

Land of the free, home of the War on Terrorism

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"They told us this was one of the world's worst terrorists, and he got the sentence of a drunken driver," said Ben Wizner, an attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union, referring to David Hicks, a 31-year-old Australian who in a plea bargain with a US military court will serve nine months in prison, largely in Australia. That's after five years at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba without being charged with a crime, without a trial, without a conviction. Under the deal, Hicks agreed not to talk to reporters for one year (a slap in the face of free speech), to forever waive any profit from telling his story (a slap — mon Dieu! — in the face of free enterprise), to submit to US interrogation and testify at future US trials or international tribunals (an open invitation to the US government to hound the young man for the rest of his life), to renounce any claims of mistreatment or unlawful detention (a requirement which would be unconstitutional in a civilian US court). "If the United States were not ashamed of its conduct, it wouldn't hide behind a gag order," said Wizner.][1]

Like so many other "terrorists" held by the United States in recent years, Hicks had been "sold" to the American military for a bounty offered by the US, a phenomenon repeated frequently in Afghanistan and Pakistan. US officials had to know that once they offered payments to a very poor area to turn in bodies that almost anyone was fair game.

Other "terrorists" have been turned in as reprisals for all sorts of personal hatreds and feuds.

Many others — abroad and in the United States — have been incarcerated by the United States simply for working for, or merely contributing money to, charitable organizations with alleged or real ties to a "terrorist organization", as determined by a list kept by the State Department, a list conspicuously political.

It was recently disclosed that an Iraqi resident of Britain is being released from Guantánamo after four years. His crime? He refused to work as an informer for the CIA and MI5, the British security service. His business partner is still being held in Guantánamo, for the same crime.[2]

Finally, there are those many other poor souls who have been picked up simply for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. "Most of these guys weren't fighting. They were running," General Martin Lucenti, former deputy commander of Guantánamo, has pointed out.[3]

Thousands of people thrown into hell on earth for no earthly good reason. The world media has been overflowing with their individual tales of horror and sadness for five very long years. Said Guantánamo's former commander, General Jay Hood: "Sometimes we just didn't get the right folks." [4] Not that the torture they were put through would be justified if they

were in fact “the right folks”.

Hicks was taken into custody in Afghanistan in 2001. He was a convert to Islam and like many others from many countries had gone to Afghanistan for religious reasons, had wound up on the side of the Taliban in the civil war that had been going on since the early 1990s, and had received military training at a Taliban camp. The United States has insisted on calling such camps “terrorist training camps”, or “anti-American terrorist training camps”, or “al-Qaeda terrorist training camps”. Almost every individual or group not in love with US foreign policy, which Washington wants to stigmatize, is charged with being associated with, or being a member of, al Qaeda, as if there’s a precise and meaningful distinction between people retaliating against American imperialism while being a member of al Qaeda and retaliating against American imperialism while NOT being a member of al Qaeda; as if al Qaeda gives out membership cards to fit into your wallet, as if there are chapters of al Qaeda that put out a weekly newsletter and hold a potluck on the first Monday of each month.

It should be noted that for nearly half a century much of southern Florida has been one big training camp for anti-Castro terrorists. None of their groups — which have carried out many hundreds of serious terrorist acts in the US as well as abroad, including bombing a passenger airplane in flight — are on the State Department list. Nor were the Contras of Nicaragua in the 1980s, heavily supported by the United States, about whom former CIA Director Stansfield Turner testified: “I believe it is irrefutable that a number of the Contras’ actions have to be characterized as terrorism, as State-supported terrorism.”[5] The same applies to groups in Kosovo and Bosnia, with close ties to al Qaeda, including Osama bin Laden, in the recent past, but which have allied themselves with Washington’s agenda in the former Yugoslavia since the 1990s. Now we learn of US support for a Pakistani group, called Jundullah and led by a Taliban, which has taken responsibility for the recent kidnappings and deaths and of more than a dozen Iranian soldiers and officials in cross-border attacks.[6] Do not hold your breath waiting for the name Jundallah to appear on the State Department list of terrorist organizations; nor any of the several other ethnic militias being supported by the CIA to carry out terrorist bombing and assassination attacks in Iran.[7]

The same political selectivity applies to many of the groups which are on the list, particularly those opposed to American or Israeli policies.

Amid growing pressure from their home countries and international human rights advocates, scores of Guantánamo detainees have been quietly repatriated in the past three years. Now, a new analysis by lawyers who have represented detainees at this 21st century Devil’s Island says this policy undermines Washington’s own claims about the threat posed by many of the prison camp’s residents. The report, based on US government case files for Saudi detainees sent home over the past three years, shows inmates being systematically freed from custody within weeks of their return. In half the cases studied, the detainees had been turned over to US forces by Pakistani police or troops in return for financial rewards. Many others were accused of terrorism connections in part because their Arab nicknames matched those found in a computer database of al-Qaeda members, documents show. In December, a survey by the Associated Press found that 84 percent of released detainees — 205 out of 245 individuals whose cases could be tracked — were set free after being released to the custody of their native countries.

“There are certainly bad people in Guantánamo Bay, but there are also other cases where it’s hard to understand why the people are still there,” said Anant Raut, co-author of the report, who has visited the detention camp three times. “We were struggling to find some rationality, something to comfort us that it wasn’t just random. But we didn’t find it.”

The report states that many of the US attempts to link the detainees to terrorism groups were based on evidence the authors describe as circumstantial and “highly questionable”, such as the travel routes the detainees had followed in flying commercially from one Middle East country to another. American officials have associated certain travel routes with al Qaeda, when in fact, says the report, the routes “involve ordinary connecting flights in major international airports.” With regard to accusations based on similar names, the report states: “This accusation appears to be based upon little more than similarities in the transliterations of a detainee’s name and a name found on one of the hard drives.”

Raut said he was most struck by the high percentage of Saudi detainees who had been captured and turned over by Pakistani forces. In effect, he said, for at least half of the group in the study, the United States “had no first-hand knowledge of their activities” in Afghanistan before their capture and imprisonment.[8]

When Michael Scheuer, former CIA officer who headed the Agency’s Osama bin Laden unit, was told that the largest group in Guantánamo came from custody in Pakistan, he said: “We absolutely got the wrong people.”[9]

Never mind. They were all treated equally. All thrown into solitary confinement. Shackled, blindfolded, excruciating physical contortions for long periods, denied medicine. Sensory deprivation, sleep deprivation. And two dozen other methods of torture which American officials do not call torture. (If you torture these officials, they might admit that it “torture lite”.)

“The idea is to build an antiterrorist global environment,” a senior American defense official said in 2003, “so that in 20 to 30 years, terrorism will be like slave-trading, completely discredited.”[10]

When will the dropping of bombs on innocent civilians by the United States, and invading and occupying their country, without their country attacking or threatening the US, become completely discredited? When will the use of depleted uranium and cluster bombs and CIA torture renditions become things that even men like George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and Donald Rumsfeld will be too embarrassed to defend?

Australian/British journalist John Pilger has noted that in George Orwell’s 1984 “three slogans dominate society: war is peace, freedom is slavery and ignorance is strength. Today’s slogan, war on terrorism, also reverses meaning. The war is terrorism.”

Throwing the earth on the mercy of the market Al Gore appeared before a House Energy and Commerce Committee hearing on global warming on March 21. The star of “An Inconvenient Truth” was told by Cong. Joe Barton of Texas: “You’re not just off a little — you’re totally wrong.” In the afternoon Gore testified before the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, during which the former vice president was told by Sen. James Inhofe of Oklahoma: “You’ve been so extreme in some of your expressions that you’re losing some of your own people.”[11]

These members of Congress know the facts of economic life in the United States. Fighting global warming is a threat to the principal human generator of it — corporations — who avail themselves of the best congress members money can buy to keep government regulations as weak as can be.

Does Al Gore know the same facts of American economic life? Of course, but you would have a hard time discerning that from his film. It's as cowardly in dealing with the corporations as Gore was in fighting the theft of the 2000 election. In the film's hour and a half, the words "corporations" or "profit" are not heard. The closest he comes to ascribing a link between the rape of the environment and the incessant corporate drive to optimize profits is a single passing mention of American automakers' reluctance to increase car gas mileage. He discusses the link between tobacco and lung cancer, as an example of how we have to "connect the dots" on environmental issues, with no mention of the tobacco corporations or their gross and deliberate deception of the American people. He states at another point that we must choose the environment over the economy, without any elucidation at all. Otherwise, the film's message is that it's up to the individual to change his habits, to campaign for renewable energy, and to write his congress member about this or that. In summary, the basic problem, he tells us, is that we're lacking "political will".

It would be most interesting if Al Gore were the president to see how tough he'd get with the corporations, which every day, around the clock, are faced with choices: one method of operation available being the least harmful to the environment, another method being the least harmful to the bottom line. Of course, Gore was vice-president for eight years and was in a fantastic and enviable position to pressure the corporations to mend their ways and Congress to enact tougher regulations; as well as to educate the public on more than their own bad habits. But what exactly did he do? Can any readers enlighten me as to what extent the man used his position and his power then in a manner consistent with the image and the word of his new film?

But could Gore be elected without corporate money? And how much of that money would reach his pocket if he advocated (choke, gasp!) free government-paid public transportation — rail, bus, ferry, etc.? That would give birth to a breathtaking — or rather, breath enhancing — reduction in automobile pollution; easily paid for by ceasing America's imperialist wars.

Microsoft and the National Security Agency I have long felt that the American media's gravest shortcoming is its errors of omission, rather than its errors of commission. It's what they leave out that distorts the news more than any factual errors or out-and-out lies. In January the Washington Post reported that Microsoft had announced that its new operating system, Vista, was being brought to us with the assistance of the National Security Agency. The NSA said it helped to protect the operating system from worms, Trojan horses and other insidious computer attackers. "Our intention is to help everyone with security," said the NSA's chief of vulnerability analysis and operations group. The spy agency, which provided its service free, said it was Microsoft's idea to acknowledge NSA's role, although the software giant declined to be specific about NSA's contributions to Vista.[12]

What the Post — and most likely the entirety of mainstream American media — do not remind us of is what came out in 1999 and 2000, although it's all over the Internet.

In September 1999, leading European investigative reporter Duncan Campbell revealed that NSA had arranged with Microsoft to insert special "keys" into Windows operating systems,

beginning with Windows 95. An American computer scientist, Andrew Fernandez of Cryptonym in North Carolina, had disassembled parts of the Windows instruction code and found the smoking gun — Microsoft's developers had failed to remove the debugging symbols used to test this software before they released it. Inside the code were the labels for two keys. One was called "KEY". The other was called "NSAKEY". Fernandez presented his finding at a conference at which some Windows developers were also in attendance. The developers did not deny that the NSA key was built into their software, but they refused to talk about what the key did, or why it had been put there without users' knowledge. Fernandez says that NSA's "back door" in the world's most commonly used operating system makes it "orders of magnitude easier for the US government to access your computer." [13]

In February 2000, it was disclosed that the Strategic Affairs Delegation (DAS), the intelligence arm of the French Defense Ministry, had prepared a report in 1999 which also asserted that NSA had helped to install secret programs in Microsoft software. According to the DAS report, "it would seem that the creation of Microsoft was largely supported, not least financially, by the NSA, and that IBM was made to accept the [Microsoft] MS-DOS operating system by the same administration." The report stated that there had been a "strong suspicion of a lack of security fed by insistent rumours about the existence of spy programmes on Microsoft, and by the presence of NSA personnel in Bill Gates' development teams." Microsoft categorically denied all the charges and the French Defense Ministry said that it did not necessarily stand by the report, which was written by "outside experts". [14]

In case the above disturbs your image of Bill Gates and his buddies as a bunch of long-haired, liberal, peacenik computer geeks, and the company as one of the non-military-oriented halfway decent corporations, the DAS report states that the Pentagon at the time was Microsoft's biggest client in the world. The Israeli military has also been an important client. In 2002, the company erected enormous billboards in Israel which bore the Microsoft logo under the text "From the depth of our heart — thanks to The Israeli Defense Forces", with the Israeli national flag in the background. [15]

The Myth of the Good War Readers of this report will be aware that one of the points I try very hard to convey is that the reason so many Americans support US atrocities abroad is that they're convinced that no matter how bad things may look, the government means well. American leaders may make mistakes, they may blunder, they may lie, they may even on the odd occasion cause more harm than good, but they do mean well. Their intentions are honorable. Of that most Americans are certain. And one of the foundation stones for this edifice of patriotic faith is the Second World War, an historical saga that all Americans are taught about from childhood on. We all know what its real name is: "The Good War".

Which leads me to recommend a book, "The Myth of the Good War", by Jacques Pauwels, published in 2002. It's very well done, well argued and documented, an easy read. I particularly like the sections dealing with the closing months of the European campaign, during which the United States and Great Britain contemplated stabbing their Soviet ally in the back with maneuvers like a separate peace with Germany, using German troops to fight the Russians, and sabotaging legal attempts by various Communist Parties and other elements of the European left to share in (highly earned) political power after the war. This last piece of sabotage was of course very effectively realized. Stalin learned enough about these schemes to at least partially explain his post-war suspicious manner toward his "allies". In the West we called it "paranoia". [16]

NOTES

[1] Seattle Times, March 31, 2007

[2] Washington Post, March 30, 2007, p.11

[3] Financial Times (London), Oct 4, 2004

[4] Wall Street Journal, January 26, 2005

[5] Testimony before the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, April 16, 1985

[6] ABC News, April 3, 2007

[7] Sunday Telegraph (London), February 25, 2007

[8] Washington Post, March 18, 2007

[9] Richard Ackland, "Innocence ignored at Guantanamo", Sydney Morning Herald, February 24, 2006.

[10] New York Times, January 17, 2003, p.10

[11] Washington Post, March 22, 2007, p.2

[12] Washington Post, January 9, 2007. p.D1

[13] Duncan Campbell's article of September 3, 1999 can be found on the website of TechWeb: <http://www.techweb.com/wire/29110640>

[14] Agence France Presse, February 18 and 21, 2000

[15] To see one of the billboards: www.inminds.co.uk/boycott-news-0022.html

[16] http://www.alys.be/pauwels/2publi_the_myth.htm Available in English, Spanish, French, German, Italian, and Dutch editions

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