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Locking door on justice

Editorial
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Leaders of the nation that would impose democracy on Iraq at the point of a gun are plotting ways to deny fundamental human rights to detainees suspected of terrorism.

A story in The Washington Post makes the astounding revelation that officials at the White House, State Department, Department of Defense and the CIA are looking for ways to keep terrorism suspects in custody indefinitely without the inconvenience of a trial, let alone a conviction.

One bright idea, said to have originated in the State Department, is to put up U.S.-built prisons in the suspects' home countries. Those countries -- some with lousy human rights records themselves -- would operate the new prisons, which would be "monitored" by the State Department.

This would be only a slight improvement over the current CIA practice of stashing suspects in other countries willing to hold them indefinitely and make them available for interrogation by U.S. agents.

The Defense Department, meanwhile, is expected to ask Congress for funding to build a 200-bed prison dubbed Camp 6 to hold some of those currently detained at Guantanamo Bay, detainees who would probably never go through a military tribunal because there is not enough evidence to convict them.

The need to punish those responsible for the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks is imperative, as is the need to guard against future attacks. But to use those needs as an excuse to hold suspects indefinitely, in secret, without evidence and without trial is to hand the terrorists of 9/11 an undeserved victory and to hand democracy an unwarranted defeat.