

December 7, 2005

Skepticism Seems to Erode Europeans' Faith in Rice

By [RICHARD BERNSTEIN](#)

BERLIN, Dec. 6 - Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice](#) did what was expected, many people in Europe said Tuesday, after her meetings with Chancellor Angela Merkel and other German officials. She gave reassurances that the United States would not tolerate torture and, while not admitting mistakes, promised to correct any that had been made.

She accompanied that with an impassioned argument for aggressive intelligence gathering, within the law, as an indispensable means of saving lives endangered by an unusually dangerous and unscrupulous foe.

Did anybody believe her on this continent, aroused as rarely before by a raft of reports about secret prisons, C.I.A. flights, allegations of torture and of "renditions," or transfers, of prisoners to third countries so they can be tortured there?

"Yes, I did," Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, a conservative member of the German Parliament, said in a telephone interview on Tuesday. "The thing I believe is that the United States does obey international law, and Mrs. Merkel said that she believes it too."

Not everybody here is of that view, to say the least. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine a more sudden and thorough tarnishing of the Bush administration's credibility than the one taking place here right now. There have been too many reports in the news media about renditions - including one involving an Lebanese-born German citizen, Khaled el- Masri, kidnapped in Macedonia in December 2003 and imprisoned in Afghanistan for several months on the mistaken assumption that he was an associate of the Sept. 11 hijackers - for blanket disclaimers of torture to be widely believed.

"I think what she means is, 'We don't use it as an official way to do things, but we don't look at what is done in other countries,' " Monika Griefahn, a Social Democratic member of Parliament, said in regard to Ms. Rice's comment on torture. "And that's the problem for us."

Ms. Griefahn also expressed skepticism about Ms. Rice's assurance that where mistakes are made - presumably in Mr. Masri's case - the United States will do everything in its power to rectify them. Indeed, Bush administration officials said nothing about rectifying mistakes before reports of Mr. Masri's kidnapping.

"I don't believe they wanted to do anything to rectify the al-Masri case," Ms. Griefahn said.

In Britain, members of Parliament from both parties reacted with even greater skepticism to Ms. Rice's statement, saying it had neither answered their questions nor allayed their concerns about American policy.

"It's clear that the text of the speech was drafted by lawyers with the intention of misleading an audience," Andrew Tyrie, a Conservative member of Parliament, said in an interview. Mr. Tyrie is chairman of a recently formed nonpartisan committee that plans to investigate claims that the British government has tacitly condoned torture by allowing the United States to use its airspace to transport terrorist suspects to countries where they are subsequently tortured.

Parsing through the speech, Mr. Tyrie pointed out example after example where, he said, Ms. Rice was using surgically precise language to obfuscate and distract. By asserting, for instance, that the United States does not send suspects to countries where they "will be" tortured, Ms. Rice is protecting herself, Mr. Tyrie said, leaving open the possibility that they "may be" tortured in those countries.

Others pointed out that the Bush administration's definition of torture did not include practices like water-boarding - in which prisoners are strapped to a board and made to believe they are about to be drowned - that violate provisions of the international Convention Against Torture.

Andrew Mullin, a Labor member of Parliament, said he had found Ms. Rice's assertions "wholly incredible." He agreed with Mr. Tyrie that Ms. Rice's statement had been "carefully lawyered," adding: "It is a matter of record that people have been kidnapped and have been handed over to people who have tortured them. I think their experience has to be matched against the particular form of language the secretary of state is using."

To a great extent, the latest trans-Atlantic brouhaha reflects a very real division between Europe and the United States, reminiscent of the arguments that took place over the Iraq war two years ago. In the view of the Bush administration and its supporters, the Europeans' moral fastidiousness reflects a lack of realism about the nature of the terrorist threat and what needs to be done to defeat it.

The view of Europeans, by contrast, is that they understand the terrorist threat perfectly well, but that the Bush administration's flouting of democratic standards and international law incites more terrorism, not less.

"I resent the fact that my country is foolishly being led into a misguided approach into combating terrorism by this administration," Mr. Tyrie said. "European countries have a far greater experience over many decades dealing with terrorism, and many of us have learned the hard way that dealing in a muscular way can often inflame the very terrorism you're trying to suppress."

In Mr. zu Guttenberg's view, the reports filling both the German and American news media these days and fostering a surge of renewed indignation against the Bush administration are based on unproved allegations and rumors that have been transformed into established fact.

"What's important is that the balance between democratic principles and secret services needs to be maintained," Mr. zu Guttenberg said. "I take it as a reaching out of the hand when she says mistakes have happened and we have to rectify them."

To some Americans at least, the way the charges about secret prisons and C.I.A. flights have gained currency illustrates the readiness of many Europeans always to believe the worst about the United States.

More than one commentator over the last few days has referred to the secret prisons as a Gulag Archipelago, even though Romania and Poland, the countries where the prisons are said to be situated, have denied their existence. Moreover, their total prison population would be at most a few dozen - compared with the hundreds of thousands that were confined in Stalin's real Gulag Archipelago.

The Bush administration's treatment of imprisoned suspected terrorists, coupled with the problems the United States continues to encounter in Iraq and Vice President [Dick Cheney's](#) resistance to Congressional curbs on the handling of prisoners, has not made Ms. Rice's job of persuasion any easier.

"The Europeans lack of realism is a big problem, but I'm also frustrated with the inability of the United States to behave like a successful big power," said John Kornblum, a former American ambassador to Germany and now director of the investment bank Lazard Frères in Germany.

He added that "the Europeans do have this propensity" to put the worst possible interpretation on American actions, "but unfortunately, we have given credibility to that sort of behavior."

To some extent, the comment by Ms. Rice that seems to have had the most effect in Europe was her statement made in Washington on Monday that many governments have cooperated with the United States on intelligence gathering.

That remark did not so much reassure European commentators that the United States was abiding by international treaties as it has led them to accuse their own governments of hypocrisy, silently acquiescing in American practices while publicly criticizing them.

"If the European services knew," the Italian daily La Repubblica said Tuesday, referring to the reports of secret prisons and C.I.A. flights in Europe, "how is it possible that the governments and the parliaments, which these services must answer to, weren't informed?"

Sarah Lyall contributed reporting from London for this article.

- [Copyright 2005 The New York Times Company](#)
 - [Home](#)
 - [Privacy Policy](#)
 - [Search](#)
 - [Corrections](#)
 - [XML](#)
 - [Help](#)
 - [Contact Us](#)
 - [Work for Us](#)
 - [Site Map](#)
 - [Back to Top](#)