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American gulag

Editorial
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NEWS THAT the Central Intelligence Agency is running a system of secret prisons in far-off countries has shocked the nation. The clandestine jails are an affront to American values and an embarrassment in the world community. They are probably illegal, and ineffective as well.

But their existence may solve one of Washington's recent minor mysteries. Members of Congress were dismayed last month when Vice President Dick Cheney, joined by CIA Director Porter Goss, lobbied them to exempt CIA employees from a bill that would bar cruel or degrading treatment of all prisoners in US custody. Their efforts were spurned in the Senate, where the provision, advanced by Senator John McCain, passed with 90 votes.

Cheney's desire to give CIA jailers and interrogators special status raises the question of whether Americans are torturing or otherwise coercing detainees at the "black site" prisons described Wednesday in The Washington Post. According to officials quoted by the Post, some 30 prisoners suspected of being high-level Al Qaeda members are "kept in dark, sometimes underground cells, they have no recognized legal rights, and no one outside the CIA is allowed to talk with or even see them, or to otherwise verify their well-being."

In America, even those accused of the most heinous murders have a right to see a lawyer and to assert their innocence. But this emblem of democracy is being trampled before the world. And the Bush administration seems deaf to the growing complaints from our allies and our own citizens. Cheney in particular was pushing for the CIA exemption only days before felony charges were filed against his top aide, Lewis Libby. And in replacing Libby, Cheney has shown no sign of reform. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, meanwhile, has barred UN human rights inspectors from the detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, insisting that the only outside inspectors will be those from the International Red Cross, which makes no public reports. And even the Red Cross has not gone to the CIA sites.

The level of secrecy and coverup in this administration is astounding, and it has spread to Capitol Hill. With Republicans senators stalling an investigation into the misinformation that was disseminated prior to the invasion of Iraq, Democrats lit a fire this week, invoking a rarely used rule to force the Senate to go into a closed session. Ironically, it took a secret session to open up the process a bit.

And where is the president in all this? Where is George W. Bush, who campaigned in 2000 on a promise to restore integrity to Washington and to give the nation a government it could be proud of?

The Post story revealed the existence of the CIA's black sites. But in this administration, far too many remain.