

Just following orders in China

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IMAGINE WHAT would have happened if during the 1980s an American communications company had provided information that allowed the South African government to track down and imprison an anti-apartheid activist. That is pretty much the moral equivalent of what Yahoo has just done in China in the case of journalist Shi Tao. And the California-based Web giant deserves the same kind of public opprobrium that would have fallen on any Western firm that dared to publicly cooperate with the enforcers of apartheid.

Shi, the victim of Yahoo's shameful behavior, was sentenced to 10 years in jail for "illegally sending state secrets abroad." Shi was a reporter for a Chinese newspaper, Contemporary Business News. His crime consisted of e-mailing to a New York-based website information about a supposedly secret directive his newspaper had received from the state propaganda department telling it how to cover the 15th anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. The security services were able to track him down thanks to information helpfully provided by Yahoo's Hong Kong affiliate, whose e-mail service Shi used.

Yahoo co-founder Jerry Yang breezily defended his company's role: "To be doing business in China, or anywhere else in the world, we have to comply with local law." I wonder how far Yang would take that logic. What if local law required Yahoo to cooperate in strictly separating races? Or the rounding up and extermination of a certain race? Or the stoning of homosexuals? Would Yang eagerly do the government's bidding in those cases too?

Granted, the Chinese communist regime may not be as odious as apartheid South Africa, Nazi Germany or Taliban Afghanistan. But it's bad enough. As summed up in the State Department's most recent human rights report: "The [Chinese] government's human rights record remained poor, and the government continued to commit numerous and serious abuses." These included "instances of extrajudicial killings; torture and mistreatment of prisoners, leading to numerous deaths in custody; coerced confessions; arbitrary arrest and detention, and incommunicado detention."

The State Department estimates that at least 250,000 people — and possibly as many as 310,000 — are serving sentences in "reeducation through labor" camps and "other forms of administrative detention not subject to judicial review." The subjects of such crackdowns have included labor, religious and political activists, including Tiananmen Square protesters (at least 250 of whom remain behind bars) and Christians, Buddhists, Muslims and Falun Gong members. And, shades of apartheid, a particular focus of official ire has been ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and Tibet who are harshly persecuted for complaining about their lack of equal employment and educational opportunities.

So this is the kind of regime whose laws Yahoo shows such great respect for. Unfortunately, its conduct is not out of the ordinary, either for it or for other American media firms operating in China. They all eagerly kowtow to a despicable police state.

Yahoo, Google, MSN and other Web search engines have agreed to block searches in China involving words such as "Tibetan independence" or "human rights." Bloggers can't post messages involving "democracy" or other "dangerous" concepts. Rupert Murdoch's Star TV has agreed not to carry BBC news or other information that the Chinese government might not like. Cisco has sold Beijing thousands of routers programmed to monitor Internet usage and flag for the secret police any "subversive" sentiments.

There is a theory that greater access to information technology will further freedom in China. The reality is that the communist oligarchy is adroitly using the Internet to increase its level of control with the help of its American business partners.

The conduct of Yahoo et al should be illegal. The Commerce Department, and if necessary Congress, should forbid American firms from facilitating human rights abuses in China. Unfortunately, the Bush administration would probably block such rules because it continues to cling to the vain hope that Beijing will solve the North Korean nuclear crisis for us. The only pressure the administration is interested in applying at the moment is to get Chinese firms to stop selling us so many bras.

In lieu of government action, private investors should step into the breach. Recall how, in the 1980s, shareholders agitated for U.S. corporations to "disinvest" in South Africa or, if they did invest there, to at least follow the Sullivan Principles — created by a Baptist minister and GM board member, Leon Sullivan, in 1977 — mandating good corporate behavior. We need a similar campaign today to convince Yahoo and its ilk that helping to oppress a fifth of humanity does not make good business sense.

