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Un-Ringing the Newsweek Bell That Sounded So True

Ann Woolner (Op-Ed)
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Newsweek magazine and the Bush administration have been trying this week to do what is impossible: un-ring a bell. It is especially hard because this bell had the ring of truth.

It resonated, this report that officials had confirmed that military interrogators at Guantanamo Bay had tossed a Koran into a toilet to get detainees to talk. It sounded like U.S. abuses that have been documented, not to mention accounts of religious humiliation told by former military interpreters and a host of ex- detainees.

"I read it and I believed it, and I think everybody believed it," says John Hutson, a retired Navy rear admiral and now president and dean of the law school at Franklin Pierce College in Concord, New Hampshire.

Before the Abu Ghraib scandal, he said he never would have imagined U.S. military personnel capable of such conduct, given his own experiences in more than two decades as a Navy lawyer.

"We've been so hardened by what's happened in the last year," Hutson said in a telephone interview.

White House and Pentagon officials have been slamming Newsweek and blaming it for riots and death.

Newsweek did, indeed, err in running an under-sourced story on a sensitive topic during volatile times.

But the magazine deserves blame only for that one article, not for the reasons it rang so true. Nor can it be blamed for all that dry tinder just waiting to be ignited.

A Moving Spotlight

By attacking Newsweek so ferociously, administration officials look like they are trying to move the spotlight away from the still troubling issue of detainee abuse. It's as if this false story wipes out all the true ones.

"This one story, that's been exposed for sloppy journalism, has had the unfortunate consequence of turning attention away from serial stories that have been verified of abuse of prisoners and misconduct of Pentagon personnel," said Bill Kovach, founding director of the Committee of Concerned Journalists.

The focus on Newsweek may push back questions of whether it is humane or in accord with U.S. values and law to keep suspects locked up for years at a time with no real chance to challenge the allegations against them.

Changing the Topic

It provides a break from wondering why, 11 months after the U.S. Supreme Court said the treatment of the Guantanamo detainees was unconstitutional, only minimal due process rights have been granted, not enough to be constitutional, a federal judge ruled in January.

“A story like this changes the discussion. In fact, it stops it in its tracks,” says Kovach.

Trying to figure out how Newsweek could get it wrong diverts us from asking whether any of the multiple government investigations into detainee abuse have gotten to the bottom of it.

The Pentagon says it didn't investigate possible Koran desecration at Guantanamo.

“We've not previously included that in any kind of previous investigations into detainee operations because there haven't been credible allegations to that effect,” Pentagon spokesman Lawrence Di Rita told reporters in a briefing this week.

Koran Desecration

And yet, released detainees and lawyers for those still at Guantanamo have been alleging Koran desecration for more than a year. USA Today counts 65 lawsuits filed for almost 180 detainees that claim some sort of desecration, including one that says military personnel tore pages out of a Koran and flushed them down a toilet.

It is true that none of the incidents have been confirmed by military investigations, at least not publicly. But then, how could there be if there was no investigation until now?

If the original Newsweek article had the ring of truth in the U.S., it is still considered true in the Middle East.

“There is a belief here that the back-off of Newsweek on this story is because there is tremendous pressure being put on them from the government,” Khalid Al-Odah, a retired Kuwaiti Air Force lieutenant colonel and the father of a Guantanamo detainee, said in a telephone interview this week from Kuwait.

Viewed from that perspective, U.S. officials who lambaste Newsweek are confirming suspicions that the retraction was a capitulation to the White House, not an honest admission of error.

Arab Opinion

Opinion polls in Arab countries reveal more about why the first Newsweek story resonated in the Middle East.

“There's a very, very pervasive sense that the U.S. is trying to weaken Islam,” according to Shibley Telhami, the Anwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland. That is the No. 1 reason given for the invasion of Iraq in the most recent poll he conducted, Telhami said in a telephone interview.

Hitting an Islamic nerve is all the more dangerous these days. Being Muslim is now more central to individual identity than is being Arab or being a citizen of a particular nation, according to that same 2004 survey.

If it weren't for the events that preceded it, the Newsweek story alone would have caused little more than a ripple. If, for example, the Pentagon had launched its investigation into alleged Koran abuse before now and punished any offenders, there might not have even been a story.

And if some false story got out there, anyway, it wouldn't have sounded so true.