

Democrats and Guantánamo: an exercise in damage control

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The chorus of calls for the shutdown of the Guantánamo Bay detention center over the past week represents an attempt to arrest the precipitous decline of Washington's international image, while maintaining the same essential policies that led to the infamous facility.

Sections of the Democratic Party and the "liberal" press have taken up the demand for shuttering Guantánamo in the wake of two reports. The first, an internal investigation by the Pentagon, confirmed that guards at the camp had indeed abused the Koran, contradicting the White House's categorical denials. The second was Amnesty International's human rights report denouncing torture and illegal detention at the camp in Cuba and elsewhere.

More conscious elements within the American political establishment are concerned with the response to these developments by the Bush administration. Its belligerent counteroffensive recalls the rhetoric of the US-backed Latin American juntas of the 1970s, which routinely labeled revelations of "disappearances," torture and mass executions as "communist propaganda."

Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice both made public statements calling Amnesty's well-documented exposure of US torture "absurd." Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld declared the Amnesty report "reprehensible," while Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Richard Myers said it was "absolutely irresponsible." Vice President Dick Cheney allowed that he was personally "offended" by the suggestion that "somehow the United States is a violator of human rights."

It appears the administration thought it could reproduce its initial success in suppressing the Koran desecration story. Through similar intimidation, it managed to obscure verified reports of detainee abuse by indicting *Newsweek* for a minor journalistic error, and even blamed the magazine for the rage against US policy that boiled over in the Muslim world.

It is, however, one thing to intimidate a cowed and complicit US media. It is quite another to sway world opinion. For most people internationally, the venom and bluster from every senior official in the US administration

were just one more confirmation of guilt.

In his statement this week, Jimmy Carter went further than any of the Democratic leaders in Congress in calling for a change in administration policy. The former Democratic president, who cloaked his own predatory foreign policy in the language of human rights, noted that the Bush administration has chosen a similar tack during its second term, adopting the mantra of a crusade for democracy.

Carter called for the shutdown not just of Guantánamo, but of the "two dozen secret detention facilities run by the United States" as well. He further demanded assurances that "no detainees will be held incommunicado and that all will know the charges against them and be insured of international standards for fair trials."

Like other Democrats, Carter, who presented his proposals to a meeting of international human rights activists, posed the question from the standpoint of the "national interests" of the US. "The US continues to suffer terrible embarrassment and a blow to our reputation as a champion of human rights because of reports concerning abuses of prisoners in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantánamo," he declared.

Others within the Democratic leadership and the media have been even more cynical, combining their call for the closure of the detention camp with declarations of loyalty to the Bush administration's global "war on terrorism."

Their arguments are based not on a defense of democratic principles or human rights; rather, they focus on the public relations damage caused by Guantánamo, and its negative consequences for US imperialist interests around the world—beginning with the war in Iraq.

Their call comes little more than a year after Bush himself proposed bulldozing the Abu Ghraib prison.

Apparently, both the administration and its Democratic critics believe that obliterating a symbol of US torture and oppression will eradicate the reality of the crimes themselves. In the case of the Democrats, it is the illusion that closing the camp in Cuba and transferring its 540 inmates will obscure the fact that—in Iraq, Afghanistan and

elsewhere—the US is currently detaining 100 times as many prisoners without charges and subjecting them to the same kind of brutality.

Among those in the media calling for Guantánamo's shutdown is Thomas Friedman, senior foreign affairs columnist for the *New York Times*. Friedman has been an enthusiastic supporter of the wars waged by the US in Afghanistan and Iraq, and his bully-boy language was entirely in tune with the brutality inflicted on those rounded up by the US military in both countries.

"Just shut it down and then plow it under," Friedman wrote in a column two weeks ago, prompting a June 5 *Times* editorial with the same theme. "It has become worse than an embarrassment. I am convinced that more Americans are dying and will die if we keep the Gitmo prison open than if we shut it down. So, please, Mr. President, just shut it down."

Senator Joseph Biden, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, made a similar appeal last Sunday on the ABC talk show "This Week." He called Guantánamo "the greatest propaganda tool that exists for recruiting terrorists around the world."

Biden added, "I think we should end up shutting it down, moving those prisoners," suggesting that if they were transferred to a jail with a less infamous name, the problem would go away.

Similarly, Rep. Nancy Pelosi of California, the Democratic leader in the House of Representatives, suggested that shutting down Guantánamo would give the US "a clean slate for America in the Muslim world."

The Democratic leadership bears full responsibility for the crimes carried out at Guantánamo and elsewhere in the so-called war on terrorism. Torture, unlawful detention and the killing of detainees are not aberrations, but the logical and inevitable product of illegal wars of colonial aggression and the assumption of extraordinary police powers by the administration. In every instance, the White House has been able to count on the Democratic Party's support for these policies.

Responding Wednesday to a question about closing Guantánamo, Bush sounded a seemingly conciliatory note. "We're exploring all alternatives as to how best to do the main objective, which is to protect America," he said.

Other members of the administration, however, quickly refuted media suggestions that the president's statement indicated a shift in policy on Guantánamo.

"I know of no one in the US government, in the executive branch, that is considering closing Guantánamo," Defense Secretary Rumsfeld told reporters just hours after Bush's interview. He added that the preferred US policy was to keep the detainees "off the street, but in the hands of the countries

of origin for the most part."

This proposal, first unveiled in a Pentagon memo last February, amounts to the "rendering" of people whom the US has detained without charges or evidence to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan and other countries that routinely practice torture and deny basic democratic rights.

The administration's opposition to closing Guantánamo is rooted in its insistence that its policies are not bound by international or domestic law, from the Geneva Conventions to the US Constitution. It is precisely on this fundamental question that leading Democrats and the erstwhile liberals of the *New York Times* chose not to challenge the administration.

The *Wall Street Journal*, whose editorial policy most closely reflects the extreme right-wing views of the Bush White House, issued the most forceful—and chilling—rebuttal to the call for Guantánamo's shutdown.

The *Journal* charged that the call to close Guantánamo "is all about repudiating the Bush administration's approach to the war on terror." It suggested that acceding to the demand would only encourage critics to "find other anti-terror policies to deplore: military commissions, or the 'rendition' of terror suspects to third countries, or interrogation techniques, or something else."

Finally, it offered a piece of advice to the White House on how to silence the demands for shutting down the detention camp. "Someone in the administration ought to point out that these measures are designed to prevent the next terror attack—which, if it ever comes, could prompt a bipartisan crackdown on civil liberties that would make Guantánamo look like summer camp."

In other words, keep your mouth shut about people being held without charges and subjected to torture or you could find yourself rounded up and tortured yourself. The only thing that could "make Guantánamo look like summer camp" is the erection of concentration camps in the US itself for those opposed to imperialist war and attacks on democratic rights.

The spineless and hypocritical character of the Democrats' pleas over Guantánamo only serves to confirm the absence of any serious commitment to democratic rights within the American ruling elite. The defense of these rights and the struggle against war are possible only through the emergence of an independent political movement of the working class.



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