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Campos: Rationalizing the Detestable

Paul Campos (op-ed)
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So many e-mails have arrived about my previous column, in which I described the plight of prisoners at the Guantanamo prison camp, that a follow-up column is in order.

First, in response to specific points made by various correspondents:

- Many of my correspondents interpret the fact that almost all these men deny having anything to do with al-Qaida in particular or terrorism in general as evidence of their guilt. The logic of this position is that guilty men often deny their guilt, so such denials are actually incriminatory. This also happens to be the position of the U.S. government. Indeed, the increasingly harsh coercive interrogation measures used against the prisoners are largely a product of the failure to get the vast majority of them to reveal useful information about al-Qaida or anything else.

This, needless to say, is the nightmare logic which as a historical matter was employed wholesale by totalitarian regimes. Since the possibility that the authorities had either made a mistake or had knowingly arrested an innocent person could not be considered, the prisoner's failure to confess simply meant he hadn't been tortured enough.

- A number of correspondents are outraged that I describe what many of the prisoners at Guantanamo have been subjected to as "torture." They point out that I have not visited Guantanamo and interviewed any of its inmates. This is true - but of course until very recently no one had been allowed to interview or even visit any of the inmates, including their lawyers.

The only exception was the International Red Cross, whose own rules restrict what it can reveal about such visits. Now that lawyers have been given limited access to the camp, the conditions in which the prisoners are being held are beginning to become public. (For a horrifying glimpse of what actually goes on at Guantanamo, see Thomas Wilner's article in the Feb. 26 edition of the Los Angeles Times. Wilner, a partner at one of New York's oldest and most distinguished law firms, represents six Kuwaiti prisoners).

- Dozens of correspondents were greatly upset by my observation that Guantanamo can be compared to a miniature gulag. This was taken as definitive proof of typical anti-American left-wing academic hysteria on my part. Yet British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, one of the top officials in Tony Blair's government, made precisely the same comparison two days later. Blair is President Bush's staunchest ally, yet he refused to criticize Straw's comments.

It is a sign of how indefensible Guantanamo is that its defenders have been reduced to arguing that comparing it to a miniature gulag is unfair. Apparently, the claim that a prison camp is not as bad as the gulag is considered an adequate justification for imprisoning men for years on end, under brutal conditions, often on the flimsiest of pretexts, with no prospect of ever being allowed to tell their story to a court or any other neutral judge of their guilt or innocence.

It should be unnecessary to point out that America is not a totalitarian regime, and that George W. Bush is not Stalin. Nor should anyone deny that the fact the gulag destroyed the lives of millions while Guantanamo is only destroying a few hundred men makes for a very great difference indeed. But it's also a very great mistake to think that Americans are fundamentally different people from Russians or Germans or Chinese.

God forbid that America should suffer another major terrorist attack any time soon. If it does, we may discover that, if we were to randomly put 100 of us in a room, we could find a Goebbels and a Streicher, or a Beria and a Vishinsky, easily enough. Could we also find a Sakharov, a Bonhoeffer or a Father Kolbe? Let us hope we are not put to that test.

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