

Durbin's tearful apology

Democrats make cowardly retreat on Guantánamo torture

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Senator Richard Durbin's sniveling apology Tuesday for his remarks on US torture at the Guantánamo Bay prison camp was entirely predictable, another of the "profiles in cowardice" that the Democratic Party serves up on a regular basis.

The pattern is all too familiar. A prominent Democrat commits the unpardonable sin of stating an unpleasant truth about crimes that are being carried out by the White House and the Pentagon in the name of the "global war on terrorism." He is subjected to a torrent of denunciations from the extreme right-wing elements that control the Republican Party. Accusations of treason and "stabbing our troops in the back" are echoed and amplified by the mass media. The Republicans demand a retraction and apology, and the Democrats demonstratively distance themselves from whomever in their midst made the offending remark.

Attempts at "clarification" are followed by a public recantation and blubbing mea culpas that serve to obscure and discredit the truth of what was originally said. In the end, the impunity of the administration is only strengthened.

This familiar Washington scenario took a particularly disgusting form with the appearance of Durbin—the second-ranking Democratic senator—sobbing for forgiveness in the well of the Senate.

Durbin's apology only encouraged right-wing politicians and media pundits to excoriate the sinner more ferociously. This, in turn, enabled the media to virtually ignore a far more significant news development the following day.

The United Nations' top human rights experts issued a report stating that they had "information, based on reliable sources, of serious allegations of torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of detainees, arbitrary detention, violation of their right to health and their due process rights" at Guantánamo, as well as at US facilities in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

The UN experts further pointed out that Washington's stonewalling for three years of their requests to inspect the facility was tantamount to an admission of guilt.

Even as the UN officials were making these well-founded charges, the Bush White House was announcing that it would not agree to any independent inquiry on Guantánamo. With

Durbin having backtracked on his "reprehensible remarks," the administration acted as if its conduct at the Pentagon's Cuban concentration camp had been vindicated.

Why did Durbin feel compelled to apologize? All he had done was read aloud on the Senate floor a declassified FBI memo detailing the treatment of Guantánamo Bay prisoners. The document said that detainees were left for 24 hours "chained hand and foot in a fetal position to the floor, with no chair, food or water," with the result that "they urinated or defecated on themselves."

The memo further described a prisoner left overnight in an "unbearably hot," unventilated room. "The detainee was almost unconscious on the floor, with a pile of hair next to him. He had apparently been literally pulling his hair out throughout the night," the FBI reported.

Durbin then commented: "If I read this to you and did not tell you that it was an FBI agent describing what Americans had done to prisoners in their control, you would most certainly believe this must have been done by Nazis, Soviets in their gulags, or some mad regime—Pol Pot or others—that had no concern for human beings."

He immediately came under fire from the right for comparing "our troops" to the Nazis, and was condemned by the Anti-Defamation League for "inappropriate and insensitive" use of "Holocaust imagery"—a charge the organization never seems to make when Israeli leaders compare Palestinians and other Arabs to Nazis.

Durbin began his expiation last week by saying he had "learned from my statement that historical parallels can be misused and misunderstood," and declaring, "Our soldiers around the world and their families at home deserve our respect, admiration and total support."

These mealy-mouthed words only fueled the attacks, so on Tuesday he went further, declaring through his tears that he was "sorry if anything I said in any way casts a negative light on our fine men and women in the military" and extending his "heartfelt apologies" to those who "may believe that my remarks crossed the line."

What better analogy to the torture at Guantánamo, Abu

Ghraib and elsewhere than the methods employed by the Gestapo? If the Republican right wanted to object, Durbin and the Democrats could have thrown their denunciations back in their faces with one simple demand:

Release the hundreds of photographs and videotapes from Abu Ghraib that have been shown to members of the Senate but remain classified. Let the American people see and hear men being tortured, children being sodomized and women being raped by their US guards and interrogators, and then decide for themselves whether these methods are consistent with a democracy or a fascist dictatorship.

As for the impermissibility of using the “n” word, the Republicans and their right-wing base do so regularly. Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum just last month compared the Democrats’ defense of the filibuster to the Nazi regime. “Right-to-life” fanatics regularly equate abortion with the Holocaust, and the Republican right has habitually compared federal agencies such as the Internal Revenue Service and the Environmental Protection Agency to the Gestapo. Similar terminology has been used to incite violence against judges.

Durbin’s inability to answer his attackers in kind recalls the old political adage, “If you can’t stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen.” But the ease with which the Republican right and sections of the media reduced the Senate’s Democratic whip to a sniveling wimp is not merely a matter of personal character traits.

Rather, this episode reveals a great deal about the Democratic Party itself, as well as the type of personnel it attracts and molds. While they have long masqueraded as the “party of the people,” the Democrats, in fact, rest upon an exceedingly narrow social base, composed primarily of sections of the financial elite and the most comfortable strata of the upper-middle class.

To the extent that leading Democrats choose to oppose the administration, they invariably articulate the concerns of factions within a ruling establishment that is divided over how best to advance the interests of American capitalism.

Thus, the torture at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib is seen not as a moral abomination and an assault on democratic rights, but rather as a blemish on “the image of America around the world.” Similarly, Democratic criticism of the Bush administration’s handling of the war in Iraq is aimed not at bringing the US intervention to a halt, but at stemming the growing tide of opposition to the war among the American people. The principal Democratic concern is that US strategic goals in the region—principally, control of its oil reserves—were met.

To this end, the Democrats advocate a “saner,” less “ideological” foreign policy, and express the fear within more conscious sections of the ruling elite that the Bush administration’s approach risks provoking mass popular opposition, both at home and abroad.

Proceeding from this point of departure, the Democrats’

opposition is invariably couched in political evasion and moral duplicity, with the party’s leadership prepared at the drop of a hat to either capitulate or accept a rotten compromise.

The only time the Democratic leadership shows any backbone is when it can stand together with its Republican counterparts in attacking the working class, promoting the interests of the corporations, and supporting foreign aggression. Whenever it strays from these positions and is called to order by the Republicans, it exhibits abject cowardice.

Such a party attracts a definite caliber of leadership. These are men and women who work not off of political ideals or even insight, but rather are driven by careerist ambition and opportunist fear. They have not been tested or steeled in any significant social struggles or political crises.

Durbin is a typical example, a man who spent his entire life working his way up the ladder of the political machine, serving as legal counsel to state politicians before his elevation first to the House and then the Senate.

What also emerges so clearly from the Durbin episode is the enormous weight exerted by an increasingly uncontrolled military over American political life. Shortly before the Democratic senator rendered his apology, House Majority Leader Tom Delay, a Texas Republican, denounced him for carrying out “a premeditated and monstrous attack against America’s military.”

There is immense sensitivity within the Democratic Party to such a charge. With its half-a-trillion-dollar budget, its extensive relations with corporate America, and its deployment across the face of the globe, the military has emerged as an extraordinarily powerful independent force.

The Democrats seek not to curb this dangerous growth of militarism, but rather to compete with the Republicans in promoting it. Thus, their principal fire against the administration over Iraq has been directed not at ending the war, but rather at increasing the number of troops and providing them with better arms and equipment.

Anyone looking to such an organization to either stop the war or defend the interests of the working people who make up the vast majority of the population understands nothing about social relations and political realities in the United States.



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