

US press takes umbrage at Amnesty's "gulag" charge

Joseph Kay, Barry Grey
28 May 2005

The American establishment press has reacted to the human rights report issued by Amnesty International with a combination of indignation and verbal mudslinging. The editorial boards of the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post* have taken particular offense at the statement by Amnesty International's secretary general calling the US-run prison camp in Guantánamo Bay "the gulag of our times."

The editorial boards of these two newspapers—one the mouthpiece of the extreme right and the other its "liberal" counterpart—have swallowed whole every lie and pro-war pretext dispensed by the Bush administration. They have done their best to promote a criminal war in Iraq and a policy of militarism and provocation throughout the world. But when an organization dares to speak with a certain degree of bluntness about the real substance of the US "war on terror" and Washington's supposed crusade for democracy, they fairly froth at the mouth.

The *Journal's* editorial, entitled "Amnesty's 'Gulag,'" begins by declaring that Amnesty International's use of the term "gulag" is "one more sign of the moral degradation" of the organization. The *Journal* takes particular exception to the statement by the executive director of Amnesty's US branch, William Schulz, that the US is a "leading purveyor and practitioner" of torture, as well as his suggestion that top American officials should think twice about vacationing outside the US, lest they "find themselves under arrest as Augusto Pinochet famously did in London in 1998."

For the editors of the *Wall Street Journal* to accuse Amnesty International of "moral degradation" is a particularly brazen instance of projecting one's own sins on one's opponents. This is a newspaper that has championed every right-wing conspiracy against the

democratic rights of the American people—from the scandal-mongering and attempted political coup against Clinton to the theft of the 2000 election. It has enthusiastically supported the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and justified the most criminal policies associated with these wars, including the torture of prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan and the indefinite detention without charges of prisoners at Guantánamo.

Those who run the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial pages, using half-truths, distortions and lies as their basic modus operandi, have earned for themselves an international reputation as journalistic thugs.

In supposed refutation of Schulz's suggestion that US officials are guilty of war crimes, the editors of the *Journal* point to the "multiple probes and courts martial [that] have found no evidence that the US condones or encourages torture."

No evidence? What about the infamous photos from Abu Ghraib? Or the stream of documents detailing prisoner abuse in Afghanistan, Iraq and Guantánamo? Or the US government memoranda that set out to provide a pseudo-legal rationale for torture, the documented orders from Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and the former top military official in Iraq Ricardo Sanchez approving policies that grossly violate the Geneva Conventions?

The *Journal* concludes, characteristically, with a verbal incitement against the leaders of Amnesty International, declaring, "These latest accusations amount to pro-al Qaeda propaganda." According to the Bush doctrine—"You're either with us or with the terrorists"—this makes these individuals fair game for virtually any form of retribution.

The *Washington Post* in an editorial published the same day voices a similar viewpoint. The editors note that in the past, the newspaper has raised criticisms of

US detention policies. “But we draw the line,” they write, “at the use of the word ‘gulag’ or at the implication that the United States has somehow become the modern equivalent of Stalin’s Soviet Union.” The real modern equivalent, the *Post* writes, “is not Guantánamo Bay, but the prisons of Cuba...the labor camps of North Korea...our, until recently, the prisons of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.”

Allow us to remind the *Post* that Guantánamo Bay is part of Cuba. US possession of this section of the island dates from Uncle Sam’s first imperialist venture—the Spanish-American war of 1898—and remains to this day a symbol of American imperialist oppression of Central and Latin America.

“Worrying about the use of a word [‘gulag’] may seem like mere semantics,” the newspaper concludes, “but it is not. Turning a report on prisoner detention into another excuse for Bush-bashing or America-bashing undermines Amnesty’s legitimate criticisms of US policies and weakens the force of its investigations of prison systems in closed societies.”

What hypocrisy! The *Post* has itself published numerous editorials and articles documenting violations of international law and criticizing high-level US officials for sanctioning torture and the rendition of prisoners to be tortured in other countries. It has published editorials linking top administration officials to the abuse of detainees. One editorial, published December 23, 2004 and headlined “War Crimes,” singled out Donald Rumsfeld by name.

Why, then, are the editors of the *Post* so incensed at Amnesty International’s use of the term “gulag?” For one thing, the application of the term to the US triggers the virulent anti-communism that runs throughout the US establishment. To refer to an American prison as the “gulag of our times” is to implicitly challenge the myth of the US as the “leader of the free world” assiduously promulgated during the Cold War and maintained today in the form of the “war on terror” and Washington’s supposed crusade for democracy.

The attitude taken by the *Post* highlights the hypocritical and unprincipled character of its criticisms of the Bush administration. What has the newspaper proposed in response to the US war crimes it itself has documented? Nothing. What conclusions has it drawn as to the character of the wars with which these crimes are linked? None.

Washington Post continues to support the war in Iraq and the other military adventures of the United States, promoting the big lie that the US is working to democratize the world. Any criticisms the *Post* makes of the Bush administration are entirely of a tactical, not principled, character. They are motivated by concerns that the Bush administration’s reckless and unilateralist tactics are endangering the long-term interests of American imperialism. Their criticisms are aimed at facilitating Washington’s drive for global hegemony, not opposing it.

The statements made by Amnesty International are, in fact, only mild expressions of the deep-seated feelings of hundreds of millions of people around the world, including many millions within the United States. The position taken by the US media in response to Amnesty’s charges will only further discredit an institution that already stands condemned in the eyes of the world. The US media is waist deep in blood, filth and lies. It has been instrumental in promoting and defending the policies of the most reactionary government in American history and is irreversibly implicated in its crimes.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact