



Miss Rice to the Europeans

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While Americans are going about their merry December business of getting ready for Christmas, presents and eggnog, Europe has been in the throes of one of those fits of anti-American hysteria that seems to seize the old continent with predictable regularity. Such fits come and go, depending on who is on death row at the moment, or the latest news from Iraq. Any shadow of a rumor, any smidgeon of information that, if true, could reflect badly on the United States, sells newspapers in Europe like hotcakes and tends to warm people's hearts with the thought that at least they are not like Americans.

The current case in point in the strangely insubstantial story first published in The Washington Post on Nov. 2 of the alleged existence of secret CIA prisons around the world, some maybe on European soil. (Shudder.) Poland, Italy and Romania are the primary suspects. Then there are mysterious American flights,

stopping in European airports, that may have carried terrorist suspects on their way back to their countries of origin, a practice known as "rendition." Some of which countries have even been known to engage in torture. This slender story has morphed into a fantasy of "American torture prisons" playing full blast throughout the European media.

One of the many problems with answering a story like this is that it resembles nothing so much as the question, "When did you stop beating your wife?" There is no good answer, as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice found during her visit to Europe in the first week of December. While she stated flat-out that the United States does not engage in torture, she was unable to deny categorically that U.S. clandestine operations take place in Europe (with the cooperation of European governments of course). How could she, given the nature of the war we are engaged in?

The problem is that honest discussion with their publics about U.S.-European cooperation in the war on terror and what it means for their own safety has not been the reaction of European governments. Miss Rice made it clear that she personally would welcome such a discussion, and she reminded Europeans that American actions have "prevented attacks in Europe" and "saved innocent lives." "It is up to those governments and their citizens to decide if they wish to work with us to prevent terrorist attack against their own and other countries and decide how much information they can make public," she said. "They have a sovereign right to make that choice."

Instead most European governments (except the British to its credit) have recoiled in horror. Franco Frattini, EU justice and home affairs commissioner and normally a man of pro-American sentiments, said the presence of clandestine jails would violate the European Convention on Human Rights, without explaining how. "I would be obliged to propose serious consequences, including suspension of voting rights" in the European Union, Mr. Frattini threatened.

Many European governments, such as the Scandinavians, the Polish, the British, the Germans, the Spanish and the Italians (who would themselves have been responsible for any agreement with the United States on landing rights, prison use, or intelligence gathering), have chosen to launch

internal investigations. Which have turned up very little or nothing. But even this is not enough to silence the critics.

"The U.K. government yesterday said that it had no evidence that the U.S. administration had been transporting terrorism suspects through British airport," reported the Financial Times on Monday. "Jack Straw, foreign secretary, said that after careful examination of government records, he was 'as certain as can be' that there were no U.S. requests for flights carrying suspects to land in the UK."

"Menzie Campbell, foreign affairs spokesman of the opposition Liberal Democrats, said Mr. Straw's assurances were unsatisfactory. 'Because there are no records and because there are no requests, this doesn't mean to say that extraordinary rendition may not have taken place,' he said. " How can you deal with this kind of attitude?

Miss Rice, however, did yeoman service on her Europe visit, which must have been about as pleasant as a root canal, and her efforts were not in vain. NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop and other NATO ministers declared themselves satisfied with her assurances on torture at least. What we need now are more American officials like Miss Rice with the mission to take on the an honest transatlantic dialogue about the European role in the war on terror.

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