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BOOKS, AUTHOR INTERVIEW, KRISTINE A. HUSKEY, JUSTICE AT GUANTANAMO

From Alaska to Gitmo: UT law prof's book reveals quest for 'Justice'

What's a former model and dancer doing defending alleged terrorists? Funny you should ask.

By [Patrick Beach](#)

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There once was a Kristine Huskey who lived in New York with her sister in the late 1980s, worked as a model and actress — most notably in videos for Buster Poindexter's "Hot, Hot, Hot" and H-Town's "Knockin' Da Boots" — tended bar, partied and not occasionally made her way home after sunup, wishing she'd remembered her sunglasses.

As it happens, there's a woman by the same name whose law firm agreed to represent the families of Kuwaitis rounded up right after 9/11 and sent to the American military prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, a Kristine Huskey who spent years battling the government before even getting a chance to meet her detainee clients, whose case eventually went to the U.S. Supreme Court, and who is now a law professor and director of the National Security Clinic at the University of Texas School of Law. On top of that, she's also a fellow at the Robert S. Strauss Center for International Security and Law, a think tank affiliated with the law school and the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs.

Of course they are the same person. But how does that person get from there to here, from going to photo shoots during the day and knocking back shots at night to Columbia University (where she got hooked on political theory and world affairs) and, quite improbably, to a pivotal battle between national security and the constitutional rights of prisoners?

That's the saga Huskey reveals in "Justice at Guantánamo: One Woman's Odyssey and Her Crusade for Human Rights" (Lyons Press, \$24.95), which spools out her story, from growing up in Alaska and hunting and fishing via float plane (not unlike Sarah Palins family outings, she notes) to being grilled by Wolf Blitzer about why her clients — dubbed "enemy combatants" by the Bush administration — should be considered to have any legal rights at all. As she writes:

"I'd learned that principles don't really matter much in times of peace. It's easy to maintain your ideology when everything is stable and life is good; it's during times of conflict that holding fast to your values really matters. ... My faith in our government ... would be shaken even more over the course of the next several years."

Your honor, before we get further into the story, Ms. Huskey would like to state for the record that she is not some insanely liberal, America-loathing hippie. Growing up in Alaska, she learned to shoot a gun and build a fire in about the third grade. Both her grandfathers were in World War II, her dad was in Vietnam and her mother was in the military. But a trip to tenant-landlord court in New York even before law school showed her that it was possible to stick up for the little guy and win. And as anyone who has ever had taxes audited or been accused of a serious crime can attest, when the government is throwing the full weight of its resources at you, you really need a passionate advocate.

That's noble, but it's quite an abstraction when Americans are still mourning their dead and coughing up the ash and dust of incinerated buildings. After the Washington office of Huskey's firm, Shearman & Sterling LLP, took the case of the Kuwaiti detainees, it got hate mail. Even lawyer friends were incredulous that she was standing up for prisoners who were called, simply by virtue of where they were being held, "the worst of the worst."

"As a lawyer you have an obligation to your client, not to believe them necessarily but to work in their interest," Huskey, 42, said from her Arlington, Va., home, where she continues to work for UT's National Security Clinic. "What sort of drove me, too, was the amazement that so many people were opposed. The more people were opposed, the more I was inspired to stand up for the rule of law."

Huskey later followed up on that thought in an e-mail: "Sometimes when people are against you, it only strengthens you in your resolve, especially if you believe you are doing the right thing. Now, I will say that the trips to Guantánamo took their toll. Everything about those trips (was) so difficult, both physically and emotionally, and ... seeing people in the flesh, what they were going through at Guantánamo, affected me more than anything else."

In Huskey's telling of the tale, it was a street fight with government lawyers and forces within the administration who refused initially even to admit that the men had been detained and were at Guantánamo or how many of them there were. Then there was the battle to see their clients face-to-face — it didn't happen until 2004 — and to file petition of habeas corpus with the federal courts, in which the prisoners could challenge the legality of their detention.

"It wasn't that they picked up a bunch of people and brought them to a place like Guantánamo; it was the lack of law they failed to apply," Huskey said. "Right after 9/11 we went into Afghanistan, and of course we should have picked up a ton of people. It doesn't matter where you take them, but apply the law."

"If you are picked up in armed conflict in Afghanistan, apply the law of war," she continued. "If you're picked up as a suspected terrorist, bring them to the United States and apply the domestic terrorism laws. And so soon after 9/11, do you think a suspected terrorist wouldn't have been convicted?"

By the time her case had been consolidated into another that was headed for the Supreme Court, Huskey was back at UT, her law school alma mater, where she'd been asked to open the National Security Clinic. The timing couldn't have been better. After eight years of billing 80 or more hours a week at Shearman & Sterling, she was ready to get her life back and maybe start a family. Moreover, students were intrigued by her unconventional background: Filipino mother, white American father, growing up in Alaska, a lot of adventurous travel from Angola during the civil war there to Southeast Asia, India and more, tending bar and modeling, going to the Interlochen Center for the Arts rather than prep schools that fed into the Ivy League and, finally, escaping the grind of a high-pressure job with her wits intact.

UT offered her a chance to continue to do work that engaged her ideals and her intellect. Huskey and some of her students even traveled to Washington to hear oral arguments before the Supreme Court. In June 2008, the court upheld the constitutional privilege of habeas corpus for Guantánamo detainees. It further ruled that the government was accountable for its actions at Guantánamo.

The clinic continues to represent one Afghan citizen still held at Guantánamo, but after the election last fall of President Barack Obama, it was clear the facility's days were finite. In the book, Huskey says she is encouraged at the election's outcome, but the notion of closing Guantánamo is complicated: Where should the detainees be sent, for example? And Huskey seems none too encouraged at Obama's floating the trial balloon of preventive detention, which would allow detainees who could not be tried to be locked up anyway.

Nonetheless, she concludes "Justice at Guantánamo" with a sentence that could have come straight from the 44th president's mouth:


"I have hope."

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