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*Condoleezza Rice: A Death Trip
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Guest Commentator*

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It is hard to feel sorry for a woman who has a supertanker named after her, a woman whose IQ is probably nearly twice as high as most of the men she works with, a woman who if she wanted to change jobs would probably be offered three or four times what she is paid as the second most important official in the US Government.

It is really hard to be sorry for Condoleezza Rice, US Secretary of State. This month I felt sorry for her. I was looking at a photograph of Dr. Rice and the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, taken by the AP's Markus Schreiber at a media briefing in Berlin.

Dr. Rice had a hunted look; the face of one cornered, surrounded by enemies, with no place to hide, no way to turn. Frau Merkel just looks terribly sad.

They were surrounded only by journalists, who these days are among the most toothless and harmless alleged predators anywhere. Dr. Rice's face reflected an entirely different reality: she was trapped, cornered and hunted by the lies of the Bush administration about its treatment of "unlawful combatants" or "battlefield detainees" hidden and tortured in dozens of black holes round the world.

We've known about them and their treatment for a long time.

On January 19, 2002, before the start of the Iraq War, I wrote:

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"The American prisoners of war, or, as they call them, 'battlefield detainees' are causing a great deal of trouble for the United States. A large number of people round the world are repulsed and horrified by the treatment meted out to these men, even if, as the Americans claim, they are 'the most dangerous folks in the world.'

"To sedate them on their flights, or to put hoods over their heads and surgical masks over their faces, to shave them and put them in solitary confinement on a concrete floor surrounded by barbed wire may be, of course, some people's idea of a Caribbean vacation.

"Mr. Donald Rumsfeld, that macho symbol of American resolve, says he does not greatly care how the men are treated, although, as their official captor, he is accountable under the rules of war. And the Attorney General of the United States, Mr. Ashcroft, the principal lawyer for the United States of America, says he doesn't think that the men 'deserve basic constitutional protection.' They are, according to him, 'war criminals.'

"In the words of General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, these most dangerous 'folks' are ready to chew their way through the hydraulic lines of a C-17 plane, to bring it down. And no doubt, they are capable of levitation, of causing ball lightning and turning people to stone with their basilisk's eyes."

Three years later, I see nothing to retract in that judgment.

The US administration never regarded their "battlefield detainees" as human beings – which is why the administration has now found itself trapped in a semantic and moral maze, leaving it to Dr. Rice with her formidable intellect, to convince the world that the United States does not torture its captives despite the enormity of the evidence to the contrary.

According to the Associated Press on May 3, 2003, Dr. Rice's predecessor as Secretary of State had, "In a strongly worded letter, urged Pentagon officials to move faster in determining which prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay can be released."

Even then, shortly after the start of the Iraq invasion, the former soldier was obviously worried about the developing scandal, part of which was the disclosure that children as young as 13 were being held at Camp Delta in Guantanamo Bay.

According to the US News & World Report that week, "Citing complaints from eight allies whose citizens are among the prisoners, [Colin] Powell said in the letter that mishandling the detainees undermines efforts to win international co-operation in the war on terror."

In the same story, the AP reported that "Rumsfeld has said the prisoners were being interrogated for any information they had on planned terrorist activities. They would continue to be held indefinitely until it is determined they pose no threat and until interrogators were convinced they had no more useful intelligence to offer."

Long-Range Planners

Al-Qaeda are reputed to be long-range planners, but can anyone believe that any of the detainees who have been in durance vile for two and three years have any plans to disgorge? Yet, the stories coming out of Guantanamo Bay and other places reveal that the torture continues, inexorably, with no end in sight. Occasionally the US releases people who are clearly innocent.

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Their stories are heartbreaking. They do not know what is wanted of them, their inquisitors go over the same questions day after day, week after week, month after month. They are humiliated, degraded, treated as less than human. The lucky ones have killed themselves.

After the Korean War, Americans should understand better than anyone that many people can be brainwashed, but many can never be broken. The story I related last week, of Fidel Castro's comrade in arms, Abel Santamaria, proves the point.

The behavior of Haydee Santamaria, his sister, only makes it more forcefully. In a jail cell, presented with her brother's bleeding eye, torn from his living body, Haydee was told, "This eye belonged to your brother. If you will not tell us what he refused to say, we will tear out the other."

She, who loved her brave brother above all other things, replied with dignity, "If you tore out his eye and he did not speak, neither will I."

Torture does not work. Most of the information gleaned from it is untrustworthy. Those who cannot stand the pain will tell the inquisitors whatever they think they want to hear.

So, can anyone believe that information-gathering is the real purpose of torture? The original inquisitors did not think so. They put their victims "to the test" knowing perfectly well that there was no information to be gained. But they tortured and burnt their victims for the greater glory of God and their own perverse and pathological satisfactions.

It is clear that Dr. Rice's torture explanations have satisfied no one. The European foreign ministers, having embarrassed the US to the point where Dr. Rice apparently promised no more torture, no more renditions, chalked up a victory.

Their constituents, however, continue to be incensed by the behavior of the United States and will continue to complain as more horror stories come to light.

This month, as Dr. Rice was speaking to the Europeans, a man called Khaled al-Masri was speaking by satellite link-up to a news conference in Washington.

Mr. al-Masri is a German citizen of Lebanese origin. On holiday in Macedonia, he was kidnapped and handed over to Americans. He was taken to a prison in Afghanistan where he was held incommunicado for five months and tortured. He was also sodomized by his jailers.

With the help of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Mr. al-Masri is suing the Central Intelligence Agency and its former head, George Tenet, and the US government.

The ACLU says this is the first case to challenge the kidnapping of foreign nationals for "interrogations" in secret prisons in third countries.

The German Chancellor, Frau Merkel, brought the case to the attention of Dr. Rice. According to Merkel, "The US government has, of course, accepted the case as a mistake."

Who told her to say that?

Dr. Rice's spokesmen denied that the secretary had accepted al-Masri's case as a mistake; Dr. Rice had said only that, "Any policy will sometimes result in errors, and when it happens we will do everything to rectify it."

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That's odd, because Mr. al-Masri was denied entry to the US last weekend when he arrived in Atlanta. If the US is serious about correcting mistakes, that was not a promising start. But perhaps it was all due to an error in interpretation – except that Frau Merkel speaks excellent English.

Values we Share?

Four years ago, shortly after 9/11, I was one of those who counseled the US not to allow anger to distort judgment. "In all the millions of words about Tuesday's horrific tragedy, few have been used to ask Why? to seek the real reasons. Blasting the visible manifestations of a cancer may achieve cosmetic improvement, but the concealed body of the parasitic tumor will not disappear.

"Injustice is the most eloquent recruiter for terrorism. Injustice breeds desperation. Suicidal behavior is almost always a desperate call for help. People who are willing to destroy themselves along with randomly selected groups of innocents are speaking the language of violence, which they know their enemies understand. Unfortunately, while their enemies understand the language, they do not usually listen to the message."

But Mr. Bush was adamant: "Remember. the ones in Guantanamo Bay are killers. They don't share the same values we share" (March 20, 2002).

There was angry and learned dissent, of course. One of the most eloquent came from one of Britain's most senior judges: "The purpose of holding the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay was, and is, to put them beyond the rule of law, beyond the protection of any courts and at the mercy of victors.

"As a lawyer brought up to admire the ideals of American democracy and justice I would have to say that I regard this as a monstrous failure of justice," Lord Steyn said.

Lord Steyn said it was a recurring theme in history "that in times of war, armed conflict, or perceived national danger, even liberal democracies adopt measures infringing human rights in ways that are wholly disproportionate to the crisis. Often the loss of liberty is permanent. (November 26, 2003).

"The question is whether the quality of justice envisaged for the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay complies with the minimum international standards for the conduct of fair trials," Lord Steyn continued. "The answer can be given quite shortly. It is a resounding 'no.' Prisoners at the Camp Delta base on Cuba are being held in conditions of 'utter lawlessness.'"

That verdict was reinforced last week by some of the most learned and respected judges in the world, the British House of Lords, sitting as the Supreme Court of the UK. In their judgment, the seven Law Lords denounced torture and any attempt to use evidence obtained by torture in British courts.

Lord Bingham of Cornhill, the former Lord Chief Justice who chaired the panel, said English law had regarded torture and its fruits with abhorrence for more than 500 years. "The principles of the common law, standing alone, in my opinion compel the exclusion of third-party torture evidence as unreliable, unfair, offensive to ordinary standards of humanity and decency and incompatible with the principles which should animate a tribunal seeking to administer justice."

Lord Hoffman: "The use of torture is dishonorable .It corrupts and degrades the state which uses it and the legal system which accepts it. In our own century, many people in the United States have felt their country dishonored by its use of torture outside the jurisdiction and its practice of extra-legal 'rendition' of suspects to countries where they would be tortured."

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Lord Hope: "Torture [is] one of the most evil practices known to man. Practices authorized for use in Guantanamo Bay would shock the conscience if they were ever to be authorized for use in our own country."

Lord Rodger: The torturer is abhorred "not because the information he produces may be unreliable but because of the barbaric means he uses to extract it."

Lord Nicholls: "Torture is not acceptable. No civilized society condones its use. This is a bedrock moral principle in this country. For centuries the common law has set its face against torture."

Lord Brown: "Torture is an unqualified evil. It can never be justified. Rather, it must always be punished."

John Maxwell of the University of the West Indies (UWI) is the veteran Jamaican journalist who in 1999 single-handedly thwarted the Jamaican government's efforts to build houses at Hope, the nation's oldest and best known botanical gardens. His campaigning earned him first prize in the 2000 Sandals Resort's annual Environmental Journalism Competition, the region's richest journalism prize. He is also the author of How to Make Our Own News: A Primer for Environmentalists and Journalists (Jamaica, 2000). Mr. Maxwell can be reached at jonmax@mac.com.

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