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Visiting Rumsfeld With Flowers in Hand

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It would appear that our defense minister, José Bono, in his visit to the United States, has gone out of his way to offer an example of the aphorism, "the weakling's joy is to give something to the strongest," included in Elias Canetti's book *The Human Province*.

As we read the articles from journalists who accompanied the minister, it might be said that he arrived at the Pentagon with flowers for US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. It was as if (in spite of the wave of secularism that Spanish bishops say is washing over Spain) the arrival of May had brought back memories of our school days, when little children brought flowers to the Virgin Mary.

But it so happens that we are now more or less grown up, and Rumsfeld can have no place on our list of saints - nor indeed does he have many admirers among the better politicians, congressional representatives, academics and defenders of human rights in the United States. In no way does the US defense secretary deserve our floral offerings, or any other kind of compliment.

Every day we hear of new atrocities, impossible to consider as isolated incidents. And these atrocities form part of a brutal system installed in Abu Ghraib, in Guantanamo and in at least nine other secret camps in different friendly and collaborating countries, where free rein is given to torture. This is why, according to *Financial Times*, an association as respectable as Human Rights First has filed a suit against Rumsfeld, and has compiled 300 investigations on the reports of abuses that have affected about 30,000 prisoners detained since the September 11 attacks.

For Senator Edward Kennedy these tortures are perhaps the greatest shame in the history of the United States, while the military commanders involved have been exonerated of all responsibility.

But, returning to the visit that Bono began on Monday in Washington, that day's edition of *EL PAÍS* announced this visit under the headline "The US plans to convert Rota into its principal base of operations in Europe." In the article, reporter Miguel González informs reported that the Pentagon wishes to concentrate a number of special forces units directed against Al Qa'ida - that are presently located in Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy and Spain - at the US base in Rota, near Cádiz.

This pretension, it would seem, had already been revealed in remarks made by General James Jones, commander-in-chief of the US forces in Europe, to the US military newspaper *Stars & Stripes*, where Jones revealed conversations with several countries to consolidate an "advance post" for special operations "south of the Alps," to confront "emerging threats in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and much of Africa."

González also mentioned that for years the United States has maintained in Rota a 30-man Navy SEAL team. This contingent had first been authorized in the reform of the bilateral defense agreement in 2002.

Next we are told that the two places that are competing for the honor of housing special operations are the base at Rota and the US base in Sigonella, Sicily. Some of us will no doubt understand that this is a wink in our direction, so that we will look alive and offer all possible facilities that may help us succeed in our ambition to grab this once-in-a-lifetime chance.

A series of questions thus seem to appear. Since when is the agreement with the United States the business of the Defense Ministry and not the Foreign Ministry? In exchange for what has the Defense Ministry announced that it is going to equip its new submarines with a US combat system? Is Rumsfeld really in a position to demand that Spain lift the restrictions concerning Iraq and Afghanistan?

Why is it that the United States, while never lifting a finger to put an end to the British colonial presence in Gibraltar, continues to send units of its fleet there? When will it be made generally known that, by authorizing the use of the bases with additional facilities, we are giving more than we receive, as was recently pointed out by Spanish General Félix Sanz? What has become of that remark made just before the military parade on October 12 last year, that the Spanish people are not in the habit of kneeling?