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Guantanamo needs scrutiny

E. J. Dionne Jr.,
Washington Post
June 5, 2005

Washington -- WHY DO President Bush's critics make life so easy for him?

At his news conference early last week, Bush was asked about a report by Amnesty International in which Irene Khan, the group's secretary-general, referred to the American detention camp at Guantanamo in Cuba as "the gulag of our times."

Not once, but four times did Bush refer to the allegation as "absurd." And he tried to dismiss all questions about the U.S. government's treatment of the detainees as the product of anti-American propaganda.

Referring to Amnesty International, Bush said: "It seemed like to me they based some of their decisions on the word of and the allegations by people that were held in detention, people who hate America, people who have been trained in some instances to disassemble, that means not to tell the truth."

The word Bush was looking for there was "dissemble," but never mind, we'll disassemble the president's remarks in a moment. What's maddening is that by reaching for the dramatic, overwrought and, yes, outrageous gulag metaphor, Amnesty's Khan let Bush slip right by the questions raised by American practices in Guantanamo and whether Guantanamo's problems are helping the "people who hate America" in their battle for world opinion.

But why so much fuss over a word? Because some words -- gulag is one, Holocaust is certainly another -- are freighted with such profound, chilling and specific historical meaning that they should never be used as attention-grabbing devices. More generally, a willingness to use hyperbolic language should never be confused with toughness.

Why does gulag matter? The word refers to the vast machinery of political subjugation created by Stalin in the Soviet Union and comes from the acronym for Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei, or Main Camp Administration. As my Washington Post colleague Anne Applebaum noted in her Pulitzer Prize-winning book, "Gulag," it eventually came to refer to "the system of Soviet slave labor itself, in all its forms and varieties."

These included "labor camps, punishment camps, criminal and political camps, women's camps, children's camps, transit camps," Applebaum wrote. Gulag also came to stand for "the Soviet repressive system itself" including "the arrests, the interrogations, the transport in unheated cattle cars, the forced labor, the destruction of families, the years spent in exile, the early and unnecessary deaths."

There are many problems in Guantanamo. They deserve attention and criticism. But Guantanamo is not "the gulag of our times."

On Thursday, Khan continued to defend her word choice, both at a news conference in Tokyo and in a letter published in the Washington Post. Responding to a Post editorial reproaching her, Khan said the critique of her language "risked letting a semantic argument overshadow extraordinary and unlawful U.S. policy and actions." But that point applies most of all to Khan herself. By reaching for the incendiary phrase, she made it much easier for Bush and his

administration to evade Amnesty's legitimate call for outside scrutiny of the practices at Guantanamo.

The shame here is that Amnesty International has long been one of the world's essential organizations. Its willingness to attack dictatorships of the left and the right and to go after human-rights abuses everywhere has won it the gratitude of oppressed people of all ideologies. Applebaum notes that Amnesty was one of the great sources of information on Soviet dissidents in the 1970s and 1980s. The organization will certainly survive this "semantic argument."

But I hope the group learns a lesson that all of Bush's opponents should also take to heart. That lesson is not to pull back from criticism or to cower before administration attacks. It's outrageous that Bush tried to dismiss all questions about practices in Guantanamo as the work of "people who hate America."

On the contrary, it's people who love America and the liberties it espouses who are most vehement in insisting that we live up to our creed. Those who care about the fate of our men and women in uniform worry how the treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib might affect what happens to Americans taken prisoner in current and future wars.

Sen. Joe Biden, D-Del., has introduced a bill to create a commission to study allegations of detainee abuse and point the way forward. The Senate Judiciary Committee is expected to hold hearings on the subject later this month. These are not the actions of "absurd" people. They reflect the habits of truth-seekers and truth-tellers.

President Bush drives many people into a fury, and I empathize. But the negative passions the president inspires should not get in the way of the clarity, precision and tough-mindedness that effective opposition demands. Human rights are too important to be lost in bad metaphors.