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Guantanamo: Not a 'Gulag'; Certainly a Stain

Daniel Schorr (Op-Ed)
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The controversy over abuses at the Guantanamo detention camp has reached that uneasy bipartisan stage where Senate Judiciary Committee chairman Arlen Specter plans hearings this month, and Sen. Joseph Biden, ranking Democrat on the Foreign Relations Committee, demands an independent inquiry and the closing of the camp.

Amnesty International undoubtedly committed a tactical error in speaking of "the gulag of our time," a reference to Stalin's murderous system of forced labor camps. That charge was "reprehensible," said Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, without dwelling on details of mistreatment in the 308-page report, which concluded that the US was "one of the biggest disappointments in the human rights arena." William Schultz, director of Amnesty International USA, later acknowledged that the "gulag" reference was not meant as a literal analogy.

As some of about 540 detainees at Guantanamo are gradually released, we're likely to hear more stories of desecration of the Koran and ill treatment by interrogators. The Army has so far acknowledged only five cases of Koran abuse.

The New York Times detailed the story of one 19-year-old Muslim from Germany, who was picked up in Pakistan and held as a terror suspect, in Afghanistan and at Guantanamo, where he's been for three years, although no evidence against him was ever found. There will undoubtedly be more such stories.

The wave of anger, sometimes violent, that coursed through the Muslim world after one partly inaccurate item about Koran desecration appeared in Newsweek, is an indication of what can be expected if there are open Senate hearings.

Senator Biden said that Guantanamo has become "the greatest propaganda tool that exists for recruiting of terrorists around the world." Sen. Robert Byrd has proposed deleting funds for Guantanamo from the defense budget.

What can be called a "close Guantanamo" lobby has begun to form in the press. It is led by former President Jimmy Carter, who says that the facility is "a terrible embarrassment" to America's prestige. New York Times columnist Tom Friedman has called for shutting down the facility, calling Guantanamo "a national shame" and "a gift to America's enemies." CBS's Bob Schieffer wondered if the greatest danger is the impact Guantanamo is having on us. Talking of torture, he asked, "Do we want our children to believe this is how we are?"

By present appearances Guantanamo is likely to take a shameful place in American history alongside the internment of Japanese-Americans in World War II.