

*Statement of the Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate***The Fourth of July, 2004: America's revolution 228 years on**

By Bill Van Auken
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The Fourth of July is once again upon us. For millions of overworked and underpaid Americans, it is one of the few occasions for a day off with their families. For the big business politicians, it is one more opportunity to wrap themselves in the Stars and Stripes and mouth speeches promoting nationalism, militarism and the virtues of “free enterprise.”

Inevitably, the official holiday pronouncements will omit any serious consideration of what this day commemorates: a struggle for freedom that once inspired peoples throughout the world.

Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge has ushered in the holiday with another set of vague warnings of imminent terrorist attacks, with no information as to how, when or where such atrocities might occur.

No one is urged to dwell on the fact that the day's fireworks displays are symbolic of an armed revolution against tyranny and colonialism. Yet, 228 years after the first July 4th, the issues arising from that revolution are posed more sharply than at any time in the country's history.

The holiday marks the anniversary of the signing of America's Declaration of Independence in 1776. The declaration's invocation of equality and “inalienable rights,” and its justification of revolution against tyranny, endowed it with world-historic significance. Those who signed it, and particularly its author, Thomas Jefferson, were inspired by the liberating intellectual, political and moral culture of the Enlightenment, and saw the document not as a peculiarly American charter, but rather as a universal call to rebel against the forces of despotism.

Jefferson said of the declaration: “May it be to the world what I believe it will be (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all) the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition have persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government. That form which we have substituted restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion. All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man.”

The contradictions between these democratic ideals and the realities of the American social system were undeniable from the outset. They were epitomized in the unsuccessful attempt by Jefferson, himself a Virginia slave-owner, to include in the document a denunciation of the British King's support of the slave trade as a “cruel war against human nature itself” and a violation of the “most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him.”

In a society associated in its early period with slavery and based upon economic inequality and exploitation, the conflict between the declaration's democratic principles and social reality has been a starting point in the struggle for socialism, and indeed for every battle against injustice—from abolitionism to the mass movement for workers' rights and the civil rights struggle against Jim Crow segregation—in America's history.

Never have these contradictions been so stark. Facile references to the present occupant of the White House as “King George” notwithstanding, the words of the declaration drafted by Jefferson and his fellow revolutionists more than two centuries ago read today like a criminal indictment of the Bush administration and the entire US political establishment.

Against the British king's invocation of the “divine right” of monarchical rule, the Declaration of Independence insisted that “governments are instituted among men, deriving their power from the consent of the governed.” Yet today, Americans are ruled by a government installed through the suppression of the popular vote in the stolen election of 2000—a government that holds power without the consent of the majority of those it governs.

This government is waging a war and occupation in Iraq that has subjected that country's 25 million people to colonial oppression far harsher and bloodier than that exercised by Great Britain against the American colonists of the eighteenth century. It has invoked a never-ending “war on terror”—of which the aggression against Iraq is supposedly a part—as the pretext for abrogating fundamental democratic rights affirmed in both the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution.

The declaration's bill of particulars against George III included the charge that “He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil Power.”

While this has been an undeniable tendency within the US political system for decades, expressed in the long line of military interventions launched without congressional declarations of war, the Bush administration has taken unrestrained militarism to unprecedented levels. This government has systematically undermined the principle of the subordination of the military to civilian authority.

It has claimed extraordinary powers for the president by invoking his supposedly unquestionable authority as “commander in chief.” Thus, the administration has asserted the right to ride roughshod over international law, launching unprovoked “preventive” wars against countries that have committed no hostile acts against the US. The administration's lawyers have argued that the president may even order the torture and killing of prisoners of war as he sees fit—a grotesque legal theory carried into practice at the notorious Abu Ghraib prison and other US detention centers.

The declaration also denounced the British king “for depriving us in many cases of the benefit of trial by jury.” The Fifth and Sixth Amendments to the US Constitution outlawed the dictatorial practice of imprisoning people without bringing charges or conducting trials. These sections of the Bill of Rights guarantee that “no person shall be held to answer for ... a crime unless on presentment or indictment of a grand jury” and that “the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury...”

Invoking the so-called “war against terrorism,” the Bush administra-

tion has assumed powers that even old King George dared not claim. By declaring an individual an “enemy combatant”—a term with no firm basis in either US or international law—the president and his prosecutors insist that they can cause anyone to “disappear.”

They claim the right to lock up citizens and non-citizens alike, without charges, hearings or even notification of families. They recognize no limit on these detentions. According to them, accused enemies of the state can be jailed for life without the presentation of a shred of evidence. Nothing more is required than the say-so of the president.

This policy has filled the detention camps at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba and elsewhere, and sent two US citizens to Navy briggs. Thousands more immigrants in the US were rounded up in the wake of September 11 and held without being charged.

Some of the Declaration’s accusations justifying revolution against British colonialism could easily be inscribed in a document championing armed resistance by Iraqis to the US occupation of their country.

In 1776, the American colonials indicted the king “for quartering large bodies of armed troops among us.” In Iraq, nearly 140,000 US soldiers and Marines are quartered indefinitely, killing and dying on a daily basis in a colonial war aimed at subjecting Iraq and its oil wealth to US domination.

The Declaration charged the British monarch with granting his troops and administrators immunity from prosecution in America for crimes committed there. It accused him of “protecting them, by a mock trial, from punishment for any murders which they should commit on inhabitants of these states.”

Shortly before the farcical “handover of sovereignty” to US-appointed puppets, Washington imposed blanket immunity for US troops and contractors from prosecution for any crimes under Iraqi law. The “mock trials” are well under way, with the prosecution of a handful of low-ranking reservists, who are considered by those in command to be expendable, while those responsible for what has clearly emerged as a systematic policy of torture originating in the White House go scot-free.

King George, the Declaration added, “is at this time transporting large armies of foreign mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation, and tyranny...” An unprecedented feature of the Iraqi occupation is the wholesale use of mercenaries—discretely referred to as “civilian contractors”—to carry out similar dirty work. These forces—estimated to number as high as 20,000—constitute the second largest military force in Iraq after the US Army. Amongst them are known war criminals, including members of death squads formed by the former Apartheid regime in South Africa and the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile.

The use of these forces serves not only to fatten the bank accounts of politically connected military contractors, but also provides a pool of trained killers and torturers accountable to no one.

It would be all too easy to conclude from the glaring contradictions between today’s ugly political realities and the shining ideals espoused in the Declaration of Independence that this document is merely a dead letter. The systematic corruption of the political system and the effective evisceration of the democratic rights of the people seem to have extinguished long ago the revolutionary traditions of 1776. For masses of people across the globe, it is not Jefferson’s evocation of democracy and equality that symbolize America, but rather Bush’s acts of aggression, mass killing and torture.

Yet, there are two Americas. One is Bush’s America, a fabulously wealthy financial oligarchy that has enriched itself through criminal enterprises, the destruction of the country’s social infrastructure, and

war. This clique of millionaires and billionaires controls the Democratic and Republican parties, both of which faithfully serve its interests.

The other America is a country of working people, increasingly drawn from every corner of the globe. These Americans, the vast majority of the population, live from paycheck to paycheck and are, to all intents and purposes, politically disenfranchised by the two-party system. It is their children, drawn into the military by economic necessity, who constitute the overwhelming share of the nearly 900 US troops killed and the thousands more wounded in Iraq.

It is the unprecedented gulf separating these two Americas that has rendered the democratic principles espoused in the country’s founding documents inoperable. Social polarization has never been more severe. According to a recent analysis of Federal Reserve data, while the top 1 percent more than doubled their financial wealth over the past two decades, the bottom two-fifths of the population saw their wealth decline by 46 percent.

The dramatic growth of economic inequality—the product of social policies enacted by Democratic and Republican administrations alike—makes it impossible to craft a policy on any major political question that upholds the interests of both the financial elite and the vast majority of Americans who work for a living. Such a system requires wholesale deception of the public and the suppression of all genuine political debate. Ultimately, it demands the destruction of every remnant of democratic rights affirmed in the struggle for American independence.

While in the mouths of both Bush and his Democratic collaborators “freedom” and “democracy” are merely code words for US corporate domination at home and unrestricted exploitation of other lands, for American working people they have a very different meaning. Millions are outraged by a government that rules only in the interests of the super-rich, that dragged the country into a criminal war based upon lies, and is destroying the people’s democratic rights and living standards.

This anger can find no expression in the present political setup. The bitter debate now raging within the ruling elite is not over the essential issues of imperialist aggression, ever-greater accumulation of wealth at the top, or the encroachments on civil liberties. Rather, it is over which candidate will prove a better CEO to manage the affairs of corporate America. The same essential policies will continue, no matter if Bush or Kerry is in the White House come 2005.

This is why the Socialist Equality Party has intervened in the 2004 elections. The purpose of my campaign, and that of the SEP candidates for Congress, is to provide an independent political voice for the working class, and a perspective and program to fight against war, social reaction and the attacks on democratic rights. We begin from an understanding that whatever remains progressive and democratic in the legacy of the American Revolution can be defended and taken forward solely through the independent mobilization of American working people in the struggle for socialism.

It is worth remembering this July 4th that enshrined in the Declaration of Independence is the right of the people to “alter or abolish” any form of government that stands in the way of their “unalienable rights,” and replace it with a different system that “to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.” We in the SEP are confident that American working people will exercise this right; that they will join with workers all over the world in another revolution, this time to put an end to capitalism and forge a new social order based upon equality, human solidarity and the concerted struggle to liberate humankind from poverty and oppression.