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A Devil's Island for Our Times

How can we let this evil persist?

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It is time to invade Cuba and put an end to what has become another Devil's Island in the annals of government-sanctioned torture. The barbaric treatment of political prisoners on the island is made no more palatable by being conducted in the name of an ideology that claims to be liberating the world from its shackles.

Once again, we are witnesses to the ugly truth bound up in that philosophical contradiction that the ends can justify the means: Desecrations of the human body and spirit can never be righteously justified by high-minded appeals to the needs of the masses. Fortunately, a few brave U.S. intelligence agents have managed to penetrate the security of a morally repugnant Cuban gulag and documented both the barbaric acts occurring on the island and their state-sanctioned rationalizations.

"On a couple of occasions, I entered interview rooms to find a detainee chained hand and foot in a fetal position to the floor, with no chair, food, or water," wrote an FBI agent who gained access to the prison compound. "Most times they had urinated or defecated on themselves and had been left there for 18-24 hours or more."

Also reported by U.S. agents: freezing or very hot cells; feverish prisoners left untreated; loud music and strobe lights directed for long periods at prisoners in solitary confinement; growling dogs used to frighten prisoners.

The prisoners themselves have testified to even worse tortures, their stories smuggled out by lawyers after they had been held incommunicado for years. Beatings that ended in injury and even death. Forced sex acts, often videotaped for use as blackmail. Coerced confessions. Injections of unknown drugs. The prisoners' claims were so outrageous that many of their attorneys did not believe the stories until U.S. government documents corroborated key aspects.

"Now there is no question that these guys have been tortured," said Brent Mickum, a Washington attorney for one of the roughly 10% of detainees at the camp who have finally secured legal representation. "Every allegation that I've heard has now come to pass and been confirmed by the government's own papers."

Even more troubling is that the FBI agents make it clear this is not the work of a few poorly supervised sadists. Their reports refer to what they described as a new — and very much secret — executive order on prisoner treatment by the president at the top of the camp's chain of command, which allowed for severe interrogation tactics, including "sleep deprivation and stress positions" combined with "loud music, interrogators yelling at subjects and prisoners with hoods on their heads."

So, shouldn't such leaders who authorize state torture be on trial for war crimes? Ah, but the torturers always tell us, such high-minded thinking does not square with real-world exigencies. The "people" must be protected at all costs! Never mind that the inevitable revelations of such outrages cost immeasurable goodwill around the world in what amounts to a global war for hearts and minds. Short-term pain for long-term gain is always the name of the game. But in this case, there is not even that justification — not a single detainee has been proved in a court of law to be a terrorist.

This Kafkaesque gulag, like others in human history, is an expression of a governing doctrine that defines morality as simply an expression of power: Might makes right. What the system can get away with, it does, unless reined in by the people it claims to represent. The ideology invoked in defense of the indefensible does not matter, for it has by that time been reduced to noble-sounding yet ultimately empty slogans, which clumsily paper over a steady erosion of the sanctity of individual rights.

This is what we can see so clearly at the American military base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, if only we have the stomach to bear witness. Yes, all of the above is a description of "Gitmo," the colonial-style U.S. prison camp run by American soldiers and paid for with American dollars.

The president who apparently authorized a global reign of prisoner torture in the "war on terror" is our own elected leader, not a convenient caricature of a foreign dictator. The military and legal systems that have looked the other way are our own.

Unfortunately, we look more and more like our enemies every day. On an island invaded, sabotaged and barred from U.S. trade and even tourism in the name of spreading our version of democracy, we have erected a massive torture chamber any deranged dictator would envy.