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The Meaning of Gitmo

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For David Rose, no detail is too small in documenting an outrage so great as Gitmo. His short, dense book *GUANTÁNAMO: The War on Human Rights* (New Press, \$21.95), based largely on a visit to the American military prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, in October 2003, overlooks nothing in its indictment: even the telephone service in the guards' quarters -- up to 53 cents a minute for long distance! -- is worth a few lines of indignation.

There are more horrible crimes occurring at Gitmo, of course, and they are described here. But what truly offends Rose, a British journalist, is not so much the reality of Gitmo as the idea of it. Introducing chapters with epigraphs from the likes of Thucydides and George Orwell, he leaves little doubt about the magnitude of both America's failure and his own ambitions. "We need to see Gitmo not as a discrete phenomenon, but as a large component in a revolutionary system, in which the administration was mounting attacks on two pillars of both the Enlightenment and the Constitution," he writes.

Not even the Supreme Court would find this statement controversial (at least the part about the Constitution). Rose's reliance on newspaper accounts and anonymous sources means that his narrative often lacks immediacy, but his interviews with several former prisoners from Britain and his firsthand reporting from Cuba are worthwhile. Because they are so unexpected, his brief profiles of a few guards are sometimes more vivid than his accounts of prisoners' experiences; one guard describes how a prisoner "seemed to be trying to hook me up with his sister." ("I wasn't interested," he tells Rose.) The prisoners tell harrowing stories of physical cruelty and pointless humiliations. After one especially brutal strip search and beating, says one British prisoner, guards shaved his head, beard and eyebrows.

The disturbing stories in this book are sufficient to "shock the conscience," to borrow a phrase the Supreme Court has used in a similar context. But "Guantánamo" would have been even more effective had Rose let his facts simply speak for themselves.