

Obama's 'War on Terror'

Saturday 12 March 2011, by [The Nation \(USA\)](#) (Date first published: 10 March 2011).

The modern-day witch hunt against Muslim Americans orchestrated by Representative Peter King could not have come at a better time for the Obama administration. King seems to relish making incendiary statements—like his groundless claim that “80-85 percent of mosques in this country are controlled by Islamic fundamentalists” who are “an enemy living amongst us”—and his March 10 hearing on radicalization in the Muslim-American community promises more of the same. In contrast, on March 6 Obama dispatched Denis McDonough, his deputy national security adviser, to a Virginia mosque, where he reassured Muslims that “we will not stigmatize or demonize entire communities because of the actions of a few.” And so a dialectic is established: King and his ilk are bad to Muslims while the Obama administration is good to Muslims, the face of a more rational, less prejudiced state.

Reality, however, is murkier. On March 7 Obama signed an executive order formalizing a system of indefinite detention for dozens of the 172 remaining detainees at Guantánamo, all Muslims, and announced the resumption of military trials. This order is a stunning reversal of one of his first acts in office, a bold directive to shut Guantánamo down. But relentlessly attacked by Republicans for his plan to try detainees in civilian courts, Obama is now attempting to resolve the Guantánamo cases by legalizing the very procedures and abuses of power that earned the Bush administration fierce condemnation. Indeed, it was Representative King who praised Obama's order because it “affirms the Bush administration policy that our government has the right to detain dangerous terrorists until the cessation of hostilities.”

And it is not just at Guantánamo that Obama has extended Bush-era “war on terror” policies. As Alia Malek documents in this issue (“Gitmo in the Heartland” [1]), at federal Communications Management Units (CMU) in Marion, Illinois, and Terre Haute, Indiana, prisoners are subject to harsh and possibly illegal restrictions against virtually any contact with the outside world. Established by the Bush administration for detainees with a link to terrorism, CMUs have expanded in scope under Obama to include potentially any federal inmate. They have been used capriciously to restrict the communications of prisoners who have no link to terror whatsoever or whose only link is based on entrapment or dangerously expanded and dubious prosecutorial standards of “material support.” In some cases, CMU restrictions appear to have been applied as retaliation for complaints lodged against prison officials or on the basis of nothing more than political or religious beliefs (the majority of CMU inmates are Muslim).

Finally, there is the shameful treatment of Army PFC Bradley Manning, the alleged leaker behind many of the WikiLeaks revelations. Imprisoned at a military jail in Quantico since July without trial, Manning has been subject to severe communications restrictions, sleep deprivation and solitary confinement—tactics refined by the Bush administration's torture experts. Lately, Manning has been forced to sleep in the nude and present himself naked for daily inspection on the grounds that he might use his underwear to commit suicide, even though army psychiatrists have declined to diagnose him as a high suicide risk.

Many have alleged that Manning's treatment is an attempt to turn him against Julian Assange and WikiLeaks and so constitutes instrumental torture. That may be true. But there is an additional corruption revealed in his latest ordeal. Manning's lawyer says that the new edict was issued as

payback for a sarcastic remark Manning made to prison guards about using “the elastic waistband of his underwear” to harm himself; his lawyer describes it as “ritual humiliation.” And so we now see clearly a kind of social cancer: the exercise of inhumane and abusive power simply because it is the state’s prerogative. Recall that this is what happened in Abu Ghraib—not torture for purpose but torture for fun, for petty retaliation, for no reason other than that the uniform allows it. The treatment of Manning in Quantico, as well as the incarceration of inmates in CMUs for no apparent penological purpose, demonstrates that the poisonous shards of Abu Ghraib are still with us. They weren’t abolished by the retirement of George W. Bush, and they weren’t destroyed by the election of Barack Obama. Quite the contrary; they have dug deep into the state apparatus and will continue to exercise their malign influence until America makes a fundamentally different choice: to abide by the rule of law and to respect human rights.

It was Obama’s great promise that he would put us on that road. It will be to his great disgrace if he continues down the dark path toward another Abu Ghraib.

The Editors

March 10, 2011

P.S.

* March 10, 2011. This article appeared in the March 28, 2011 edition of The Nation:
<http://www.thenation.com/article/159168/obamas-war-terror>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.thenation.com/article/159161/gitmo-heartland#node-159161>