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'The Worst of the Worst'?

At this point, who exactly are we holding at Guantanamo?

Editorial

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Military authorities in charge of our POW camp at Guantanamo Bay argue that concerns about the civil rights of prisoners -- considered "a given" by most Americans -- are misplaced when discussing these facilities, because the men held there are not criminal defendants, but enemy combatants.

They have a point. The rules of war allow far harsher treatment than mere interrogations in between three square meals a day for "irregulars" found out of uniform, planting bombs or firing at our troops.

But that argument holds true only if the American populace can be assured it's truly "the worst of the worst" -- terrorist murderers and their direct enablers and accomplices -- who are thus locked up without time limit or the benefit of counsel.

This week's account in Newsday of Badr Zaman Badr and Abdurrahim Muslim Dost, two Afghan brothers just released from Guantanamo after three years of incarceration, does little to reinforce such assurances.

Like millions of Afghans, the brothers fled to Pakistan during the Soviet occupation of their country in the 1980s and joined one of the many anti-Soviet factions. Their small group was called Jamiat-i-Dawatul Quran wa Sunna, and Dost became editor of its magazine. Even then, "we were not fighters," said Badr. "We took part in the war only as writers."

After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the men split with Jamiat, partly over its promotion of the extremist Wahhabi sect of Islam. In November 2001, as U.S. forces attacked Afghanistan, the mullah's brother, Roh Ullah, "called us and said if we didn't stop criticizing the party he would have us put in jail," said Badr. Ten days later, men from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate showed up and did just that.

In the midnight chill of Feb. 9, 2002, ISI officers led Badr and Dost, blindfolded and handcuffed, onto the tarmac of Peshawar International Airport, where they were hooded, shackled, and flown to U.S. prisons.

For months, American interrogators grilled the brothers over a satirical article Dost had written in 1998, when the Clinton administration offered a \$5 million reward for Osama bin Laden. Dost suggested that the Afghans put up 5 million Afghans -- equivalent to \$113 -- for the arrest of President Clinton.

"It was a lampoon ... of the poor Afghan economy" under the Taliban, Badr recalled.

Once one group of interrogators seemed convinced, a new batch arrived and started all over again. It took the brothers three years to convince the Americans that they posed no threat to Bill Clinton or the United States.

Of course our military doesn't want to release someone with a good cover story, only to find him flying a plane into one of our skyscrapers next year.

But what useful intelligence can really be gleaned from someone arrested three years ago?

Political satirists Badr Zaman Badr and Abdurrahim Muslim Dost: "the worst of the worst"?