

Human Rights: Barack Obama's Double Standards. Aung San Suu Kyi versus Omar Khadr

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Global Research, November 17, 2009

17 November 2009

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#)

During his trip to Asia, President Obama called for the government of Burma to release Aung San Suu Kyi, a noted dissident who has spent years under house arrest.

It made headlines, a fact which tells us more about the role of media as an outlet for government press releases than in communicating genuine news.

Obama's was hardly a brave or innovative act when you consider that it is a universally-condemned military junta keeping Aung San Suu Kyi penned up.

But when you appreciate the full context of Obama's call, you may agree with me that it was more a cowardly act than anything else.

A year ago, after eight years of mind-numbing stupidity, countless public lies and bloody war crimes, Obama's arrival on the American political scene thrilled the world. His intelligence, his grace, and his sense of decency were striking. His like as an American politician, quite apart from his race, had not been seen in the lifetime of many.

But the hopes raised by Obama, like so many flickering little candles in a fierce wind, already are largely extinguished. This polished, educated, liberal-minded and decent man, after only one year in office, has been overwhelmed by America's military-industrial complex, a terrible machine which grinds on night and day, chewing people in its gears, no matter who is elected ostensibly to be in charge of it.

Much as I resent Burma's treatment of Aung San Suu Kyi, it shines as genuinely humane compared to America's treatment of Omar Khadr.

The key facts in the case of this young man, a prisoner at Guantanamo, are easily told.

Omar Khadr was born to a fundamentalist Muslim, highly political family whose father knew and died fighting for Osama bin Laden. In an era whose ruling myths are a clash of civilizations and a war on terror, Omar would seem to have been doomed from birth.

Under intense pressure from his family, fifteen-year old Omar went to fight in Afghanistan when America invaded it. In doing that, he was doing nothing that tens of thousands of Americans hadn't done, both as idealists for causes and as soldiers of fortune in countless wars from the Spanish Civil War to the Cuban Revolution or the turmoil of the Congo.

Omar's experience reminded me a little of American Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*, a story where the need for maternal approval helped drive his destructive participation in

America's Vietnam holocaust (three million Vietnamese slaughtered, many hideously with napalm, and the legacy of soil saturated with Agent Orange and littered with millions of landmines more than justifies that term).

The American claim against Omar is that he shot an American soldier, a medic no less, a fact seemingly almost designed to increase his infamy.

The story, as I heard it in an interview a few years ago with an American soldier, a friend of the dead medic's, was that after a small firefight, Omar hid himself, then leapt up, heartlessly killing the medic whose only interest was the wounded. Omar was then captured and eventually sent to Guantanamo .

Even were that story true, and it is not, there would still be no excuse for sending a fifteen-year old child to Guantanamo . That act violated all international conventions on the treatment of child soldiers, but then almost everything America has done over the last eight years has violated international conventions, international laws, common decency, and the spirit of its own Bill of Rights.

For years, Omar, like hundreds of inmates at Guantanamo , was held incommunicado: he was allowed no contact with his family, he was allowed no visits from the International Red Cross (again in contravention to international conventions) and he was allowed no legal counsel. Omar was allowed no rights of any kind: being kept shackled in a secret prison ninety miles offshore was considered adequate to efface the entire spirit and meaning of America 's own rights and laws.

We now know that the soldiers who captured Omar, in fact, shot him twice in the back as the frightened boy tried to run. Despite life-threatening wounds and his young age, Omar was consigned to years of imprisonment and torture at Guantanamo . Indeed, his worst torturer, a soldier with a reputation at Guantanamo as perhaps its most vicious interrogator, deliberately contrived his sessions with Omar so that the boy had to sit in a position which pulled at his slowly-healing and painful wounds.

We also know now, evidence having just been published in Canadian newspapers, that Omar could not possibly have killed the medic: Omar was photographed hiding under a pile of rubble as the soldiers passed.

So who killed the medic? One perhaps should recall the case of Pat Tillman, an American football player killed by his own forces in Afghanistan , a case at first covered up the military, but even now full of unanswered questions.

And why did the Americans shoot Omar, twice, in the back? One simply cannot avoid the suggestion that the American soldiers involved acted with cowardice and savagery.

Some readers may object that American soldiers are incapable of such behaviour, but let's go back to that time in Afghanistan, reviewing some things we now know as facts, and think about what they suggest about the ethos prevailing there when a fifteen-year old was shot in the back and sent to be tortured.

America's carpet bombing in Afghanistan was destructive beyond anything Americans have ever been told. Just as was the case in the First Gulf War when uncounted tens of thousands of poor Iraqi recruits were bulldozed into the desert after having been literally pulped into

tailing ponds of human bits and fluids by B-52s, the true horror of what massive bombing did in Afghanistan was understandably not well advertised..

The public has been led to believe that, compared to the horrors inflicted upon Iraq , the invasion of Afghanistan was almost bloodless. But I learned recently from an expert journalist – an American no less – with many years of experience in that country that a great deal of blood was shed. In Kabul alone, fifty to sixty thousand Afghans died in America 's brutal bombing and artillery cover for its Northern Alliance proxy army, itself a gang of thugs many of whom are not one wit more ethical or civilized than the Taleban.

We knew too, those who cared to search, of the brutal tactics of American special forces in the mountains after the initial "victory": tales of heavily-armed goons marching into remote towns, throwing stun grenades, breaking down the doors of homes, holding women and children at gunpoint while their male family members were marched away with no explanation. The men were often kept for considerable periods to be "questioned."

At the least suspicion, air strikes were called in, and in dozens and dozens of cases, those air strikes wiped out whole families or groups of villagers who had done nothing to oppose Americans. They were the victims, thousands of them, of young Americans filled with irrational resentments over 9/11, anxious to prove how good they were with their high-tech killing machines, and let loose on someone else's country.

And we knew, at least again those who cared to search, the story of America 's hideous treatment of Taleban prisoners in the early days of occupation, of Secretary of Defence Rumsfeld's Nazi-like public demand that all prisoners should be killed or walled away forever. One of America 's ghastly allies of the Northern Alliance , General Dostum, took Rumsfeld in deadly earnest: he had his men round up three thousand prisoners, seal them in vans and drive them out onto the desert to suffocate in the heat. The bodies were then buried in shallow mass graves. All this was watched by American soldiers who somehow failed to act the way Jimmy Stewart did in war movies. Instead they picked their noses or smoked cigarettes as they gawked.

We also knew of the terrible tales of boys being raped while American troops never lifted a finger to help them. In a strict fundamentalist country like Afghanistan , where young women are kept guarded and almost hidden, the sexual behaviour of men often takes on the character of that common in prisons everywhere: that is, young and vulnerable men are brutally raped and often treated as "bitches" by older, tougher prisoners.

Only recently, I heard the horrible stories of a Canadian soldier with post traumatic stress who told of seeing a boy with blood running down his legs as two Afghan allies raped him. The soldier could do nothing and was told later only to buck it up. He told too of a translator, a hired Afghan, gleefully relating to him about the way he liked to use a knife on boys he raped.

We all saw the ghastly pictures from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq . Only now we know far uglier pictures and recordings have been suppressed, images and sounds of young Iraqis being raped and sodomized by American soldiers at the prison.

Those facts give us some realistic sense of the atmosphere in Afghanistan when American soldiers shot Omar in the back, falsely accused him of killing a medic, and sent a fifteen-year old boy off to years of torture.

Omar remains a prisoner in Guantanamo , although the torture mercifully has stopped, but it was announced only a couple of days ago that he would be among those who would stand trial in New York .

Trial for what? For trumped-up charges of murder? Trial for acts in war? Trial for being an abused child soldier? Trial under American laws which never applied to Afghanistan ? A trial where every scrap of government evidence is tainted with years of torture and human-rights abuse? Where the government doing the trying itself has acted against countless laws and treaties in invading and occupying two countries?

If there were one breath of decency left in America 's establishment, Omar and the other abused prisoners would all be released and allowed to live the rest of their lives in peace. They are no threat to anyone, most did nothing deserving imprisonment, and those who may have committed something we would regard as a crime have been viciously punished already.

Only days ago, Obama's White House Counsel Greg Craig was let go. Craig, an old friend of the President's, had promised to make his administration the most transparent in history. Craig was the main force behind the Obama's promise to close Guantanamo in one year.

Well, there is no sign Guantanamo is to be closed any time soon, and the policy's chief advocate is gone. But more importantly, when we speak of American torture chambers, it is easy to forget that Guantanamo is only the most publicized of many. What horrors go on at places like America's secret base at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean or at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, or in a number of other locations, all part of the CIA's vast international torture gulag, is anybody's guess.

Obama has not uttered a whimper about the CIA's euphemistically-named extreme rendition, a practice whereby thousands of people have been kidnapped off streets and sent bound to some of the world's hell-holes for months of torture. Afterwards, having been discovered innocent of anything, they find themselves dumped in some obscure place like Bosnia without so much as an apology for their treatment.

Obama told people repeatedly during his campaign that American forces in Iraq would be withdrawn promptly, saying "you can bank on it," and people believed him because Obama did not vote in the Senate for that illegal war, but most of America 's soldiers remain there still.

Obama appointed a commander in Afghanistan , General Stanley McChrystal, who has a background swirling with suggestions of black operations and dirty business, and now that ghastly man has said he needs forty-thousand more troops.

American Predator drones, guided by buzz-cut, faceless men with computer screens in locked rooms in America , now frequently invade Pakistan 's airspace. One can just imagine them hooting and pumping their arms like young men playing a computer game when one of their terrible Hellfire missiles strikes its target, the home of someone not legally charged with anything, killing everyone who happens to be nearby.

No, I only wish the ugly stain on America 's flag was keeping a dissident under house arrest.

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