

Closing Gitmo? Forget About It

Michael Sean Winters | May. 3, 2013 | Distinctly Catholic

At his press conference earlier this week, marking the 100th day of his second term, President Obama expressed his intention to try again to close the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay. His political capital should be better spent.

I do not doubt it was a mistake to open the detention center at Guantanamo. In the United States, anything that suggests an extra-judicial proceeding offends our commitment to the rule of law. It certainly gives Islamic extremists a fine propaganda talking point. And, it encourages Americans to think that our system of justice is somehow inadequate when it comes to dealing with the threat of terrorism, which is not only a morally troubling thought, it is a thought with no basis in fact. The criminal justice system has handled some 1000 terrorism cases in the last decade, with most ending in a plea bargain and a 90 percent conviction rate. Zacarias Moussaoui, the infamous '20th hijacker' from 9/11 was tried in a civil court, as was, most recently, Faisal Shahzad, the man who hoped to plant a bomb in Times Square.

The difficulty is that closing the prison at Guantanamo and transferring the inmates takes money, and Congress has refused to allocate any funding. In any conceivable political negotiations with Republicans in Congress, what would the President be willing to trade in return for their votes to close Gitmo? Raising the Social Security retirement age? Lowering taxes on rich people? Abandoning the effort to enact comprehensive immigration reform? Republican votes to close Guantanamo would not come cheap and I can't think that, given the alternatives, the country would be better off with a closed Gitmo and lower taxes, or a shuttered Gitmo and no comprehensive immigration reform.

Of course, we can wish all day that we lived in a country where such choices did not have to be made. The President's funniest line during the White House Correspondents Dinner was about Michael Douglas' happy, albeit fictional, presidency, which happiness might have something to do with the fact that it was an Aaron Sorkin, liberal fantasy. We can wish that we did not have to barter for votes to expand background checks for purchasing a gun. We can wish the GOP had not swamped the Democrats in 2010, allowing them to gerrymander congressional districts at will — although anyone who did not vote in 2010 should refrain from complaining.

The President knows, or at least he jokes, that his presidency exists in the real world of politics. I still have my doubts about his capacity for political leadership. Bill Clinton knew that good policy was good politics, but he also knew how to cut a deal. Obama seems to think that, if given the facts, or at least the facts he likes, everyone who is rational should see the policy questions the way he does. Obama is more Mike Dukakis technocrat than Bill Clinton schmoozer. Obama is a master at policy detail: His decision to insist that the military provide back-up on the raid in Pakistan that killed Osama bin Laden turned out to be prescient when one of the helicopters crashed. But he seems not to understand the grubby part of politics, the part that entails getting people to move towards your positions through long and arduous negotiations.

President Obama said that keeping Guantanamo open hurts the U.S. abroad. Really? I do not think Kim Jong-un

would be more pliable and less unpredictable if Guantanamo were closed tomorrow, do you? How does the existence of Guantanamo enter into the evil calculations being made by Assad and his henchmen in Syria? I have long been suspicious of those who invoke "world opinion" as a necessary accompaniment for U.S. foreign policy decision-making. Certainly, the United Nations is no sure moral guide, filled as it is with dictatorial regimes that condemn Guantanamo but then elect Libya, when still under the regime of Qaddafi, to lead its human rights commission. "World opinion" is a chimera.

Yes, closing Guantanamo might be the right thing to do. But, there are many right things to do and, when faced with political opposition, one must prioritize. I do not understand the fascination closing Gitmo has over the left, including the religious left. There are bigger fish to fry. Every second the president spends even thinking about closing Guantanamo is a second wasted. Move on.

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