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## **Guantanamo/It's Hurting the U.S. Cause**

Editorial  
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As more than 500 prisoners languish indefinitely at Guantanamo Bay and new accounts of torture find their way to the press, the Bush administration has found itself increasingly on the defensive - - to the extent of parsing why the prison should not be called a "gulag" and explaining that the prisoners are "bad people ... terrorists for the most part."

On the defensive is exactly where the administration belongs, because no one has succeeded in justifying the flouting of core U.S. values, laws and the Constitution -- in the name of protecting them.

The Senate Judiciary Committee is planning a hearing on Wednesday. It should first explore the facts, and then evaluate the Guantanamo issue in terms of both principles and pragmatism. In other words, is what we're doing in Guantanamo right -- and is it working?

Absent much better reasoning than anyone has given yet, the answers will be no and no.

Let's take principles first. High on the list of American values is the rule of law. Indeed, when leaders talk of freedom, that's what they're generally referring to. Yet at Guantanamo Bay, prisoners are held in secret, without being charged and without benefit of trial. Occurrences of torture have been documented, including in a secret interrogation log recently obtained by Time magazine.

Whether they have been rare or routine is a matter for investigation. To imply their absence, a member of Congress made fun of mistreatment allegations by reading a Guantanamo menu that included mushrooms and rice pilaf. But citizens, both here and abroad, can see through such pathetic diversionary rhetoric: The presence of balanced meals doesn't prove the absence of torture.

Vice President Dick Cheney seemed to go further than such scoffing when he emphasized in an interview that "the important thing here to understand is that the people that are at Guantanamo are bad people. I mean, these are terrorists for the most part." The implication is that the nature of the suspects takes America off the hook for the way it treats them. But does it?

We'd submit that America is better than that. But if it weren't -- if the war on terrorism means that America has to fight the way its enemies fight, using any and all efficient tools despite our values -- then how are we doing on the efficiency front?

Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., worried on CNN Sunday that the United States is "losing the image war around the world," in part because of Guantanamo. "It's identifiable with, for right or wrong, a part of America that people in the world believe is a power, an empire that pushes people around," he said.

In other words, Hagel recognizes that what we're doing at Guantanamo is counterproductive. Cheney can try to explain that bad people deserve to be held without trial and interrogated with whatever means are being used, and some may accept that reasoning. But under what reasoning would the United States government continue to justify behavior that is hurting the image of the nation worldwide and, presumably, is serving as a recruitment tool for new terrorists?

The view from abroad was well captured by Philip Stephens in the Financial Times of London: "Guantanamo, and secret facilities elsewhere, were established to put suspects beyond the reach of the U.S. constitution. The dispatch (known as rendition) of alleged terrorists to regimes practiced in torture and the clandestine activities of the CIA have the same purpose. In the eyes of much of the rest of the world the effect has been to rob the U.S. of the moral high ground, to demean its democracy and to undermine its mission of spreading freedom.

"I have heard American friends say such draconian measures are proportionate to the threat. But I am not sure they appreciate how badly America's standing and influence has been tarnished."

It's time to appreciate it. America has damaged both its standing and its effectiveness in the war on terror. There is only one remedy: Acknowledge that we're better than that, and demonstrate it.