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## **One nation, under law**

Editorial  
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'WE ARE a nation of laws,' as President Bush put it in his news conference Monday. Sadly, in the case of the men held in military holding tanks at Guantanamo Bay, and in Iraq and Afghanistan, the administration continues to interpret U.S. law for its own ends.

Six months after the Supreme Court ruled that Guantanamo prisoners can challenge their endless internment, the Department of Defense has gotten around to informing them of that fact.

The three-paragraph letter offers the address of the District of Columbia courthouse for queries and suggests prisoners contact their families for help - a six-month process, because each letter has to travel a circuitous route of censorship.

The internee could ask for a public lawyer, and one would be provided in days. But the letter doesn't mention that, and it turns out not many of the 550 or so prisoners locked up at Guantanamo are expert in U.S. law.

Justice Department lawyers continue to argue in the courts that these men have no rights that can be enforced by the U.S. court system, despite the Supreme Court's ruling last summer that they do.

Justice lawyers continue to argue that the United States can pick up anyone, anywhere, whom it suspects of aiding terrorists and hold him or her for however long it wages war.

Meanwhile, the continuing drip-drop of revelations of the worst sorts of behavior in the prisons at Guantanamo, Iraq and Afghanistan destroys the presumption of U.S. integrity. In Iraq, detainees were choked and lit cigarettes were dropped in their ears, according to government documents released as part of a lawsuit accusing the U.S. government of torture. In Guantanamo, a witness described prisoners "chained hand and foot in a fetal position to the floor, with no chair, food or water" for 18 to 24 hours or more. The internal reports started more than two years ago, went to top officials in Washington and continued after the public horror over the abuses at Abu Ghraib. They describe a pattern, not random, isolated events.

Denying basic rights and protections is not the hallmark of a nation of laws. If the president presumes to be leading such a nation, he must prove it in action as well as rhetoric.