

Holding America to its principles

WILLIAM F. SCHULZ

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WASHINGTON - I didn't mind President Bush calling Amnesty International "absurd" several weeks ago after our secretary-general, Irene Khan, labeled Guantanamo Bay "the gulag of our times." Nor did it really bother me that Vice President Dick Cheney claimed not to take us seriously or that Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld thought us "reprehensible." Government officials around the world often react that way to our reports, and the truth is that we've been treated to a lot harsher tongue-lashings.

But when the president fueled the accusations of people such as Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity that we were anti-American, that really stuck in my craw. "It seemed like to me they based some of their decisions on the word of, and the allegations by, people who were held in detention, people who hate America," Mr. Bush said at a Rose Garden news conference.

Not only was this inaccurate, given that our conclusions were based upon many sources, including FBI agents, U.S. translators and the International Red Cross, but it's also that I think of myself as every bit as American as the next guy.

I love hot dogs and apple pie - too much, in fact. I'm a big baseball fan (though I admit that because I grew up in Pittsburgh, I root for the hapless Pirates). I relish our verdant prairies and majestic mountain peaks. And I'm deeply moved every time I watch CBS News' Fallen Heroes and learn of one more brave young man or woman who died for our country.

It's not just because my American credentials are impregnable, however, that the anti-American charge rankles me. It's because we in the human rights business are among the most appreciative of what America stands for. We are the ones who so often witness what frequently happens in other countries to people who disagree with their governments.

When I was in Darfur, Sudan, in the fall, I visited a prison in which a number of lawyers had been incarcerated. Their crime was representing clients whose families had been massacred by the government-backed janjaweed militia and who, instead of seeking violent revenge, had sought compensation through the judicial system. Before their cases had even made it to court, their lawyers had been tossed in jail.

At this very moment, the political opponents of President Robert G. Mugabe of Zimbabwe are being forced out of their homes, their property confiscated, their businesses destroyed, solely because they supported the opposition in the last election.

I have dozens of friends, human rights defenders all, in places such as China, Iran and Myanmar who would be delighted if being called "absurd" by the heads of their governments were the worst punishments meted out to them.

Indeed, that's what people around the world so admire about America - that ours is a country in which people can challenge the president and survive. Granting a forum for unpopular views, protecting the rights of minorities, guaranteeing due process even to the most despised among us - all that is America's greatest strength, even more than our military prowess or economic might. It's what the world most admires about our country and what I do, too.

If we give that up, if we betray our most cherished principles or try to intimidate dissenters, we will have sacrificed one of our most powerful tools in the struggle to stop terrorism. To speak up for those principles is not to be anti-American or soft on terrorism. On the contrary, it is simply to ask that America be the best that it can be, exactly in order that it succeed in the fight against those who would plunder the innocent in the name of ideology.

Human rights organizations exist to protect the innocent and to hold up one universal standard of behavior against which to measure everyone. We have no armed forces at our disposal and little economic clout. We depend for our very lives upon the indulgence of those whom we criticize. The United States, whatever its human rights failings, models that indulgence about as well as any country in the world, and for that I salute it.

After all, in 1997, Charles Taylor, about to be elected president of Liberia, threatened to have me assassinated because I had angered him when I led an Amnesty International mission to that country. But here I am, having been excoriated by some of the highest officials in our government, and my tax returns haven't even been audited. At least not yet. God bless America.

William F. Schulz is executive director of Amnesty International USA.