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Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib: Congress Should Appoint Panel To Investigate Abuse Charges

Editorial
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In every nation's life, there are times when its people must decide whether to stand by their principles in spite of their fears. For the United States, this is such a time.

In the national panic that followed the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and the subsequent military campaign to topple the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Bush administration determined that it would imprison "enemy combatants" at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Many of these prisoners are held without charge, without communication with the outside world, without meaningful legal recourse.

This was a terrible mistake, especially for a nation that prides itself on standing as a beacon of human rights and the rule of law for the rest of the world.

The camp at Guantanamo Bay should be closed. In addition, President Bush and Congress should appoint an independent, bipartisan commission to investigate charges of torture and abuse at Gitmo, at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and elsewhere.

The reasons are both philosophical and practical.

The ostensible justification for the war in Iraq is to plant the seeds of democracy, human rights and the rule of the law in the Middle East. But the United States cannot win this war for the hearts and minds of people in the Islamic world when its own behavior appears to mock the values it claims to be fighting for.

Internal investigations by the Defense Department have laid the blame for abuses at Abu Ghraib and Gitmo at the feet of combat soldiers and their immediate superiors. But it is widely known that officials at the highest levels of the U.S. government, including the current attorney general, wrote memoranda or approved policies that pushed the bounds of legal interrogation to the brink of torture, if not beyond. Yet no one of high rank, either military or civilian, has been held to account.

Last year, the International Committee of the Red Cross charged that the United States had employed tactics at Gitmo that were "tantamount to torture." In recent days, officials of Amnesty International have compared the system of U.S. prisons to the Soviet gulag.

These may be absurd exaggerations, as the White House has said. But without an independent investigation outside the Defense Department, how can anyone, least of all the rest of the world, know?

The United States was justified in employing military force to bring down the Taliban and its al-Qaida allies in Afghanistan. But the questions about treatment of prisoners from that conflict and the war in Iraq will continue to undermine U.S. objectives in the Middle East until they are credibly resolved by a thorough, independent, transparent inquiry.

It's a matter of principle.