Bush administration defends Guantánamo prison camp

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In the face of new revelations of torture and abuse of detainees at the Guantánamo Bay prison camp, the Bush administration and its Republican backers in Congress continue to defend the treatment of prisoners at Guantánamo and other US-run facilities in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. This defense of war crimes is combined with denunciations of those who expose or criticize them and attempts to further cow an already pliant media.

Of the approximately 520 prisoners currently being held at Guantánamo as "enemy combatants," only 4 have been charged with any crime. The camp opened in January 2002, and many prisoners have been held for more than three years, without access to legal counsel or contact with their families. A handful have been returned to their countries of origin.

Renewed attention was focused on US prisoner abuse last month after Amnesty International charged in its annual report for 2004 that the Bush administration was authorizing "interrogation techniques that violated the UN Convention Against Torture." Irene Khan, the secretary general of the London-based human rights organization, called Guantánamo the "gulag of our time" and demanded that the facility be shut down.

In the last week, further evidence that the US has violated international law has come to light. A June 20 article in *Time* magazine exposed torture techniques used at Guantánamo in the interrogation of Mohammed al-Qahtani, the so-called 20th hijacker.

A British lawyer who had visited the facility also charged that at least five juveniles under the age of 18 had been arrested and brought to Guantánamo, including one youth who was subjected to torture and is currently being held in solitary confinement, in clear violation of international treaties governing the treatment of children.

In response to these revelations, the Bush administration has ratcheted up its defense of Guantánamo, as well as announced plans for its expansion. Following statements by President Bush during an interview on Fox News that was interpreted by some as hinting at possible closure of the detention facility, White House spokesman Scott McClellan assured the press that Bush, Vice President Cheney and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld were all "on the same page" in defense of the camp.

Speaking at the National Press Club last Monday, Vice President Dick Cheney argued that detainees at the prison camp are treated "far better" than they would be by any other government. He added cynically, "My own personal view of it is that those who are most urgently advocating that we shut down Guantánamo probably don't agree with our policies anyway."

At a Pentagon news briefing on Wednesday, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld defended the prison camp, claiming that "dozens of reforms" had been implemented at Guantánamo regarding soldier conduct toward detainees, but that "traditional doctrines covering criminals and military prisoners to do not apply well enough." He argued that "no detention facility in the history of warfare has been more transparent or received more scrutiny than Guantánamo."

Rumsfeld claimed that the US military has gone to "unprecedented" lengths to respect "the religious sensibilities of these enemies of civil society." Considering the recent exposures—and the US military's own admission—that interrogators at Guantánamo have abused the Quran, the defense secretary's comments were remarkable.

Rumsfeld said rules had been established governing the handling of the Quran and arranging meals around the five daily calls to prayer. "In fact," he boasted, "at Guantánamo, the military spends more per meal for detainees to meet their religious dietary requirements than it spends for rations for US troops."

At a hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee last Wednesday, Bush administration officials defended the Guantánamo camp in response to complaints from some senators that it was damaging the international image of the US, and should be either reformed or closed.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, stated: "Guantánamo Bay is an international embarrassment to our nation, to our ideals, and it remains a festering threat to our security." Leahy's comments drew a scathing rebuke from Sen. Jeff Sessions, Republican of Alabama, who claimed, "This country is not systematically abusing prisoners. We have no policy to do so, and it's wrong to suggest that." He added that some of the detainees "need to be executed."

Several prominent Republicans voiced concern over the Bush administration's policy on detainees. Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Arlen Specter said Congress should intervene to help define the legal rights of detainees, describing Guantánamo as a "crazy quilt" system.

Senator Mel Martinez, Republican of Florida, stated, "The Guantánamo facility has become an icon for bad stories and at some point you wonder the cost-benefit ratio. How much do you get out of having that facility there...or can this be done some other way a little better?"

Military and Justice Department officials appearing at the Senate hearing insisted that prisoners were being treated legally, and defended their indefinite detention. J. Michael Wiggins, deputy associate attorney general, made the Bush administration's stance clear. "It's our position," he stated, "that, legally, they can be held in perpetuity."

Wiggins also claimed that "detainees enjoy some constitutional rights," but was unable to specify what those rights are.

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Air Force Brig. Gen. Thomas L. Hemingway told the Senate panel, "America is at war. It is not a metaphorical war." Promulgating the Bush administration line that the "war on terror" is protecting American citizens from future terrorist attack, he added that this war "is as tangible as the blood, the rubble that littered the streets of Manhattan on September 11, 2001."

The White House and leading Republicans have lambasted Illinois Sen. Richard J. Durbin for statements he made on the Senate floor Tuesday. After reading an FBI agent's description of detainees at Guantánamo being chained to the floor without food or water in extreme temperatures, Durbin 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."

Bush spokesman Scott McClellan declared it was "beyond belief" that Durbin would compare the treatment of Guantánamo detainees to the behavior of these repressive regimes. Senate Armed Services Committee chairman, Republican John Warner (Virginia), said that Durbin's comments "have no basis of fact or history."

Responding Friday to the criticisms of his statement, Durbin did his best to retract and repent, saying, "I have learned from my statement that historical parallels can be misused and misunderstood." He followed with the obligatory praise for American troops: "Our soldiers around the world, and their families at home deserve our respect, admiration and total support."

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (Republican of Tennessee) stated Saturday that nothing short of a full apology from Durbin would be acceptable: "In captivity at Guantánamo are murderers...many dangerous murderers. They are in jail cells where they belong...and not on the battlefield in Iraq and Afghanistan...or on the streets of Nashville, Boston, Miami or New York."

Contrary to Bush administration and Republican leaders' claims to the contrary, however, the new information contained in the *Time* magazine report documents that the methods utilized at Guantánamo—and undoubtedly practiced at other US prison camps—are a clear violation of Geneva Convention protections for prisoners of war and international and national laws against torture.

The article is based on an 84-page secret information log obtained by *Time* of the interrogation of Mohammed al-Qahtani, a young Saudi prisoner detained at Camp X-Ray in Guantánamo. According to the military, he had tried to enter the US in August 2001, allegedly to take part in the 9/11 attacks.

The log spans 50 days in the winter of 2002-2003, during which time 16 additional interrogation techniques were approved by Defense Secretary Rumsfeld for use on specific detainees at Guantánamo, including al-Qahtani.

Time writes: "Now the interrogators could use stress strategies like standing for prolonged periods, isolation for as long as 30 days, removal of clothing, forced shaving of facial hair, playing on 'individual phobias' (such as dogs) and 'mild, non-injurious physical contact such as grabbing, poking in the chest with the finger and light pushing.' According to the log, al-Qahtani experienced several of those over the next five weeks."

According to the secret log, al-Qahtani was often awakened at 4 in the morning and questioned until midnight. When he went on a hunger strike, interrogators told him he could not pray. According to a letter to the Pentagon by a senior FBI counterterrorism official, a dog was used "in an aggressive manner to intimidate Detainee #63 [al-Qahtani]."

He was subjected to repeated humiliation, such as one incident detailed in the log: "Told detainee that a dog is held in higher esteem because dogs know right from wrong and know to protect innocent people from bad people. Began teaching the detainee lessons such as stay, come, and bark to elevate his social status up to that of a dog."

In one incident, his interrogators performed a puppet show "satirizing the detainee's involvement with al-Qaeda." In an affront to his Muslim faith, his handlers at one point hung pictures of scantily clad women around al-Qahtani's neck.

Military officials and Pentagon personnel were well aware that they could face criminal prosecution under US anti-torture laws for the interrogation methods used at the Guantánamo camp in 2002-2003. According to notes obtained by ABC News from a series of meetings at the Pentagon in early 2003, Alberto Mora, general counsel for the Navy, warned his superiors that "use of coercive techniques...has military, legal, and political implication...has international implication...and exposes us to liability and criminal prosecution."

The growing evidence of torture and abuse by US forces of those rounded up in the Bush administration's "war on terror," combined with mounting US casualties and a deteriorating military situation in Iraq, are producing a rising tide of anti-war sentiment, as reflected in US opinion polls. A recent *New York Times*/CBS poll found a 51 percent majority believing that the US should have stayed out of Iraq, while Bush's handling of the war drew only a 37 percent approval rating.

In light of the growing unpopularity of the Bush administration, the response among congressional Democrats stands out all the more for its cowardice and cynicism. Democratic criticism amounts to an attempt at damage control, the main purpose of which is to minimize the impact of the revelations while defending the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Not one Democratic representative or senator has dared raise the point that top government officials are guilty of war crimes, or that Bush should be impeached for waging a war based on lies.

The Pentagon gave further confirmation on Thursday that the Bush administration has no intention of shutting down Guantánamo. Rumsfeld announced that a new two-story prison, Detention Camp #6, would be built at the US naval base in Cuba.

Arlington, Virginia-based Kellogg Brown & Root Services—a unit of Halliburton, the company formerly headed by Vice President Cheney—will construct the new detention facility and an accompanying security fence. The Halliburton subsidiary will earn $30 million for the project, which is part of a larger contract that could be worth up to $500 million if all options are exercised.

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