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Protesting Too Much On 'Gulag'

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"GULAG." What a storm a single word can make. By comparing America's treatment of prisoners to the vast prison system of the former Soviet Union, the respected watchdog of human rights, Amnesty International, set our national leaders to howling at the injustice of it all.

"Absurd," said the president of the United States. "Reprehensible," said the secretary of defense. And the vice president said he was "offended."

In its 308-page human rights report, Amnesty charged that America's internment camp at Guantanamo Bay was the "gulag of our times," and the Bush administration was quick to wrap itself in red, white, and blue self-righteousness. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said it was an insult to the US military that had done so much to bring people liberty. President Bush dismissed the entire report as a work written by "people who hate America."

There are plenty of people in this world who hate America -- considerably more since Bush took office -- but Amnesty International is not among them. Its research is thorough, and its findings considered. It often reflects what the United States says it wants for the world. "If our reports are so 'absurd,' " asked Amnesty's William Schultz in a letter to The New York Times, "why did the administration repeatedly cite our findings about Saddam Hussein before the Iraq war? Why does it welcome our criticism of Cuba, China, and North Korea? And why does it cite our research in its own annual human rights report?"

What could be the basis for Amnesty's indictment? The Amnesty report says: "The US government has gone to great lengths to restrict the application of the Geneva Conventions and to 're-define' torture. It has sought to justify the use of coercive interrogation techniques and the practice of holding 'ghost detainees,' people in unacknowledged incommunicado detention, and the 'rendering' or handing over of prisoners to third countries known to practice torture."

The Guantanamo-gulag connection was made in the context of "the practice of arbitrary and indefinite detention in violation of international law. Trials by military commissions have made a mockery of justice and due process," the report says. Unfortunately, all of the above has been well documented, and not just by Amnesty International.

The word gulag is a Russian acronym for the "corrective labor camps" that dotted the Soviet Union like islands in an archipelago, as Alexander Solzhenitsyn so memorably put it. They were not so much the creature of the Red Army as the abomination of its political leaders. Likewise the decision to abandon world conventions on torture and detention at Guantanamo and elsewhere was not something the US military is responsible for. It is the abomination of its civilian leadership.

"No amount of spin," Shultz wrote, "can erase the myriad human rights abuses committed by the United States in the 'war on terror.' The United States cannot simultaneously claim that it 'promotes freedom around the world' while detaining tens of thousands without charge or trial."

And there you have it. The United States is engaged in a long-term effort to persuade an alienated Muslim world that the United States stands for justice. By allowing systematic torture and indefinite detention to sully our system, we have handed our enemies the most perfect

recruiting tool we could devise, for it exposes all our high ideals about democracy to the charges of hypocrisy.

Rather than heap contempt on Amnesty International, the Bush administration should take the organization's advice and convene an independent investigation on how the circumvention of international standards of detention and torture came about. The administration should seek to remove all the similarities between what a prisoner in Guantanamo might endure and the experience of a Russian prisoner of yore rather than attempt to change the subject because of a single word. Accountability starts at the top, not by the conviction of a few low-level underlings. Accountability should start with the resignation of Donald Rumsfeld, as he reportedly contemplated after the scandals of Abu Ghraib.

Was the use of the word "gulag" over the top? Yes, and it may have been counterproductive in that it allowed the Bush administration to avoid the real issue. But as Ralph Waldo Emerson once said: "Sometimes a scream is better than a thesis."