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Dodd: Dad's Nuremberg Notes Apply Today

BYLINE: By RON FOURNIER, Associated Press Writer

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As a prosecutor at Nuremberg, Thomas Dodd charged the Nazis with "the apprehension of victims and their confinement without trial, often without charges, generally with no indication of their detention."

His son, Sen. Chris Dodd, wonders today whether he and his fellow Democrats did enough to stop the United States from violating that same rule of law in the war on terror.

"For six decades, we learned the lessons of the Nuremberg men and women well," the presidential candidate writes in his book, "Letters from Nuremberg" published this week. "We didn't start wars we ended them. We didn't commit torture we condemned it. We didn't turn away from the world we embraced it."

"But that has changed in the past few years," Dodd writes.

The book is a compilation of the letters future Sen. Thomas Dodd wrote home to his wife, Grace, from the trial of Nazi war criminals. On a deeper level, "Letters from Nuremberg," is a story of the symmetry between a father and son, and their times.

Thomas Dodd was a young lawyer in the summer of 1945 when he traveled to Nuremberg, Germany, to interrogate such notorious figures as Hermann Goring, Albert Speer and Rudolf Hess, rising to the No. 2 prosecutor on the U.S. team.

The elder Dodd saw the trial as a triumph of the rule of law, with civilized countries conducting a fair trial for mass murderers who didn't seem to deserve one.

Flash forward six decades and the U.S. leaders, including the younger Dodd, are faced with the same moral dilemma on the issue of how to treat prisoners in the war on terror.

President Bush has argued that the commander in chief is authorized to hold enemy combatants indefinitely without trial or formal charges.

The Bush administration established military tribunals at Guantanamo Bay, drawing a rebuke from the Supreme Court in a June 2006 ruling that said the president overstepped his authority. Bush responded by seeking the necessary authority from Congress, which Dodd saw as a political maneuver aimed at casting Democrats as soft on terror.

In the book's opening pages, the Connecticut senator recalls how the patriotism of former Georgia Sen. Max Cleland was questioned by the White House because of his opposition to a provision in the bill creating the Homeland Security Department in 2002.

Cleland lost his Senate seat that year.

"I had no doubt that if we, as a group, had the audacity to take a firm stance against the commander in chief on the interrogation issue we'd get the same treatment," Dodd writes.

Chastened Democrats backed a GOP compromise, but the deal didn't withstand Bush's review. The final legislation allowed the president to define U.S. commitments under the Geneva conventions.

"... We had been played," Dodd writes. "In agreeing to all this, Congress has shirked its oversight responsibilities."

A filibuster might have blocked the bill, Dodd writes, but he ducked the fight. Dodd called that "my last compromise on the issue."

Before voting against the bill, Dodd reminded the Senate what Justice Robert Jackson said about the need for a fair trial at Nuremberg: "To pass these defendants a poisoned chalice is to put it to our lips as well."

Dodd now seems to wonder whether he dampened his lips on the chalice by not fighting harder against the Bush administration.

He also regrets voting in 2002 to give Bush authority to wage war.

Dodd sees many parallels to this era and post-World War II, including a new and shadowy enemy (Soviets then, Islamic terrorists today) and the uneasy balance between security and civil rights.

His book "is an epistle to this generation as much as it was letters to my mother," Dodd told The AP.

Its lessons for today?

"The rule of law," he said. "When evil happens, build those international relations and stand up for the principles that are universal."

No matter what the pressure.

(This version CORRECTS SUBS last graf to correct word to universal; ADDS new photo numbers)

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