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Detainee Treatment End this Sordid Tale

Editorial
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When a human-rights group reported in February that 98 detainees in Iraq and Afghanistan had died in U.S. custody in the war on terror - nearly half of them under still-secret conditions - the Bush administration all but shrugged.

A Pentagon spokesman said he couldn't provide (or couldn't be bothered to dig up?) a blow-by-blow account of the deaths. Such a bother. The paperwork was scattered around various Army command posts.

That lame response was similar to the White House's earlier reception of the damning United Nations report on the mistreatment of dozens of detainees at Guantanamo - treatment that U.N. investigators likened to torture.

Presidential spokesman Scott McClellan tried to dismiss the 40-page U.N. report's findings as a "rehash of old allegations."

Memo to Scott: Old is not a synonym for untrue. Or unimportant.

Anyone see a pattern here? Think back to when the U.S. Supreme Court sharply rebuked the White House on its refusal to grant even minimal rights to hundreds of detainees at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Bush officials then started shipping new detainees to an expanded detention center in Afghanistan - a sort of rights-free zone to which the high court's reach did not extend.

Whenever more distressing information arises about how the home of the free has mishandled detainees in Cuba, Iraq's notorious Abu Ghraib prison or elsewhere, the administration reaches for its all-purpose alibi, brandished recently by McClellan: "Remember, these are terrorists."

Actually, Scott, no. Many detainees were. But many more were not. The United States has quietly released hundreds upon hundreds of detainees, tacitly admitting that they were either innocents caught up in the chaos, or low-level grunts with no special information.

Yes, some released detainees later were found to have taken up arms against the United States in Afghanistan or Iraq. A few had been combatants all along, but how many others were driven to violent revenge by their experience in a lawless U.S. prison?

So, to sum up, the White House defends its violations of American values and universal human rights by claiming that people who aren't terrorists are - and that tactics that do amount to torture don't.

The current policies are not only wrong; they're counterproductive. First, when you torture people who know little, you goad them to concoct wild stories to stop the pain. Second, when these abuses are revealed - as they inevitably will be - they spread hate among America's enemies while shaming the nation to its friends.

Maybe the growing chorus of critics, both inside the government and outside, will bring detention policies back in sync with American values of justice and humanity.

When that happens, as it must, credit will be due those who spoke up - from rights groups, to individuals in the military and intelligence community. These people are not enemies of the state; they are the heroes and patriots in this sordid tale.

Count among them a former Army interrogator at Abu Ghraib, Anthony Lagouranis, who revealed last week in a New York Times op-ed he "never knew what laws applied" to detainees, because of fuzzy orders from on high. Result: Abu Ghraib-style abuses, which Lagouranis confirmed.

Another recent press account (read it at go.philly.com/ideas) detailed the heroic efforts of military lawyers such as former Navy general counsel Alberto J. Mora, who struggled to dissuade Bush officials from sanctioning abuse with their wink-wink policy on torture, which declared any abuse short of causing organ failure to be OK.

Speaking to a New Yorker writer, Mora summed up the challenge: "The debate here isn't only how to protect the country. It's how to protect our values."