

Parboiled people

WE'RE living in a lawless nation. So I guess I shouldn't be shocked every time I return from a trip and catch up on the news to see how much further the ruling junta and its international posse have sunk into the depths of moral depravity. This time around the shocker was a revelation that the Bush-connected dictator in the former Soviet republic of Uzbekistan, with the seeming acquiescence of the C.I.A., had taken to ordering his political prisoners boiled to death.

According to Craig Murry, the former British Ambassador to Uzbekistan, forensics experts at Scotland Yard and the University of Glasgow determined that one Uzbek political prisoner whose case they examined died from being boiled alive. He wasn't "splashed" with water but immersed, the experts determined, since there was a clear "tide mark" on the corpse. And he was immersed after being severely beaten and having his fingernails plucked out.

I first heard this on the Democracy Now radio news program while taking a shower. It was one of those surreal moments that seem to be occurring with troubling frequency these days. My mind could only respond as if I myself had been plucked from the shower and deposited into a cartoon world. "How dastardly," I thought, imagining superheroes battling villains while innocents dangled over steamy caldrons. Dastardly?

But this ain't a cartoon. Evidence emerges weekly that our own government condones and practices torture, using euphemisms such as "aggressive interrogation." The unthinkable is suddenly our reality and our national policy. All the Uzbeks were doing was taking it to the next level. This wasn't just another uniformed sadist going psycho. Prisons

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don't normally have 200-gallon vats of boiling water around into which interrogators might, in the heat of the moment, decide to chuck a prisoner. Someone had to design and build a jig to lower people into a boiling cauldron.

And there's evidence that this practice is routine in Uzbekistan. Murry estimates that the Uzbeks currently hold as many as 10,000 political prisoners, many of whom are in jail for advocating democracy. This is the same nation where government troops gunned down and killed as many as 700 unarmed, peaceful, pro-democracy demonstrators last May. But unlike the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre in Beijing, this one went almost unnoticed by the American corporate media.

Another One of Ours

So who are these barbarians running Uzbekistan? And why is the U.S. government and its corporate media giving them a free ride? Many critics, including Murry, point to the close relationship between Islam Karimov, the Uzbek dictator, and the Bush White House – a relationship that began back when Enron was negotiating a natural gas deal with the Uzbeks. In 2004 the U.S. State Department reported that Uzbekistan had failed to “make progress on its Human Rights commitments.” The Department of Defense quickly followed up that announcement by increasing direct military aid to the Uzbek army by \$21 million. Today Karimov is an important ally in the “War on Terror.” And Uzbek prisons? According to Karimov's government, they're filled with “terrorists.”

Uzbek prisons may also play host to a few U.S. captives dumped there for interrogation as part of the Bush administration's extraordinary rendition program. Murry reported to Democracy Now that C.I.A. planes regularly landed in Uzbekistan while he was ambassador, ferrying in Uzbeks captured in neighboring Afghanistan.

There's a disturbing moral issue concerning Bush's efforts to coddle madmen, mass murderers and other bona fide terrorists in the name of his “War on Terror.” And there's a frightening domestic aspect, too. At the same time he's trotting the globe embracing despotic regimes, he's moving full bore ahead to nullify our core democratic freedoms. For example, there's Attorney General Alberto Gonzales. Officially, he's the nation's top cop, the one responsible for upholding our constitution and prosecuting those who violate our laws. His previous position was as Bush's personal attorney. Last year, when he was grilled by the Senate during his confirmation hearings, he was asked about warrantless, illegal wiretapping of American citizens. Gonzales, according to the Washington Post, refused to answer, saying the question was hypothetical. He did, however, say that it “was not the policy of this president” to authorize actions that conflict with existing laws in the area of surveillance. We now know that Bush in fact did both authorize and order military

agencies to secretly spy, Soviet style, on thousands of innocent Americans – a clear violation of the existing law. And he has been doing it since 2001, according to the Washington Post, under the guidance of his personal attorney, Alberto Gonzales.

In short, the nation's top cop – whose job includes prosecuting Bush administration officials for spying on Americans and violating other law – is both Bush's co-conspirator and a liar, who lied under oath to the U.S. Senate. This week he was back in the news, not prosecuting but defending Bush's domestic spying program.

There's nothing new about the government snooping on its citizens, but in the past there was at least the veneer of some crooked judge signing off on a baseless warrant. With the Bush crew, there's not even that. Officials argue that they couldn't go to a judge for a warrant because they had no evidence. Likewise, they argue that they should have the right to detain citizens without charges when – get this – they have no evidence to charge them with a crime.

So, in the perfect Bush world, the president, without consulting a court, can order surveillance on anyone at any time, and can order anyone arrested and held indefinitely without charges. They can even be held in secret detention, as the administration has demonstrated, thus violating one of the basic tenets of American law, habeas corpus. This is all necessary, the White House explains, since, like Karimov's dirty little domestic war, it's all part of the fight against terror.

This push toward an imperial presidency is relentless. Last week conservatives joined liberals in sounding alarms over language in the new proposed Patriot Act that gives the president power to declare legal demonstrations illegal, branding peaceful expression as a felony. It works like this: The president can declare a "security perimeter" at any "special event of national significance," suspending freedom of expression within that zone. Anyone expressing themselves within that area is guilty of a felony – as in five years or so in jail.

Remember the 2001 election when Bush lost but became president after a miscount and a Supreme Court decision? On inauguration day his parade route was lined with indignant demonstrators. Today such free expression is all but impossible, snuffed by an emerging culture of abusive policing and unlawful stifling of dissent. Under the new Patriot Act, such outbursts of democracy would be criminalized.

Such an attack on free speech would be unconstitutional. But historically the Constitution has only been as strong as the Supreme Court allows it to be. Slavery, for example, was always unconstitutional, but was permitted by a racist Supreme Court.

This brings us to last week's most disturbing event: the confirmation of Samuel Alito to the U.S. Supreme Court. By now most folks are aware of his history opposing reproductive

rights, womens' rights and desegregation. Most folks know that his confirmation is the beginning of the end of legal abortion in this country. But most people are unaware of his basic disdain for democratic principles such as the separation of powers.

In an unusually candid editorial, the New York Times reported that, in signing a bill reaffirming the illegality of torture – a bill that his administration unsuccessfully lobbied against – Bush noted that the bill might not be binding, since, "whatever Congress intended the law to say, he intended to ignore it on the pretext the commander in chief is above the law. That twisted reasoning," the Times went on to say, "is what led to the legalized torture policies, not to mention the domestic spying program." The Times cited another brazen stab at the Constitution last week when the White House alleged that the Supreme Court no longer had jurisdiction concerning the cases of prisoners held indefinitely at Guantanamo Bay. The problem, according to the Times, is that both of the Bush administration's radical theories – that "a president's will in signing a law trumps Congress' will in writing it" and that the president can "claim power without restriction or supervision by the courts or Congress" – are shared by our new Supreme Court Justice, Samuel Alito.

Yes, now there's a Bush court. In all likelihood it will role back our civil rights, our voting rights, women's rights, abortion rights, environmental protections and so on. But what few people are talking about is that this court may very well roll back our right to talk about our rights being rolled back. These are all steps that can eventually lead to a boiling caldron. But then again, who cares? Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie are expecting a baby. And the Steelers won the Super Bowl.