



The reasons why Guantanamo is so expensive

In listening to [President Obama](#) and most Democrats in [Congress](#), one might think that holding detainees at Guantanamo Bay is what's bankrupting America. Last month, the president told Candy Crowley on CNN's State of the Union that "it is wildly expensive. We're spending millions for each individual there." Democratic Sen. Joe Machin III of West Virginia went further after visiting Gitmo in December: "We're up to \$3.3 million per detainee. The average annual cost per prisoner in a maximum security prison in the United States is \$78,000." So let's ask the simple question: Why is Gitmo so expensive? Once anyone actually does the math in looking at specific line items, the sky-high cost myth is shattered in an instant. Here's the bottom line. Even though the Gitmo detainee population has shrunk from 779 to 122 detainees over a decade, the size of the military units and contractors guarding them, providing health care, cooking and cleaning for them, staffing a library and recreational activities haven't downsized accordingly. There are still about 2,000 deployed military men and women serving with [Joint Task Force \(JTF\)](#) Guantanamo, typically rotating on an annual basis. It's the same as it was when I was a [Pentagon](#) spokesman from 2005 to 2009 and visited there more than 30 times with press and human rights groups. During those years, the detainee population declined from quadruple to triple to double the size of today. The JTF Medical Group is still composed of about 100 health care professionals. Perversely, while dozens of American veterans have died on secret waiting lists at Veterans Affairs hospitals around the country, practically every detainee has his own doctor or nurse, waiting at his beck and call. Next, there's the virtual army of military lawyers. Assigned to the [Office of Military Commissions \(OMC\)](#) based in the Washington area, these attorneys, paralegals and support staff have made charter flights weekly or more frequently to visit their clients, and to conduct sporadic trials and pretrial motion hearings before a military judge. While that made sense during the Bush administration when [OMC](#) prosecutors talked openly about 60 or 70 trials, the Obama administration dismissed most of those cases and are only prosecuting Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, four other September 11 co-conspirators and a handful of others. Yet like the [Joint Task Force](#) staff, the [Office of Military Commissions](#) hasn't shrunk, either. Then there are things like the \$750,000 detainee soccer field, built from 2011 to 2012. It's not even nice — just a dirt patch, goal posts and chalk lines — all surrounded by a fence with green mesh around it. There's also the cost of up to four halal meals a day — far more expensive than for our own troops. Imported dates and honey, roasted meats, sides of olives and cheese at every meal, if that's what the detainees want. And then there's all the treadmills, stationary bikes, Wii-Fits, TVs, Al-Jazeera satellite broadcasts, recreation centers, art classes, and a 10,000-volume library, where J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" series was the most popular for years, only recently eclipsed by "Fresh Prince of Bel Air" videos. Now let's talk dollar and cents. According to a Defense Department report to Sen. Dianne Feinstein on Dec. 1, the total cost of holding Gitmo detainees for fiscal 2014 was \$397 million. The



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military personnel costs were \$108 million. The operations and maintenance costs were also \$108 million. The [Office of Military Commissions](#) cost \$113 million. Just those three big-ticket items alone add up to \$329 million, most of Gitmo's cost. Let's not forget the jet-setting "special envoy for gitmo closure" and deputy assistant secretary of defense overseeing detainee policy who racked up another \$17 million to review cases for the hundredth time, and trotted around the globe looking for desperate countries to take in al Qaeda and Taliban suspects in exchange for who knows what. Here's the plain truth: If and when Gitmo closes, the taxpayer will still be paying the cost of all those military men and women, both within the [JTF](#) and [OMC](#). They'll just be deployed elsewhere overseas, or back to home bases. Well over 2,000 military people will not be fired if Gitmo closes. Nor will hundreds of lawyers, paralegals, contractors and support staff with [OMC](#) and other Gitmo-related agencies. Now for actual incurred costs: If 2,000 troops could guard and care for 779 detainees, then 300 logically ought to be able to handle 122. Does each detainee really need his own personal doctor and military lawyer? Can't they share? If you adjust the troop levels to meet the actual mission requirements, and cut back on some of the luxuries afforded to detainees, the real cost would be just a small fraction of the party line. Much closer to the Supermax cost, actually. In a nutshell, the bloated costs at Gitmo are highly misleading, and amount to a self-inflicted wound that Mr. Obama has forced upon the American taxpayer. This strategy is designed to apply maximum political pressure against those who support keeping Gitmo open. Maybe it's time for [Congress](#) to hold some specific hearings on those costs and how the [Pentagon](#), [Joint Task Force](#) and the [Office of Military Commissions](#) do business. They're long overdue.