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Gulag? No. Unnecessary Geopolitical Pain? You Bet.

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The Bush administration and Defense Department brass, still juicing on the steroids of war, appear determined to bull their way past the Guantanamo mess. They were aided in this quest, oddly, by Amnesty International's over-the-top use of "gulag" to describe the military prison camps where the United States is detaining hundreds of people.

Amnesty International's poor choice of words allowed President Bush to label the allegation "absurd" and Vice President Dick Cheney to pronounce himself "offended." "Reprehensible," rumbled Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, chimed in with "absolutely irresponsible."

Amnesty International's overheated rhetoric might have been good for the organization's fund raising in, say, the silkier salons of Stockholm and the pinker portions of Paris, but it gave Bush & Co. the opportunity to skate around the substantive issue of prisoner abuse.

"We're getting hung up on a word," as Sen. Joe Biden of Delaware, ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said Sunday on ABC News' This Week.

It's a word that is irrelevant — probably even unknown — to many Muslims across the globe.

And the faulty reference to "gulag" did not get this ball rolling.

As Michael Posner, executive director of Human Rights First, wrote at the weekend: "For many people around the world ... [Guantanamo] has become one of the most prominent negative symbols of America's departure from the rule of law" since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

The Amnesty International report came after reports of Quran abuse, now confirmed by the Pentagon. It was after the initial outrage over detainee abuse at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad. It was after the snapshot of Saddam Hussein in his skivvies hit the front page of London's Sun.

And, keep in mind, this is before the next batch of happy snaps from Abu Ghraib hits the fan. They're coming up shortly after a federal judge thwacked the Pentagon's knuckles. The issue of abuse is not a one-off.

"This has become the greatest propaganda tool that exists for recruiting of terrorists around the world," Biden said in the ABC interview, reflecting on the continued conning of no-hope youths from the Mideast to blow themselves up.

For this potent reason, as well as that prisoner abuse is not something the United States should be doing, the legitimate issue of what can fairly be described as less-than-perfect detainee handling should be pressed.

And it will be, at a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing planned for next week, when corrective measures, addressing several angles of the issue, will be discussed. At least two merit serious consideration.

First up should be Biden's proposal to establish an independent commission, which would include military representatives, to review handling of detainees. As Biden has pointed out, the embarrassment is unnecessary. Continued military-only reviews are not getting the job done.

An interesting filip is the bill's requirement that the comptroller general report to Congress on what kind of bang taxpayers are getting for all of the bucks that are being directed at the fight against terrorism.

Another proposal, imperfect but preferable to the current legal muddle, is that of Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., chairman of the Judiciary Committee, to consolidate detainees' habeas corpus hearings in secret courts created by the Federal Intelligence Security Act. It's worth trying if there can be any hope that the procedure would speed considering detainees' legal rights.

At a Judiciary Committee hearing in April, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales said the measure "could certainly be useful," but FBI Director Robert Mueller did not express a view.

To put just the Quran abuse in perspective, let's turn to an example cited in mid-May by the Christian Science Monitor as it attempted to explain the reaction to reports of abuse of the Islamic holy book by U.S. personnel at Guantanamo. In a domestic dispute in Pakistan, the Monitor reported, a wife held up a Quran to protect herself. When the husband shoved, the Quran fell to the floor.

A local mullah filed blasphemy charges against the man. As the man went about his town, the mullah spotted him and broadcast his whereabouts on mosque loudspeakers. Being pursued by more than 400 villagers, the man climbed a tree, where he was shot dead.

Idiotic lawlessness in Western terms? Of course.

But perfectly illustrative of many of the hearts and minds that Bush is determined to win over and democratize? You bet.

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