

# Once again on the New York Times and Bush's police-state measures

David Walsh  
10 December 2001

The *New York Times* returned to the question of the Bush administration's police-state measures in an editorial December 2 ("War and the Constitution").

We commented in the WSWWS on the *Times*' previous criticism of Bush on this issue (a November 16 editorial, "A Travesty of Justice"), noting the newspaper's dishonest attempt to "separate his [Bush's] assault on democratic rights at home from the open-ended and brutal assertion of American militarism in the so-called 'war on terrorism.'" [The *New York Times* and Bush's military tribunals]

The new editorial goes farther, outlining in some detail the anti-democratic character of the proposals of Bush, Ashcroft and company. It reads in part:

"After the brutal attacks of Sept. 11, the Bush administration began building a parallel criminal justice system, decree by decree, largely removed from the ordinary oversight of Congress and the courts. In this shadow system, people can be rounded up by the government and held at undisclosed locations for indefinite periods of time. It is a system that allows the government to conduct warrantless wiretaps of conversations between prisoners and their lawyers, a system in which defendants can be tried and condemned to death by secret military tribunals run according to procedural rules that bear scant resemblance to normal military justice."

In expounding at greater length on the character of the Bush measures, the *Times* only deepens the contradictions of its positions and the profound dishonesty of its arguments.

In the first place, the newspaper's stance is extremely muted, concentrating its criticism along two lines: that the "Bush administration is taking us down a path that will surely wind up embarrassing the country and undermining our own standing as a defender of international human rights and global justice" and that the measures unfairly target non-citizens (thus "sectioning off one segment of humanity as unworthy of the same basic civil rights as everyone else").

The editors refuse to draw the conclusion that the extraordinary events warrant: that the Bush administration is carrying out the most far-reaching political-legal changes in modern US history. It is implementing plans, long harbored by the extreme right, for authoritarian rule, which place a question mark over the continued existence of American democracy.

This is an event with vast implications, which opens a period of great social and political struggles in the US.

Not only does it ignore these implications, remarkably the *Times* offers no explanation as to why Bush, Ashcroft and company are proposing their anti-democratic measures. There is not one reference to the possible driving forces behind their actions. The reader would be left with the impression that the government is merely overreacting to the September 11 events, that it has taken a series of mistaken decisions, which can be counteracted by a degree of pressure from public opinion.

The tepid character of the *Times*' response reveals the lack of commitment to democratic principles that it has demonstrated in recent years. In a series of political events—the Whitewater and Clinton-Lewinsky scandals, the Wen Ho Lee witch-hunt—the *Times* acted as the ally and indeed mouthpiece for extreme right-wing elements. The newspaper's attempt to cast itself in the role of stalwart defender of the Constitution after its conniving in conspiracy during much of the last decade, including the attempt at an extra-parliamentary coup led by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr and the House Republicans, is fraudulent.

The *Times*, along with the rest of the American media, has been instrumental in assisting the extreme right to assume power, deliberately concealing the dangers from the American people and helping lull it to sleep. Not surprisingly, the *Times* feels no obligation to address the scandals and crises antecedent to September 11, nor the reprehensible part it played in them.

In the December 2 piece the *Times*' editors repeat the same essential argument they advanced in the earlier one: the US cause in Afghanistan is a just one that should not be tainted through its association with arbitrary and undemocratic policies at home. They write, in the editorial's pivotal passage: "We do not want history to record this as one of those mixed moments in which the behavior of our government failed to live up to the performance of our troops in the field."

The falsity of this argument, that the dictatorial measures in the US are entirely unrelated to the war in Afghanistan, is all the more obvious in light of the recent episodes in the conflict: the slaughter of hundreds of prisoners of war at Mazar-i-Sharif presided over by the CIA and US military, other summary executions, the activities of Special Operations and CIA torture

and assassination squads, the bombing of civilians. The actions of the government in the domestic “war against terrorism” are entirely in line with the conduct of US forces in Central Asia: police-state rule at home, imperialist aggression abroad.

The *Times* reasoning is untenable, even absurd. The editorial describes in considerable detail the government’s genuinely repressive and frightening attacks on civil liberties and then suggests this is taking place in the context of a legitimate and honorable war against terrorists in Afghanistan, as though the two phenomena existed in separate universes. Is it not far more plausible that there is a link between the two policies unashamedly conducted by the same regime?

The war in Afghanistan, as accumulating evidence has revealed, is an effort by the US ruling elite to establish its dominion over a vital region of the world, in the vicinity of the former Soviet republics surrounding the Caspian Sea. Vast oil and natural gas deposits are at stake. More generally, the war in Afghanistan is Phase One in the reckless and destabilizing attempt by US capitalism, making use of its overwhelming military superiority, to reorganize and, in fact, dominate the globe. After Afghanistan, what next? The reactionary media—*Wall Street Journal*, the Murdoch-owned print and television outlets—do not debate *whether* the US will launch another war, merely *when* and *against whom*.

And there is not only a link between the war and Bush’s anti-democratic policies, but between the war and events in the recent past: the conspiracy to impeach a president, the hijacking of an election, the takeover of the US government by the ultra-right. Even if one were to accept the official version of September 11, and we do not, the events that have taken place in its wake only bring to a climax an historical process at work over a considerable period of time: the disintegration of bourgeois democracy in the US under conditions of a vast social chasm between a wealthy handful and the mass of the population.

The argument of the Bush administration and its supporters is far more consistent than that of the *Times*’ editors. They simply repeat over and over: we are at war, we have to exterminate the terrorists, we need extraordinary powers to carry out this work, trust us. They see no contradiction between the conduct of the war on its “two fronts.” And, in fact, none exists.

The *Times*, along with Democratic Party leaders, has made no call for an investigation into the September 11 events or the anthrax scare that followed it. On its own pages December 3 the newspaper carried a story (“Terror Anthrax Linked to Type Made by U.S.”) hinting strongly that someone connected with the US military or its former biowarfare program was responsible for the anthrax attacks. The article contained potentially explosive material, yet its contents pass by the editors without comment.

Along with everything else, there is a considerable degree of self-deception in the *Times*’ reasoning. The editorial board reflects the thinking of a social tendency that has been

corrupted by privilege, benefiting from a system based on the increasingly parasitic accumulation of wealth and naked exploitation of the working class, and which has lost the ability to look reality in the face. The December 2 editorial is half-hearted, unconvincing. Having accepted the argument that the war is just, the newspaper’s editors undermine their own position. They are protesting from their knees.

The *Times* speaks for the privileged upper middle class layer that constitutes what remains of liberalism. This layer’s concerns about Bush’s reactionary measures have far more to do with its ability to continue functioning as an ostensibly liberal faction within the political establishment than with the defense of the basic rights of the American people.

The constituency for social reform within sections of the ruling elite, which assumed organized form during the Roosevelt New Deal era in the 1930s and maintained its strength throughout the next several decades, has collapsed. The section of the population that became fabulously rich during the stock market and profit boom of the 1990s has moved sharply to the right.

The impossible contradictions in the *Times*’ arguments mirror the deep crisis of bourgeois democracy. The newspaper’s own evolution is one reflection of that crisis. Liberalism is incapable today of undertaking a principled defense of democratic rights. Such a defense will have to be organized on a new political basis.

Serious opposition to the Bush administration’s measures at home and abroad will emerge from the one constituency for democratic rights in the US—the working class, as it breaks, under the impact of enormous events, from previous political allegiances and illusions and turns toward an international socialist program.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**