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Every Day Guantanamo Still Exists

THE WAR ON TERROR IS DOOMED AND OUR MORAL CASE IS LOST

STEPHEN GLOVER (op-ed)

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CAN there be anyone apart from the Bush administration and its most bullet-headed supporters who does not understand that the so-called war on terror has gone horribly, and perhaps irreversibly, wrong?

Yesterday, five United Nations special envoys published a report which says that the United States has been violating a host of human rights, including a ban on torture, arbitrary detention and a right to a fair trial, at its naval base at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba.

President George W. Bush's blinkered defenders will try to undermine the report by rubbishing the United Nations as an institution while disregarding what the report says. Certainly the UN has many imperfections, but you can't argue with the chapter and verse of placing detainees in solitary confinement, subjecting them to severe temperatures and threatening them with dogs.

Oh, but the Bush people do. They sneer at the report on the basis that its authors did not visit Guantanamo Bay. And why might that be? Because the U.S. authorities would not allow them to conduct private interviews with any of the 500-odd prisoners there, many of whom have been held without trial for four years. In effect, the Bush administration criticises the report for limitations which it imposed upon it.

This much is certain -- that hundreds of detainees are being held in Guantanamo Bay without being given the opportunity to try to establish their innocence, and that the Bush administration has introduced measures to permit new forms of interrogation which the rest of the world would say amount to torture.

How can it be that the elected government of the great democracy that is the United States should have departed so far from the civilised values that characterised previous administrations? They just don't get it, do they? Among friendly governments -- governments which rushed to America's side after the abomination of the attack on the World Trade Centre -- there is virtually no one who does not hang his head in shame.

Guantanamo is wrong. Whatever the provocation, however great the guilt of some or many of its detainees, there is no conceivable justification for America behaving as she has. Despite everything -- despite Bush and the ghastly Rumsfeld and the trigger-happy Cheney, whose friends are not even safe -- despite all their evident awfulness, I still cannot understand how America could have stooped so low.

But Guantanamo is not only wrong, it is also fantastically stupid. For if America's friends hang their heads in shame, its enemies are overjoyed that the country which they unfairly and, as it seemed, ludicrously designated as the Great Satan should be acting the part accorded to it. Throughout the Muslim world, the seething mobs seize on the injustice of Guantanamo, and the hearts of a new generation of terrorists will be inspired with hate.

And there is more evidence -- the evidence of Abu Ghraib. New photographs released by an Australian television station show American soldiers degrading Iraqi prisoners in the infamous prison near Baghdad. Some of the pictures are too horrible to be published. They suggest some moral perversion on the part of the tormentors. Given the state-sponsored (though admittedly

much milder) torture of Guantanamo Bay, is it not likely that these deranged American soldiers believed that, at the very least, they had the tacit support of the U.S. authorities?

Even the Bush administration could grasp that these pictures, which apparently date from 2003, would inflame people in Iraq and throughout the Muslim world, and so tried to suppress them. Its spokesman apologised, but even as he did so he blamed those who had released them, almost as though these crimes were committed by an Australian television channel rather than the U.S. Army. Thank God such abuses cannot be covered up. If the U.S. army has any more shameful secrets, it would be wise for it to own up now.

Following the recent publication of pictures of British soldiers maltreating Iraqis, albeit in an apparently less brutal way, our own Government is hardly in a position to lecture the Americans. But then we are in with the Bush administration up to our ears. The Arab world no longer distinguishes between us. This may be Tony Blair's biggest, and most damaging, legacy.

Our government, like the American one, lied to its people about the dangers of so-called weapons of mass destruction. Our government, like the American one, failed to develop any proper plans for the ordered administration of Iraq after the invasion, though as a former colonial power in the region Britain should have been alive to the probable difficulties. Our soldiers, like their U.S. counterparts, have been involved in the degradation of Iraqis, though seemingly on a much smaller scale.

Unfortunately, the whole world, including even our European allies, sees the 'war against terror' and the debacle of Iraq as a joint U.S.-British operation. In their ineptitude, their lies and their abuses, the two countries are lumped together, and judged together. Which is why, possibly after New York, London may be the number one target on Osama Bin Laden's hate list.

But there is one sphere of activity in which the British should not be judged with the Americans: Guantanamo Bay. Here, the Americans have made the running. It is their disgrace. They decided to ignore international law and to flout decent behaviour to an extent that the British government would have found troublesome. The U.S. authorities even detained several British citizens without trial, occasioning a half-bleat of protest from Jack Straw, the Foreign Secretary.

Most people believe that Britain is no more than America's unquestioning junior partner, and Mr Blair is George W. Bush's pet poodle. Perhaps it is so. But can the increasingly stretched and isolated American giant accomplish everything it wants on its own? Even now, thousands of British troops are arriving in Afghanistan, where they will be exposed to grave risks. Southern Iraq could not be easily run by the U.S. alone and without British help.

In a sane world, this would give Mr Blair at least some small purchase. So why does he not use it? Why does he not tell President Bush that Guantanamo Bay is an affront to the civilised world? It should be dismantled brick by brick. Its detainees should be put on trial or returned to their own countries. As long as it continues to exist, the war against terror is doomed, and our moral case is lost.

Maybe President Bush would listen. Even if he did not, Tony Blair would have this consolation -- that for the first time since this tragic story began, for the first time since he surreptitiously promised Mr Bush British support in Iraq, he would be at one with truth and justice, and on the side of the angels. That might be a small legacy which we would not forget.