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World-Class Example

Editorial
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JIMMY CARTER'S call to dissolve the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, is a welcome addition to the chorus. President Bush should do more than consider the idea, as he said on Wednesday he was doing; he should shut the doors on this ill-advised experiment.

The American detention facility for foreigners picked up by U.S. troops in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere is not a "gulag," as an Amnesty International report unfortunately put it. It also is not a prisoner of war camp, according to the administration, which has not followed the standards of the Geneva Conventions in its treatment of those held there. It is a limbo, where more than 500 men sit more or less patiently as Americans debate what to call them, what to charge them with and what to do with them.

This limbo state is not defined in the U.S. Constitution, nor in treaties our government has signed with other powers. The legal processes followed at Guantanamo are distinctly un-American: What hearings and tribunals have occurred do not follow such bedrock U.S. civilian and military laws as those requiring that detainees know the charges against them; that they have access to legal help, Red Cross workers and consular officials; even that the jailers name the people they are jailing. The alleged mistreatment of prisoners - and some acknowledged mistreatment - also is un-American.

President Bush just this week repeated Americans' commitment to promoting democracy and human freedom across the world. The word "Guantanamo" now conjures the exact opposite. The prison must be closed.

At the start of armed conflict, it is understandable that warriors might take prisoners now and ask questions later. But the prisoners at Guantanamo have languished there for more than three years; it is far past time to have decided what to do with them. That the United States appears not to have done that gives no comfort to our allies and provides fodder to those who accuse the country of deal-breaking, hubris and hypocrisy. Who would - or should - believe and practice the ideals of a country that does not itself practice them?

If the Bush administration truly can't figure out what to do with these prisoners, many of whom the prison's jailers say are and have been no threat, it should start running them through the standard legal process, setting free those against whom charges are not brought.

Besides being the right thing to do, winnowing the jailed hundreds down to the dozens who appear to have some kind of terror-planning connection would show doubters that the American system of governance and justice works - slowly, perhaps, but surely.