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Does the Right Remember Abu Ghraib?

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During the past eight months there have been many news cycles, many front-page stories, many events. There have been elections. There have been hurricanes and tidal waves. Nevertheless, in the grand scheme of things, eight months is not a very long time. In most of the world, something that happened eight months ago is considered "recent." In Washington, however, it seems that eight months ago is considered "ancient." How else to explain the nomination of Alberto Gonzales to the post of attorney general of the United States?

Or, more to the point: How else to explain the widespread assumption that Gonzales -- who commissioned the "torture memo" of August 2002, following a meeting in his office -- will be decisively confirmed? After all, eight months ago, much of the country -- and much of the Republican Party -- was gripped by horror and embarrassment after the publication of photographs from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Those photographs haven't gone away: As I write this, I need only click on my computer's Internet Explorer icon and there is Lynndie England, grinning and giving a thumbs-up behind a pile of naked men.

If the pictures haven't gone away, the value system that led to Abu Ghraib hasn't gone away either. Last month -- really recently -- lawsuits filed by American human rights groups forced the government to release thousands of pages of documents showing that the abuse of prisoners at Guantanamo Naval Base long preceded the Abu Ghraib photographs, and that abuse has continued since then too. U.S. soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan have, according to the administration's own records and my colleagues' reporting, used beatings, suffocation, sleep deprivation, electric shocks and dogs during interrogations. They probably still do.

Although many people bear some responsibility for these abuses, Alberto Gonzales, along with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, is among those who bear the most responsibility. It was Gonzales who led the administration's internal discussion of what qualified as torture. It was Gonzales who advised the president that the Geneva Conventions did not apply to people captured in Afghanistan. It was Gonzales who helped craft some of the administration's worst domestic decisions, including the indefinite detention, without access to lawyers, of U.S. citizens Jose Padilla and Yaser Esam Hamdi.

By nominating Gonzales to his Cabinet, the president has demonstrated not only that he is undisturbed by these aberrations, but that he still doesn't understand the nature of the international conflict which he says he is fighting. Like communism, radical Islam is an ideology that people will die for. To fight it, the United States needs not just to show off its fancy weapons systems but also to prove to the Islamic world that democratic values, in some moderate Islamic form, will give them better lives. The Cold War ended because Eastern Europeans were clamoring to join the West; the war on terrorism will be over when moderate Muslims abandon the radicals and join us. They will not do so if our system promotes people who support legal arguments for human rights abuse.

The president's opponents -- Democrats, the ACLU, People for the American Way -- are lining up to oppose Gonzales. But there are Republicans who ought to understand the deeper issues at stake as well. I am thinking of Sen. Sam Brownback of Kansas, who was the moving force behind the recent passage of the North Korean Human Rights Act. I am also thinking of Sen. Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, who has been an eloquent spokesman on behalf of the victims of religious persecution around the world. Other influential critics of international human rights

abuses include Sen. Richard Lugar of Indiana, whose presence in Kiev last month had an enormous, uplifting impact on Ukrainian human rights demonstrators; Sen. John McCain of Arizona, who has given his time to promote human rights even in obscure, unfashionable places such as Kazakhstan and Belarus; Sen. Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, who has called for linking of trade agreements to human rights; and Sen. Jon Kyl of Arizona, a member of the Judiciary Committee (which will pose questions to Gonzales) and a politician who can speak knowledgeably about human rights issues in Russia, China and the Middle East.

And those are only a few senators. In fact, anyone who has ever wanted the United States to play a role in promoting and supporting democracy and human rights around the world -- and this includes a wide swath of the conservative movement -- ought to oppose the appointment of Alberto Gonzales, if only on the grounds that he is associated with bad legal advice that has damaged our ability to do so. Just because the president can't remember how embarrassed we all were eight months ago doesn't mean the rest of Washington, and especially the rest of the president's party, need be gripped by amnesia as well.