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Not In My Backyard

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NIMBY ? not in my back yard ? sensitivities have, for the moment, derailed the President?s plan to close Gitmo. The Republicans, led by Sen. Lindsay Graham who claims to support closing the extra-legal detention facility, beat the White House to the punch framing the issue, appealing to people?s understandable sense of fear of terrorists. Admittedly, there is not much beyond fear for the GOP to campaign on, but this fear casts an unusually harsh light on our prison system.

The television show ?Prison Break? notwithstanding, when was the last time you heard of an actual prison break at a maximum security prison in the United States? Yet, every time state or federal authorities need to build a new prison, the NIMBY sensibility returns. I have never understood it. If someone did break out of prison, I suspect the last thing they would do is hang out in the immediate vicinity.

Be that as it may, both houses of Congress have refused to authorize funds for closing Gitmo lest the detainees end up at a federal facility in their home district. Of course, the crass political choice would be for the President to designate a federal facility in Oklahoma which was the state in which he polled the worst last November, losing by a whopping 66 to 34 percent. Or Wyoming, ideally somewhere close to Dick Cheney?s ranch, a state Obama lost by 65 to 33 percent.

President Obama continues to enjoy stratospheric poll numbers. The RealClearPolitics polling average shows him with a 61.2 percent approval rating. That should provide some cover for Congress. Yet, despite the strong backing of progressive advocacy groups, only six senators backed Obama yesterday. Alas, our democracy does not always yield wise results, but it almost always yields results that will help incumbents in their next election.

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