

The fate of democratic rights in the event of war: a reply to readers

Martin McLaughlin
22 April 1999

The following letter by World Socialist Web Site editorial board member Martin McLaughlin was written in reply to letters received by the WSWWS in response to his April 15 article. The full texts of these letters are linked to his reply.

A number of readers have questioned the prognosis advanced in my April 15 article, "What would be the consequences of a US declaration of war on Yugoslavia?" which argued that a formal declaration of war would set the stage for sweeping attacks on civil liberties at home, especially on the free speech rights of those opposed to the US-NATO attack.

KJ suggests that major intrusions on civil liberties could only take place during a major war when the United States itself was threatened, as in the roundup of Japanese-Americans during World War II. He rejects the notion that such actions could take place during a war with Yugoslavia, because "the Serbs won't be landing on our shores anytime soon."

This view reveals considerable naivete about the real nature of American democracy and ignorance of historical events much more recent than World War II.

In early 1984, when the Reagan administration was contemplating full-scale military intervention in Central America to bring about the overthrow of the Nicaraguan Sandinista regime and to defeat the leftist FMLN guerrillas in El Salvador, a group of National Security Council personnel was assigned to draft contingency plans for domestic security and anti-terrorist actions in the event of such a war. Lieutenant-Colonel Oliver North was in charge of this effort, which included a secret plan to suspend the US Constitution, declare martial law, and appoint military commanders to run state and local governments.

The NSC team, together with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), carried out a training exercise, called Rex '84 Alpha, from April 5 to April 13, 1984, to rehearse the measures which would be necessary at the onset of a US war in Central America. Rex 84 simulated a mass roundup of Central American immigrants in the United States, clearly modeled on the World War II detention of Japanese-Americans.

Together with these Nicaraguan-Americans, Salvadorean-Americans and Guatemalan-Americans, Oliver North proposed to arrest "known communist terrorists." He did not list which

organizations and individuals would fall in this category, but it would undoubtedly have included members and supporters of many socialist, antiwar and peace groups. One such group, labeled a suspected "terrorist" organization and subjected to FBI spying and infiltration, was the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), many of whose members were priests, nuns and other liberal Catholics.

Under the terms of National Security Decision Directive No. 52, issued by Reagan on April 6, 1984, as many as 400,000 people were targeted for arrest and confinement in former US Army bases--four times the number of arrests carried out by the Roosevelt administration during World War II. This for a war in which the "enemy," the impoverished countries of Central America, was just as unlikely to "land on our shores" as Milosevic. (For a fuller account, see the *Bulletin*, July 7, 1987, the *Miami Herald*, July 5, 19 and 26, 1987, and the pamphlet *Labor Must Act on Iran-Contra Crisis*, available from Mehring Books.)

The pretext of "fighting terrorism" has been used repeatedly in recent years to justify legislation which restricts civil liberties and to authorize an aggressive expansion of the powers of the FBI, CIA and other police and security agencies. This comes despite the fact that actual attacks by foreign terrorists on US targets have been relatively infrequent, certainly compared to the number of US military attacks on defenseless people overseas.

There is already evidence that the terrorist bogeyman will be employed vigorously as a pretext for domestic repression during the Yugoslavia war. Last week it was reported that the FBI has begun to investigate alleged threats that Serbian agents and sympathizers might place bombs at military bases in the United States. Given the large number of Serbian-Americans in the population--far greater than the number of Iraqi-Americans during the Persian Gulf War or Japanese-Americans during World War II--any general crackdown on potential opponents of the war in Yugoslavia could quickly assume a vast scope.

Another correspondent, GD, writes, "It is a constitutional guarantee to dissent, therefore opposition to a declared war cannot become illegal." But American history demonstrates very nearly the opposite: during every declared war, opposition and protest have enjoyed at best a semi-legal existence,

frequently being banned by law and always subject to harassment and repression in practice.

Take the most recent declared war, World War II. On the eve of the war, the US Congress passed and Franklin Roosevelt signed into law the notorious Smith Act, which made it illegal to advocate revolution in the United States. The Smith Act did not make it illegal to carry out violent actions against the government--these were already outlawed under ordinary criminal laws. Its purpose was to criminalize the political views of socialist and communist organizations.

In mid-1941, leaders of the Socialist Workers Party, then the American Trotskyist organization, were arrested under the Smith Act. Their trial in Minneapolis, Minnesota began on December 8, 1941, the day after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, and from the beginning it was clear that the SWP was being placed on trial because of its opposition to the US entry into World War II. Ultimately 18 leaders of the SWP were convicted and sent to prison for terms of a year or more.

During the same period the attorney general drew up a list of organizations whose political views were held to be inimical to the US government. This included not only openly pro-Nazi groups which sought to sabotage the war effort, but a whole series of socialist, radical, pacifist and left-liberal organizations, which were monitored by government agents and targeted for repression. Among the measures taken were banning publications of these groups from the mails, excluding their members from government employment, and informing private employers with a view to getting their members fired. The entire institutional framework for the postwar anticommunist witch-hunts was already in place under Roosevelt, before Joseph McCarthy and Richard Nixon even arrived in Washington.

A third correspondent, EP, writes that the WWSWS is exaggerating the threat to democratic rights in the event of a formal declaration of war with Yugoslavia. He believes that repression of dissent would be impossible because the US military, the police and the media would oppose it, and the American people would ignore any legislation outlawing opposition to the war. "This isn't the 70's, and it sure as hell isn't the 40's," he writes. "America has changed, for better or for worse, and writing as if it hasn't does nothing to strengthen the article."

EP's suggestion that the police and the media can be relied on to oppose domestic repression in time of war is ludicrous. Even in conditions of peace, the attitude of the police to left-wing political opposition to American capitalism is one of barely restrained hatred, while the commercial mass media routinely suppresses any expression of political opinion outside the official consensus of the two right-wing capitalist parties in Washington. In wartime, this intolerance of dissent will operate at full force.

If the US government has not found it necessary to impose formal censorship in wartime it is only because the media,

owned by a handful of giant corporate conglomerates, exercises self-censorship to a degree which makes direct Pentagon control superfluous. Last year an attempt by several courageous journalists at CNN to expose US use of nerve gas weapons during the Vietnam War led to their firing and the retraction of the well-documented report. This affair served as a warning to the entire media, a lesson which was reinforced this week by the dismissal of Peter Arnett, CNN's best-known war correspondent.

In contrast to the police and media, there would be considerable sympathy for antiwar opinion within the military, at least in its lower ranks, in the event of a protracted war in the Balkans. During the Vietnam War, thousands of rank-and-file soldiers engaged in one form or another of opposition activity, ranging from wearing to peace symbols to directly disobeying orders and even "fragging" particularly hated officers. Such conduct by ordinary soldiers, however, does not mean that the military as an institution would be incapable of carrying out repression within the United States.

It was during the Vietnam War that soldiers of elite units were deployed within the United States to suppress rioting in urban ghettos. The 82nd Airborne Division, for instance, just recently returned from Southeast Asia, saw duty in Detroit during the July 1967 riot. National Guard troops also took part in domestic repression, most notoriously at Kent State University in Ohio, where soldiers shot to death four students on May 4, 1970.

As for the likelihood that a crackdown on antiwar dissent would provoke popular opposition, we would be the last to deny this. The American people are deeply attached to democratic rights and, whatever the initial confusion which accompanies the onset of war, intensifying domestic repression will produce a reaction. But to acknowledge this is not the same thing as asserting that such a crackdown could not take place. On the contrary, in our view, a declaration of war on Yugoslavia, let alone a full-scale ground war in the Balkans, would create the conditions for major political and social explosions within the United States.

Full texts of the letters sent to the WWSWS



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact