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Selective outrage

Newsweek error a blip in torture story

Editorial
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Publication by Newsweek of an anonymous allegation that interrogators at America's Guantanamo Bay detention facility in Cuba desecrated a Quran has been blamed for riots in which 17 died and touched off a furor that rages through the Arab world and political circles at home. It has prompted yet another painful ethical assessment by the mainstream media and given conservatives more ammunition with which to attack coverage that might be critical of the Bush administration.

What it has not done, thus far, is produce a balanced discussion about America's shameful treatment of detainees accused of terrorist activity, widely reported as being in blatant violation of the Geneva Accords on treatment of prisoners of war.

Newsweek deserves criticism for printing a report on the alleged flushing of a Quran, Muslims' holy book equivalent to the Christian Bible, down a toilet based on a report from a single anonymous source who later recanted the information. It appeared that the magazine rushed to print without verification by a second, independent source, the bare minimum standard for stories based on information from unnamed sources. This error virtually duplicated the mistake CBS made in the George W. Bush National Guard document scandal last fall that ultimately led to the downfall of veteran anchorman Dan Rather.

Newsweek Editor Mark Whitaker retracted the story and apologized for the error. But the damage was done. The story was blamed for widespread rioting in Afghanistan and Pakistan that left at least 17 dead and many more injured. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called the unverified story "appalling," and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld noted, "People lost their lives. People are dead. People need to be very careful about what they say, just as they need to be careful about what they do."

Real issue obscured

Very true. Responsible journalists deplore such carelessness, all too common in today's 24-hour news cycle. That a respected news magazine allowed its standards to drop to this level is a reflection of the tabloid mentality that has spread to mainstream media. Indeed, the story has sparked a reassessment of policies on the use of anonymous sources in newsrooms across the country. (See related column and text of The Herald's policy on the opposite page.)

But the bashing of Newsweek for its carelessness should not obscure the real issue here: U.S. treatment of Arab detainees. Recall that this issue first emerged more than a year ago with publication of shocking pictures of physical and psychological abuse of detainees at Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison. It has been followed by numerous reports from International Red Cross inspectors, from released detainees and from former guards of widespread abuse at both Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. Those reports have included several allegations of desecration of the Quran. They have also included other charges of mocking detainees' religious taboos, such as a female guard smearing what was purported to be menstrual blood on a detainee's face, of exposing others to nudity and simulated sex acts and forcing some to eat pork.

A former Army translator at Guantanamo, Sgt. Erik Saar, has written a book that includes allegations that brutality prompted numerous suicide attempts by detainees. In a report on that

book in its May 9 edition, Time magazine quoted the IRC as saying there had been 32 suicide attempts, and a Red Cross official as saying the actual number was far higher.

One wonders at the timing of the outrage. Why was there no reaction when the first reports of Quran desecration surfaced in March 2004?

Practice what you preach

One wonders also at the selectivity of Muslim outrage. (See Thomas Friedman column below.) A 13-word report on desecration of their holy book should not overshadow the enormity of the slaughter of Muslims by Muslims in Iraq. In May alone, some 577 Iraqis, mostly civilian Shiites and Kurds, have been blown up by car bombs and suicide bombers in markets, mosques and funeral processions. Americans hear no word of condemnation in Arab countries for this mass murder of Muslims.

Newsweek deserved the criticism by Rice, Rumsfeld and other administration brass, including Bush's official spokesman, Scott McClellan. But would that the administration respected the same standards it urges on the news media. For an administration that is the most secretive and the least accountable in modern history, lectures about accuracy and reliance on anonymous sources are hypocritical. Indeed, off-the-record briefings are a staple of White House coverage. Were Bush team members more open about the administration's policies, including foul-ups, reporters wouldn't have to rely upon anonymous sources.

As for accountability, the administration has yet to accept any for the documented torture of Arab detainees that has done grave harm to America's image all over the world. Not one higher-up official has been disciplined for the torture; indeed, several have been promoted. A handful of low-ranking soldiers has been scapegoated for the abuses. And the administration continues to allow interrogation practices that violate the spirit of the Geneva Accords.

The press realizes its credibility is at stake and will re-examine its conscience and its practices in the wake of Newsweek's error to rebuild the public's trust. The Bush administration would be well-advised to make a similar pledge. Voters, like readers, can see through sanctimonious preaching.