

## Is the Bush Administration “Purposefully & Materially” Undermining Democracy?

By Matt Rowe, October 6, 2006

[www.WinTheGWOT.org](http://www.WinTheGWOT.org)

Senators from both sides of the aisle have been at odds with the Bush Administration over the proper means to try “unlawful enemy combatants.” The most recent compromise allows the executive branch to indefinitely detain any suspects who have “...purposefully and materially” supported hostilities against the United States. This is in spite of the efforts of Senators like Joe Biden (D-DE) who voted against the bill. The passage of the bill falls far short of restoring the credibility of the United States as a Just democracy and the bastion of hope to oppressed people around the world.

The consequences of this compromise, combined with other actions of the Bush Administration are directly hurting our success in the global war on terror. How can a government that espouses freedom, justice, and the benefits of democracy advocate torturing its enemies, exempting them from *habeas corpus* protections, and submitting them to secret commissions that wield the power of the death penalty? Can a freedom loving people allow warrantless domestic surveillance and the use of military violence as the first response to a socio-political challenge? The terrorism and insurgency we face today are primarily the result of government oppression and neglect in the region, which has been especially complicated by powerful religious and ethnic intolerance and historic geopolitical interactions.

Oppressed people are often misinformed and manipulated by their governments and ideologically based organizations like Al-Qaeda that can offer them false hope. They are duped or even forced into materially supporting the insurgents and terrorists that allegedly operate on behalf of the people. The vast majority of Muslims do not agree with radical Islamic ideology, but as long as their governments oppress them, groups like Al-Qaeda can manipulate the populace for general support. The last thing the US should do is give these people, who have no historic experience or inherent faith in a representative form of government, a legitimate reason to fear us too.

The President and his supporters claim that these abuses of dignity and basic human rights are appropriate responses to the extraordinary threat that we face from modern terrorism. In other words, the ends justify the means. The potential extent of destruction by terrorists today is certainly horrific, but does that warrant undermining the principles of the US constitution, basic Human Rights, and our most precious democratic values? The Geneva Conventions do not authorize the torture or inhumane treatment of citizens and combatants of “recognized” states that might resort to a surprise nuclear attack.

One could argue that the terrorist non-state actors are more ruthless and irrational and lack the controls that recognized states assumed to exercise, but the Bush Administration policies will not affect a significant number of active insurgents who pose the real threat. They only make up a relatively small portion of the overall population and they are protected behind a layer of direct supporters that immediately surrounds them. The largest population—the one we least want to alienate and that numbers in the millions throughout the Middle East—consists of loosely affiliated sympathizers and the neutral portion of the populace that simply tries to go on living in the midst of conflict. These are the people for whom we are presumably fighting.

By developing relationships of trust that protect Human Rights and promote justice, we stand to gain more intelligence and support from the majority of the populace than we could ever get from the handful of extremists and any of their direct supporters we might catch. On the other hand, every time we mistreat a suspected “unlawful enemy combatant” who is not really a terrorist we undercut our moral position and drive another supporter directly to the enemy.

There are some very bad people out there who must be captured or killed in order to make the world safer, but not at the expense of our civil liberties and constitutional rights. History has shown that the strategy should be more like investigating and apprehending criminals than a violent war of attrition. Security and justice are the overriding objectives. If the Geneva Conventions do not clearly articulate protections for “unlawful enemy combatants,” it is because the people who drafted them did not anticipate the extent to which this group would play in future wars. Perhaps it is time to amend the conventions and provide that protection. For now, in the absence of those amendments, the US should retake the moral high ground by establishing the broadest protections possible and demonstrate to the world that we can back our lofty rhetoric of freedom, democracy, and justice with tangible action.

In the end, you can sometimes fight fire with fire, but you can never fight terrorism and insurgency with more terror. If you want to take away the support of an oppressed people from the terrorists and insurgents, you have to offer them something better than oppression and fear.

They already have that.