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Just Shut It Down

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Shut it down. Just shut it down.

I am talking about the war-on-terrorism P.O.W. camp at Guantánamo Bay. Just shut it down and then plow it under. It has become worse than an embarrassment. I am convinced that more Americans are dying and will die if we keep the Gitmo prison open than if we shut it down. So, please, Mr. President, just shut it down.

If you want to appreciate how corrosive Guantánamo has become for America's standing abroad, don't read the Arab press. Don't read the Pakistani press. Don't read the Afghan press. Hop over here to London or go online and just read the British press! See what our closest allies are saying about Gitmo. And when you get done with that, read the Australian press and the Canadian press and the German press.

It is all a variation on the theme of a May 8 article in The Observer of London that begins, "An American soldier has revealed shocking new details of abuse and sexual torture of prisoners at Guantánamo Bay in the first high-profile whistle-blowing account to emerge from inside the top-secret base." Google the words "Guantánamo Bay and Australia" and what comes up is an Australian ABC radio report that begins: "New claims have emerged that prisoners at Guantánamo Bay are being tortured by their American captors, and the claims say that Australians David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib are among the victims."

Just another day of the world talking about Guantánamo Bay.

Why care? It's not because I am queasy about the war on terrorism. It is because I want to win the war on terrorism. And it is now obvious from reports in my own paper and others that the abuse at Guantánamo and within the whole U.S. military prison system dealing with terrorism is out of control. Tell me, how is it that over 100 detainees have died in U.S. custody so far? Heart attacks? This is not just deeply immoral, it is strategically dangerous.

I can explain it best by analogy. For several years now I have argued that Israel needed to get out of the West Bank and Gaza, and behind a wall, as fast as possible. Not because the Palestinians are right and Israel wrong. It's because Israel today is surrounded by three large trends. The first is a huge population explosion happening all across the Arab world. The second is an explosion of the worst interpersonal violence between Israelis and Palestinians in the history of the conflict, which has only recently been defused by a cease-fire. And the third is an explosion of Arabic language multimedia outlets - from the Internet to Al Jazeera.

What was happening around Israel at the height of the intifada was that the Arab multimedia explosion was taking the images of that intifada explosion and feeding them to the Arab population explosion, melding in the minds of a new generation of Arabs and Muslims that their enemies were J.I.A. - "Jews, Israel and America." That is an enormously toxic trend, and I hope Israel's withdrawal from Gaza will help deprive it of oxygen.

I believe the stories emerging from Guantánamo are having a similar toxic effect on us - inflaming sentiments against the U.S. all over the world and providing recruitment energy on the Internet for those who would do us ill.

Husain Haqqani, a thoughtful Pakistani scholar now teaching at Boston University, remarked to me: "When people like myself say American values must be emulated and America is a bastion of freedom, we get Guantánamo Bay thrown in our faces. When we talk about the America of Jefferson and Hamilton, people back home say to us: 'That is not the America we are dealing with. We are dealing with the America of imprisonment without trial.' "

Guantánamo Bay is becoming the anti-Statue of Liberty. If we have a case to be made against any of the 500 or so inmates still in Guantánamo, then it is high time we put them on trial, convict as many possible (which will not be easy because of bungled interrogations) and then simply let the rest go home or to a third country. Sure, a few may come back to haunt us. But at least they won't be able to take advantage of Guantánamo as an engine of recruitment to enlist thousands more. I would rather have a few more bad guys roaming the world than a whole new generation.

"This is not about being for or against the war," said Michael Posner, the executive director of Human Rights First, which is closely following this issue. "It is about doing it right. If we are going to transform the Middle East, we have to be law-abiding and uphold the values we want them to embrace - otherwise it is not going to work."