

American Prison Camps Are on the Way

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The Military Commissions Act of 2006 governing the treatment of detainees is the culmination of relentless fear-mongering by the Bush administration since the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Because the bill was adopted with lightning speed, barely anyone noticed that it empowers Bush to declare not just aliens, but also U.S. citizens, “unlawful enemy combatants.”

Bush & Co. has portrayed the bill as a tough way to deal with aliens to protect us against terrorism. Frightened they might lose their majority in Congress in the November elections, the Republicans rammed the bill through Congress with little substantive debate.

Anyone who donates money to a charity that turns up on Bush’s list of “terrorist” organizations, or who speaks out against the government’s policies could be declared an “unlawful enemy combatant” and imprisoned indefinitely. That includes American citizens.

The bill also strips habeas corpus rights from detained aliens who have been declared enemy combatants. Congress has the constitutional power to suspend habeas corpus only in times of rebellion or invasion. The habeas-stripping provision in the new bill is unconstitutional and the Supreme Court will likely say so when the issue comes before it.

Although more insidious, this law follows in the footsteps of other unnecessarily repressive legislation. In times of war and national crisis, the government has targeted immigrants and dissidents.

In 1798, the Federalist-led Congress, capitalizing on the fear of war, passed the four Alien and Sedition Acts to stifle dissent against the Federalist Party’s political agenda. The Naturalization Act extended the time necessary for immigrants to reside in the U.S. because most immigrants sympathized with the Republicans.



The Alien Enemies Act provided for the arrest, detention and deportation of male citizens of any foreign nation at war with the United States. Many of the 25,000 French citizens living in the U.S. could have been expelled had France and America gone to war, but this law was never used. The Alien Friends Act authorized the deportation of any non-citizen suspected of endangering the security of the U.S. government; the law lasted only two years and no one was deported under it.

The Sedition Act provided criminal penalties for any person who wrote, printed, published, or

spoke anything “false, scandalous and malicious” with the intent to hold the government in “contempt or disrepute.” The Federalists argued it was necessary to suppress criticism of the government in time of war. The Republicans objected that the Sedition Act violated the First Amendment, which had become part of the Constitution seven years earlier. Employed exclusively against Republicans, the Sedition Act was used to target congressmen and newspaper editors who criticized President John Adams.

Subsequent examples of laws passed and actions taken as a result of fear-mongering during periods of xenophobia are the Espionage Act of 1917, the Sedition Act of 1918, the Red Scare following World War I, the forcible internment of people of Japanese descent during World War II, and the Alien Registration Act of 1940 (the Smith Act).

During the McCarthy period of the 1950s, in an effort to eradicate the perceived threat of communism, the government engaged in widespread illegal surveillance to threaten and silence anyone who had an unorthodox political viewpoint. Many people were jailed, blacklisted and lost their jobs. Thousands of lives were shattered as the FBI engaged in “red-baiting.” One month after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, United States Attorney General John Ashcroft rushed the U.S.A. Patriot Act through a timid Congress. The Patriot Act created a crime of domestic terrorism aimed at political activists who protest government policies, and set forth an ideological test for entry into the United States.

In 1944, the Supreme Court upheld the legality of the internment of Japanese and Japanese-American citizens in *Korematsu v. United States*. Justice Robert Jackson warned in his dissent that the ruling would “lie about like a loaded weapon ready for the hand of any authority that can bring forward a plausible claim of an urgent need.”

That day has come with the Military Commissions Act of 2006. It provides the basis for the President to round-up both aliens and U.S. citizens he determines have given material support to terrorists. Kellogg Brown & Root, a subsidiary of Cheney’s Halliburton, is constructing a huge facility at an undisclosed location to hold tens of thousands of undesirables.



In his 1928 dissent in *Olmstead v. United States*, Justice Louis Brandeis cautioned, “The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well meaning but without understanding.” Seventy-three years later, former White House spokesman Ari Fleischer, speaking for a zealous President, warned Americans “they need to watch what they say, watch what they do.”

We can expect Bush to continue to exploit 9/11 to strip us of more of our liberties. Our constitutional right to dissent is in serious jeopardy. Benjamin Franklin’s prescient warning should give us pause: “They who would give up an essential liberty for temporary security, deserve neither liberty or security.”

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