

The White House circle.

Philip Johnson:

Yeah. But it tells us something.

Tanya Domi:

This was like Naval ... Wasn't it? Like these people were on cruises. They were on cruises and got sick while they were on a cruise with Covid, right?

Philip Johnson:

And it does say something to Trump's thinking on this, right? It's a continuation of that idea that Guantanamo is a place you can dump people who are inconvenient or who you want to keep out of the way, out of the US. And you won't face much in the way of consequences. You're beyond the Constitution.

Philip Johnson:

But also, there's a sort of loaded sense that like, "Well, if they're in Guantanamo Bay they might deserve to be there," right?

Tanya Domi:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Philip Johnson:

This lingering sense that the detainees there now probably have some reason that warrants their indefinite detention after 20 years.

Tanya Domi:

Right. Despite all that, and you did mention that Bush began saying "We need to close," or "We need to move on," he did in his second term reduce the prison population pretty significantly, and at this time, approximately 44 prisoners are there, approximately, who New York Times reporter Carol Rosenberg has called the forever prisoners.

Philip Johnson:

Right.

Tanya Domi:

Do you think Biden, who recently ended the forever war, do you think that he has the political will and knowhow to actually close Gitmo?

Philip Johnson:

I think he has the will. I don't know and I wonder if this is going to go the same way as it did under Obama, where he had the will, certainly initially, but maybe not the capital to prioritize closing Guantanamo.

Tanya Domi:

Political capital.

Philip Johnson:

Exactly. Yeah. It's going to take some legislative work, right, to clear up the possibility of closing Guantanamo, and if not closing the base, but at least transferring out the remaining detainees or putting them through a proper trial.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Philip Johnson:

So something is going to have to give in the Legislature ...

Tanya Domi:

Yeah. In the Congress.

Philip Johnson:

For this to happen. Yeah.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. It does seem that there is some support on the Hill, as a matter of fact as I mentioned earlier, this letter from 24 Democratic senators, of course no Republican senators signed this letter, they called this, "This offshore prison has damaged America's reputation, fueled anti-Muslim bigotry, and weakened the United States' ability to counter terrorism and fight for human rights and the rule of law around the world." If for anything, that's a good reason to close it.

Philip Johnson:

It's a great reason.

Tanya Domi:

It's a great reason.

Philip Johnson:

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Yeah. Some of the other added points that are raised are like, "This is an expensive facility," right?

Tanya Domi:

Yeah. This is one of the reasons why Trump didn't put people there, right?

Philip Johnson:

Probably so. Yeah.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah. He mentioned that.

Philip Johnson:

Yeah. He had other ... He was funneling defense money into other places. If he hadn't had The Wall and things like that to focus on, maybe Guantanamo would have felt like a more attractive option to him.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. Very interesting. So now we have this trial starting. It's a pretrial. Some of the reporting I've watched or listened to. There sort of pessimistic. They think that this could be stopped and started. Could you tell us why, in terms of the procedures why that might happen?

Philip Johnson:

Well, I think this is the flip side of situating Guantanamo outside of the Constitution and beyond the reach of the law, right, is that there's just not enough law to work with in some ways here, right? There's good precedent for trying alleged terrorists within the US Courts and getting convictions, and pursuing justice in that way.

Tanya Domi:

Sure.

Philip Johnson:

But it hasn't happened yet at Guantanamo. There have been a small number, maybe close to 10, men convicted at Guantanamo,

Tanya Domi:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Philip Johnson:

But often through plea deals, and a number of those have since been canceled, annulled, vacated, right? One example, David Hicks, who is from Australia, was a detainee there, and sort of pled his way out as fast as he could after being in Guantanamo for a couple of years, but is now free and has had his conviction canceled.

Tanya Domi:

Annulled?

Philip Johnson:

Annulled, I think. Yeah.

Tanya Domi:

Annulled or commuted?

Philip Johnson:

Yeah. There's been different sort of cancellations-

Tanya Domi:

Different terms?

Philip Johnson:

For different detainees.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah, yeah. Well, what's really interesting is that one of those defendants is perhaps one of the most notorious, and that's Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who is nicknamed KSM by the FBI and was accused of conceiving of the plane's operation itself. We know that he was pervasively tortured. They used water torture on him, and most people that know something about the psychology of interrogations say that a lot of this information that is extracted from somebody being tortured is not necessarily accurate. You're going to do anything you can to stop the torture and the pain.

Tanya Domi:

One of the others is also quite notorious is Ramzi bin al-Shibh, who was accused of organizing the Hamburg, Germany cell.

Philip Johnson:

Right.

Tanya Domi:

He was considered a major player and was actually arrested in Karachi, Pakistan. So this is probably the biggest case probably that will come before this military tribunal.

Philip Johnson:

Right.

Tanya Domi:

We're getting bits and pieces. Not much consistent reporting. That's another problem, that there is very little transparency, and a lot of Americans, and I think people in general, just don't also understand military tribunals, military commission. It's very different. This is just, I think it derogates so many norms that I just question how legitimate it really is, ultimately.

Philip Johnson:



Right. And there's been some suggestion that even within the failing and clunky system in place, that there's stuff going on behind the scenes, right? There was a famous case, during one of the earlier hearings, of someone censoring the audio feed from the courtroom to the reporters. The judge is supposed to control what of the court proceedings are heard by reporters in an adjacent room, but the judge noticed that someone else had sort of interrupted the feed during part of the testimony.

Philip Johnson:

This is ongoing concern about the level of surveillance and interference within the trials, which creates, of course, further legal obstacles and makes it harder to actually proceed with any part of the trial.

Tanya Domi:

I believe there were some previous prosecutors that withdrew. There was somebody that withdrew because they just said they did not see how this could be a fair trial. I took note of that, because I did serve in the US Army and you had to work with what we call a Judge Advocate General. That's their branch. And that a number of them had really questioned the Bush administration at the time, and that people didn't want to be involved in this prosecution.

Philip Johnson:

Yeah. Even just as a career move, right? It's [crosstalk 00:19:53]-

Tanya Domi:

Not something you want to list on your CV, right?

Philip Johnson:

[Crosstalk 00:19:57]. And not a place you want to spend years potentially turning in circles only to leave and find that ... Even for the defense, right? That there are lawyers defending these detainees, but at the end of the day, in a way, the defense continues but only because the trial never proceeds.

Tanya Domi:

Right. So this isn't a jury of their peers, obviously. If they were being tried in a federal court in Denver, it would be completely different because the jury are all military officers and they all serve in the military, and military commission is also a hybrid of a military court martial and the federal court system. So this is really, really unique. It even derogates from normal military commissions.

Philip Johnson:

Right. Right. Correct.

Tanya Domi:

So all of this is dubious, and it's unfortunate because the public isn't really going to get ... I don't think they'll get regular reporting on this, and then how do you explain that to the public, as well?

Philip Johnson:

Right. And especially because when this was really a hot topic in the US, this was really Bush's first term and the beginning of Obama's term when he was quite adamantly against Guantanamo and thought he might be able to close it early on.

Tanya Domi:

It's when he campaigned on it, right?

Philip Johnson:

Yeah. But you see now, the Times and places that still report on this, but there's often a bit of framing of like, "By the way, this is still going on. There's still men down there. Let's not forget that."

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

Philip Johnson:

There are, I think, now 39. At the height, there were 780 detainees,

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Philip Johnson:

So the population has shrunk considerably, and yet this is exactly what indefinite detention is, right? It's indefinite.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Philip Johnson:

And some of those men aren't even facing charges.

Tanya Domi:

Right. Many of them were never guilty, were never involved in the actual attack on 9/11. How did they end up there?

Philip Johnson:

The emerging picture, and we're getting much better information because with more detainees released, some of them have spoken to the public, released memoirs, diaries, or worked with their lawyers to do that. The idea that they were captured on the battlefield is something of a misdirection, because they were often not captured initially by US troops, but by Afghan allies. Or, as some people have said, something like bounty hunters. People who turned in, especially non-Afghan Arab men, who seemed like they might be up to something ...

Tanya Domi:

Nefarious.

Philip Johnson:

Right. So they were turned over for the bounty, locked up. There was this suspicion that, "Well, what were they doing in fairly remote parts of Afghanistan?" Beyond much further investigation, they were rounded up in camps, some of them were rendered to different sites to be tortured, and most of them ended up in Guantanamo, which is always the end of the rendition [crosstalk 00:22:52].

Tanya Domi:

There were actually three people arrested in Bosnia.

Philip Johnson:

Right.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah.

Philip Johnson:

Right.

Tanya Domi:

That was very controversial. A lot of Bosniaks, which is a Bosnian citizen who is Muslim, were shocked by that, because the United States had been their close friend, and I couldn't believe it. Apparently these three individuals were not involved at all.

Philip Johnson:

Right. What started as "captured on the battlefield in Afghanistan" spread to this much more global, insidious-

Tanya Domi:

War on terror. Global war on terror. It was like, scoop up everybody that looks suspicious that is probably religious, a Muslim religious person, and also "What are they doing out there," kind of thing. Casting aspersions on all Muslims.

Philip Johnson:

Right. And looking for those ... It's pretty crude profiling, but looking for men who had traveled. If you were Bosniak but you happened to have spent time abroad, for example, in a country that is also considered to have an extremist presence, that was the basis for enough suspicion for people to be followed, in some cases picked up, or at least questioned locally.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Philip Johnson:

And maybe delivered over to the US.

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Tanya Domi:

You did a study of the internal official prisoner newspaper entitled The Wire. First of all, tell me how you got access, and secondly, what did you find out by reading them and studying them?

Philip Johnson:

Well, this is actually-

Tanya Domi:

That's fascinating to me.

Philip Johnson:

This is freely available through ... It used to be on Wikimedia Commons. It was just there. But it's still available now on DVIDS and I'm going to butcher the acronym, but it's the Department of Defense's video image distribution service. Basically an online repository which the public can access.

Tanya Domi:

So they post it and it's transparently available.

Philip Johnson:

Yeah.

Tanya Domi:

Well, good for DOD on that score.

Philip Johnson:

Right. Right.

Tanya Domi:

Okay. So what did you find out? When did this start? When did this newspaper start?

Philip Johnson:

The Wire started probably very soon after the detention facilities at Guantanamo in 2002, right? The earliest issues aren't available, though probably only photocopied and handed around the camps, but starting with the second sort of volume and running on for 19 volumes total, these things were available as PDFs, they were circulated, they were printed around the base.

Tanya Domi:

Were they in Arabic, or how many languages?

Philip Johnson:

These are actually only in English, and specifically for military personnel assigned to the camps.

Tanya Domi:

Oh. This is for the military.

Philip Johnson:

Right.

Tanya Domi:

Okay.

Philip Johnson:

There's actually a separate newspaper for the civilians ... I think it's called the Guantanamo Gazette or something ... Which is much longer running.

Tanya Domi:

Okay. Sure. Yeah, yeah, that would be a public affairs initiative of the Department of Defense. In this case, Department of Navy.

Philip Johnson:

Right.

Tanya Domi:

Right. Okay.

Philip Johnson:

But The Wire was published for personnel-

Tanya Domi:

Who worked in the prison.

Philip Johnson:

You know, pick up a copy-

Tanya Domi:

Who worked in the prison.

Philip Johnson:

Exactly.

Tanya Domi:

Okay. Now that makes it clear.

Philip Johnson:

Right.

Tanya Domi:

Okay, so what did you find out? What did you learn?

Philip Johnson:

Well, I went in looking to see if the way the leadership talked on the base mirrored the way the President talked, right? Bush in his second term pivoted against ... "This is like the front lines of the war and the place where all the worst people are kept." Then Obama continued that and said, "This is not a place we're proud of." I was looking to see if the Joint Task Force leadership at Guantanamo echoed that.

Philip Johnson:

Instead, what I found was not a shift into negative language, but a sort of shift completely away from the topic of the War on Terror and the idea of defending against the worst of the worst.

Philip Johnson:

In about 2006, the newspaper rebrands as a lifestyle magazine. It becomes full color, glossy production, and it really emphasizes Guantanamo as a place for professional development and also for recreation and convalescence. So it's a place where if you're deployed, you take up a sport. You start running fun runs. You get your scuba lessons.

Philip Johnson:

It's a place, in some cases, where wounded veterans could come to do some sort of convalescing. They had, from about 2008, visits from the so-called Wounded Warriors, soldiers who were amputees and were doing dive therapy to heal from that trauma and the physical injury.

Philip Johnson:

Guantanamo becomes this place of recreation and relaxation for the troopers, once they're outside of the camps. You go and do your shifts in the camps-

Tanya Domi:

What do you do? What do you do after you work? After you get off of work.

Philip Johnson:

And you go and work out, you get on a boat, but you also better yourself. You go for that best time or you heal if you're wounded or suffering. So [crosstalk 00:27:58]-

Tanya Domi:

So it didn't really talk about the prison itself-

Philip Johnson:

Nah.

Tanya Domi:

And what their military objectives were.

Philip Johnson:

Right. Exactly. These fade away. They're less relevant. The subtext here as well is that like there's no end to this War on Terror now. Instead of Guantanamo being a way to fight it-

Tanya Domi:

This is part of the forever war, actually.

Philip Johnson:

Right. And it's a place to come and heal, because the war is ongoing. It's actually one of the better deployments you could get. Take some time off from Iraq and Afghanistan and take one of the cushier assignments for a while.

Tanya Domi:

Well, that really says everything, in my view. I have to say that in reading a book recently by George Packard ... He wrote a book about Bosnia recently, and about American engagement there. I agree with his hypothesis, and his hypothesis was the apex of US power was really exercised from '45 to '99, and it stopped, really, the derogations, all that began that really damaged US leadership in the world and the values and principles and ideals that attracted so many people to this country. It began on 9/11.

Philip Johnson:

Right.

Tanya Domi:

And evolved because of one bad decision after another on how to deal with this attack on the United States. So instead of operating from our ideals, we operated from our fear, and you can see that, and I think Afghanistan puts the exclamation point on that end. We are America, engaged and left from a position of weakness.

Philip Johnson:

Right.

Tanya Domi:

This is a, I think sobering moment for those of us who are interested in that trajectory of the United States and the allies after '45 and the conclusion of defeating fascism in Europe. Australia, of course, was part of that. So many of our friends are Canadian friends and people around the world, including ... Even in South Korea now they have joined with the United States and the OSCE as an observer, and you really do see the diminished America at this point.

Tanya Domi:

I point to your article and the accounting of many people in the media of this really fine article that was published in The Nation by Karen Greenberg also gives a pretty good summation. But I think this is where we really tripped and fell into hubris. Guantanamo is the quintessential illustration of all those poor decisions.

Philip Johnson:

You're absolutely right. Fear guided a lot of this, but at high levels there was also this grab for power or this almost vengeful search to be able to do more. Like "We need to fight back," or "We need to do something about this." But-

Tanya Domi:

Yeah. I think they were enraged, also. They wanted to destroy these people.

Philip Johnson:

Right.

Tanya Domi:

This is one of the takes on Cheney, that he actually sort of drove that, and in retrospect, I think Bush hasn't ever said it, but it seems like he did distance himself from Cheney in the second administration. You can see that. It would be interesting to have a conversation with George W Bush about all these decisions at some point.

Philip Johnson:

Right. And especially about the earlier decisions, because this aggression, this search for more power to do more and destroy more, fairly obviously runs contrary to ideas like, "Let's go through due process and come out as the just guys. We will find the people who did this and we will subject them to courts, not torture, and we will emerge as not only the victors, but looking strong and also fair in this."

Tanya Domi:

This is true, and there's many instances where, for example, the Southern District of New York has prosecuted a number of terrorists effectively and put them in prison, and that we could do that. But they decided, "No, that's not good enough for this situation."

Philip Johnson:

Right.

Tanya Domi:

And I think that this forever war, forever prisoners, they went down the rabbit hole, so to speak, did they not?

Philip Johnson:

Right. They absolutely did. And we're not all the way out of it yet, and we're, I think Trump's campaign and presidency shows that there's no guarantee that we'll leave the rabbit hole behind, and that I think is why, beyond trying the men who are alleged 9/11 conspirators, why Guantanamo needs to be shut as a detention facility in a way that doesn't lend itself to reopening.

Tanya Domi:



Yes. That's a really good point. What do you think ... Besides the fact that we know that this has been so bad for the US reputation in the world, what are your takeaway lessons from Guantanamo? What are some of the ideas that have occurred to you while you've been studying it?

Philip Johnson:

Well, actually the thing that started me off studying this was the odd correspondence between the way Australia was treating immigrants and refugees, and what had happened and what seemed to be happening in Guantanamo. Australia has echoed that sort of move from the '90s of intercepting refugees en route to the country-

Tanya Domi:

Offshore, right? Offshore.

Philip Johnson:

And offshoring them, right?

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

Philip Johnson:

Some of the same dynamics apply, where these people aren't taken to a Australian soil, they're taken to countries like Nauru-

Tanya Domi:

Third countries.

Philip Johnson:

Right.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Philip Johnson:

Where Australia can first say, "Not our soil, not our problem," but also where things like access is very limited so it's hard for journalists to get in and independently investigate, right?

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Philip Johnson:

In places like that, you have the added thing that the detention system becomes quite a big employer, so it's even hard to find local people that would talk to you. In the same way, Guantanamo's cut off from Cuba, right?

Tanya Domi:

That's right.

Philip Johnson:

Guantanamo has what they called back in the day, the cactus curtain, which actually involved cacti and minefields to prevent Cubans' access to the United States.

Tanya Domi:

From accessing the Naval Observatory.

Philip Johnson:

Yeah. Exactly.

Tanya Domi:

Very interesting. I have to say that we live in this time of not only diminished US power, obviously, but we live in a time of the greatest number of refugees and migrants looking and seeking a home and a safe place to live that tops the historical high that occurred during WWII. And it is unimaginable to live that life. Couldn't live a more precarious existence, and when you think about it, the Europeans are using the Western Balkans to prevent refugees from getting into "the Schengen zone".

Tanya Domi:

You look at what you're talking about in Australia, and you can see the southern border, and Biden's rhetoric might be different, but they're still not permitting people from the Northern Triangle to apply for asylum, and they have to remain in Mexico and these gang ridden towns where people cannot exercise. They're right to do this.

Tanya Domi:

It's being repeated all over the world. For example, in Croatia people are trying to get into the EU through Bosnia, and the Croats are pushing them back into Bosnia in really brutal ways.

Tanya Domi:

This is, I think, also a time of really diminished leadership in the world too, so when you have this diminished leadership it seems like the dumbing down of everything, including justice process.

Philip Johnson:

Right.

Tanya Domi:

Right?

Philip Johnson:

Although some of these leaders I think in Australia are ... There are certainly those who sort of shrug and say, "We don't know what to do about this."

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Philip Johnson:

But there are also those who are active proponents of this ... There's actually some sort of commitment or ideology there ... And have gone to advise in Europe, "You should take what we've done and apply it here."

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Philip Johnson:

It's harder to offshore with land borders of course, but the idea is still the same. This sort of like, "We can detain and then deter migrants such that they'll find other ways to try and come, or they won't come."

Tanya Domi:

Or they won't come or they'll just die in the sea.

Philip Johnson:

Exactly.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. This is a really interesting and terrible time at the same time. Philip Johnson, I want to thank you so very much for sharing your thoughts and your ideas about Guantanamo, and we wish you well on your defense this year.

Philip Johnson:

Great. Thank you so much. It's great to be back here.

Tanya Domi:

Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project and thanks to our guest, Philip Johnson, a PhD candidate in the Political Science doctoral program at the Graduate Center.

Tanya Domi:

The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Kevin Wolfe of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.