

The war in Afghanistan and the crisis of political rule in America

Part 1

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A case can be made for the following axiom: the more absurd and disingenuous the official justifications given by a political elite for its policies, the greater the crisis of the regime. A regime in deep crisis cannot tell the truth—or anything approaching the truth—not only to the people, but also to itself. The underlying social contradictions, and the intensity of the conflicts within the ruling layers themselves, simply do not permit it.

This conception is useful in beginning to consider the state of bourgeois rule in the United States at the onset of the twenty-first century. Let us recall that the political crisis that convulsed the American political and media establishment for more than a year in 1998-99 was officially attributed to the fact that Bill Clinton had a sexual liaison and lied about it. Any attempt to seek more profound causes for the first-ever impeachment of an elected president was generally dismissed by official opinion-makers as moral lassitude, pro-Clinton propaganda, or both.

Now we confront a brutal war in Afghanistan that is only the initial front in an open-ended global military crusade against terrorism, combined with the most far-reaching assault on democratic rights in US history. This historical turning point, we are told, is to be explained simply as the response of the Bush administration to the terror attacks of September 11—attacks that were unforeseen and unforeseeable, and which dictated to the American government all of the measures it has taken since, both internationally and at home.

There is ample and mounting factual evidence that the official version of September 11, which depicts the American CIA, FBI, Pentagon and White House as innocent, if hapless, victims, is a compilation of lies and evasions. We will return to this question in due course.

More fundamentally, the government-media line is a crude attempt to deny the fact that the eruption of American militarism and implementation of authoritarian methods of rule are the outcome of historical processes that have been at work for a protracted period, culminating in the political wars of the 1990s and the stolen election of 2000. Anyone who cares to read the statements and commentaries carried by the *World Socialist Web Site* since its inception four years ago, and those published in the antecedent publications of the Socialist Equality Party, will see that a definite political logic underlies the traumatic events of today—a logic that can be, and has been, rationally uncovered and analyzed by the Marxist movement. There are tens of thousands of readers of the WSWs around the world who can attest to this fact.

In the space of four months the American ruling elite has effected the most far-reaching attack on democratic rights in US history. The measures enacted by the Bush administration go far beyond a mere quantitative expansion of certain investigative powers. They constitute a basic restructuring of the police and intelligence apparatus to vastly expand its scope and reach.

The United States has undergone a radical transformation in the structure of the government, in the relationship between the people and the police and armed forces, and in the legal and constitutional framework.

Allow me to quote from a statement posted November 7 on the WSWs:

“The White House has assumed vast new powers for internal repression, establishing by executive order an Office of Homeland Security that is not subject to either congressional oversight or any vote on the personnel appointed to run it. An all-encompassing political police agency is coming into being, through the passage of an ‘anti-terror’ law that effectively amalgamates the FBI and CIA and abolishes the longstanding separation between overseas spying and domestic policing.

“Side by side with the bombing of Afghanistan, the Bush administration has declared that there is a second front in the war, the war at home. The federal government issues vague and unsubstantiated ‘terror alerts,’ which fuel anxiety while providing no protection to the public. Government spokesmen urge the population to get used to measures like random police searches and roadblocks as a permanent feature of life. National Guard troops patrol the airports, harbors, bridges, tunnels and even the US Capitol.

“Fundamental constitutional safeguards—the right of *habeas corpus*, the right of the accused to know the charges against them, the right of arrested persons to see a lawyer, even the presumption of innocence—have been set aside for millions of immigrants from the Middle East and Central Asia. The right to privacy has been all but abolished for the entire population, with government intelligence agencies given the green light to plant bugs and wiretaps, monitor financial transactions, and conduct other forms of spying, virtually at will.

“If the average American had been shown on September 10 a picture of the United States as it is today, the response would likely have been: ‘This is not the America I know. This looks more like a police state.’

“The bitter irony is that such a sweeping attack on democratic rights has been perpetrated in the name of a war to defend ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ against terrorism. But neither the Bush administration, nor its Democratic Party collaborators, nor a compliant and complicit media bother to explain the following contradiction: the United States government never secured powers such as these at any point in the twentieth century. Not in World War I, World War II or the Cold War, when the antagonists were powerful and heavily armed states, was such a

radical restructuring of the government and legal framework carried out. Why is this happening today, when the alleged enemy is a small band of terrorists operating out of caves in one of the poorest countries in the world?"

The measures listed above have been carried out within the context of a massive police dragnet that has resulted in the imprisonment of some 1,200 people, many of whom have been held at secret locations without being charged and without proper access to legal representation. The United States has seen nothing like this since the Red Scare of 1919-1920, when the American ruling class reacted to the Bolshevik Revolution by imprisoning and deporting thousands of immigrants.

Since the above-quoted article was posted, Bush has announced the establishment of military tribunals where non-citizens designated by the White House as terrorists can be tried in secret without any of the basic protections guaranteed by the US Constitution. The star chamber proceedings set forth in Bush's executive order make the 1999 show trial of Kurdish separatist leader Abdullah Ocalan in Turkey seem a model of due process, by comparison. Under Bush's pronouncement a reputed terrorist can be tried, convicted and executed in secret on the basis of a two-thirds vote by a jury handpicked by the president.

Attorney General John Ashcroft has enacted, also by executive order, a measure giving him the power to overrule immigration courts and keep aliens in jail indefinitely. The government has leaked reports to the press that it plans to lift restrictions on police spying on domestic political organizations.

Congress, with bipartisan support, has authorized the posting of armed soldiers at the Capitol building, and the Supreme Court has announced it will bar the public from its hearings.

In order to acclimate the public to a government that operates largely in secret, the White House has, with great fanfare, announced that the vice president, Dick Cheney, will spend most of his time in secret, secure locations away from Washington.

From a constitutional standpoint, the measures enacted by the Bush administration represent the dismantling of the system of checks and balances established by the Constitution's framers, according to which the state consists of three coequal branches—the executive, the legislative and the judicial. Bush has arrogated to himself and his administration unprecedented powers, relegating the other branches to the status of little more than a rubber stamp.

This is being done with the enthusiastic support of the Republican congressional leadership and the tacit connivance of the Democrats. It is worth noting that at the height of the anthrax scare, in mid-October, congressional Republicans favored shutting down Congress and adjourning indefinitely, the better to give Bush, the FBI, the CIA and the military a free hand, both abroad and at home.

Administration spokesmen have justified these measures with statements that reveal a combination of ignorance of basic constitutional principles, and contempt for the democratic content lodged in these safeguards. Bush, for example, has repeatedly declared that he has no intention of telling the generals how to conduct their war—an explicit repudiation of the core principle of civilian control over the military.

In his testimony last month before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Ashcroft issued a threat to any congressmen who might dare oppose Bush's authoritarian dictates. Employing one of the standard tactics of the Republican right—accusing your enemies of the crimes you are committing—he denounced critics for pitting "Americans against immigrants and citizens against non-citizens." He continued: "[T]o those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty, my message is this: your tactics only aid terrorists, for they erode our national unity and diminish our resolve. They give ammunition to America's enemies, a pause to America's friends. They encourage people of good will to remain silent in the face of evil."

Under the Bush doctrine, anyone who "aids terrorists" is guilty of terrorism and subject to the full repressive powers of the state. The implication could not be more clear.

In a breathtaking repudiation of basic democratic conceptions, Ashcroft went on to say that Bush had no obligation to consult Congress because "the Constitution vests the president with the extraordinary and sole authority, as commander-in-chief, to lead our nation in times of war." This crude falsification of the Constitution amounts to an open justification for presidential dictatorship.

At a speech in Portland, Oregon on January 6, Bush set forth a rationale for conducting a full-scale political witch-hunt, declaring he intended to prosecute not only terrorists, but anyone "who espouses a philosophy that's terrorist and bent." This followed the assertion that congressional Democrats could only reverse the tax breaks for the wealthy passed last year "over my dead body." Aside from the implied threat of physical violence, this pronouncement suggests that the Bush White House has no intention of abiding by congressional action that cuts across its program for further enriching the financial elite. It raises a further question: will Bush permit a mere technicality, such as electoral defeat, to drive him from office, or must this also be accomplished "over my dead body"?

The Bush administration has made clear that, as far as it is concerned, the battery of authoritarian measures it has imposed are not temporary changes. They are, it insists, essential components of the global war on terrorism, a war that must be fought both abroad and at home, and which has no endpoint in time and no geographical boundaries.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, in a column in the November 1 edition of the *Washington Post*, baldly stated that not only should the American people accept an open-ended war against terrorism, but they must "prepare now for the next war—a war that may be vastly different not only from those of the past century but also from the new war on terrorism that we are fighting today." In other words, America is going on a war footing, not only for the duration of a specific conflict in Afghanistan, but indefinitely. Consequently, the domestic police measures being taken now by the government must also be accepted as a permanent state of affairs.

The sum total of measures enacted since September 11—and no one should doubt that even more extreme actions are on the drawing boards—constitute the legal and political framework for a bonapartist dictatorship, resting primarily on the police and military apparatus.

During the Republican campaign to remove Clinton from office, the *World Socialist Web Site* noted the apparent incongruity of ultra-right forces, who have for years sought to strengthen the police powers of the state, deliberately humiliating and degrading not only the president, but also the institution of the presidency. We made the point then that this political wrecking operation, while revealing the recklessness of the Republicans, by no means meant that the Republican right had become hostile to a "strong" executive. What they were setting out to destroy was the last vestiges of an "activist" presidency, in the sense that this term had acquired since the days of Franklin Roosevelt, i.e., a presidency that promoted reformist measures which to some degree limited the prerogatives and power of the corporate oligarchy.

Once they had their man in the White House, we predicted, the Republican right would insist on a vast expansion of the powers of the executive branch to crack down and repress social and political dissent at home, and wage war abroad. Recent events have fully confirmed this prognosis.

To conclude this review of the post-September 11 domestic measures, let me return to the WSWWS statement of November 7 cited above: "The Bush administration's domestic 'anti-terror' campaign must serve as a sharp warning. After the Florida debacle of November and December 2000, there were complacent commentaries in the press declaring that, unlike many other countries, the bitter political struggle in the United States did not end with tanks in the streets. Now the tanks *are* in the

streets, and soldiers surround the Capitol, in what might be called a slow-motion coup d'état.”

Central to the government-media propaganda campaign is the myth that on September 11 “everything changed.” But, as numerous commentators have demonstrated—most incisively the WWS—the plans for US military intervention in Afghanistan and Central Asia were well developed and the preliminary stages of something akin to “Operation Enduring Freedom” were already under way prior to the terror attacks on New York and Washington. Similarly, the most right-wing sections of the political, financial and military elite were pressing for authoritarian domestic measures to accompany a massive expansion of US imperialist aggression abroad and deal with the growing danger of social unrest at home.

What was lacking was a suitable pretext, a *casus belli*. The events of September 11 provided the *casus belli* that the cabal around Bush was seeking. To substantiate this claim one can, as they say, go to the horse’s mouth. Consider the words of Zbigniew Brzezinski, one of the primary authors of the US policy of subversion and destabilization in Afghanistan that provoked the 1979 Soviet invasion and led to decades of war and civil war in that unfortunate country. As President Carter’s national security adviser, Brzezinski spearheaded the policy of inciting Islamic fundamentalism and allying with elements like Osama bin Laden to undermine Soviet influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

In his 1997 book *The Grand Chessboard*, Brzezinski wrote: “It is a ... fact that America is too democratic at home to be autocratic abroad. This limits the use of America’s power, especially its capacity for military intimidation. Never before has a populist democracy attained international supremacy. But the pursuit of power is not a goal that commands popular passion, *except in conditions of a sudden threat or challenge to the public’s sense of domestic well-being*” (emphasis added).

In reality, the frontal assault on traditional bourgeois democratic methods and institutions is the culmination of more than two decades of political reaction and attacks on democratic rights in the US. This period has seen a steady buildup of the repressive forces of the state—two million Americans in prison, thousands on Death Row, legal restrictions on the rights of defendants, expanded powers of police spying and domestic surveillance. This has been accompanied by the emergence of a fascist right wing with little popular support, but enormous influence in the Republican Party, in Congress, and now in the White House.

The decay of American democracy reached a culmination in the political wars of the 1990s. We have written a great deal about this complex and immensely significant process, but I will try to recapitulate its basic features.

Ultimately, the death agony of American democracy is rooted in fundamental shifts in the social structure of the US, which in turn are expressions within the US of changes in the structure of world economy and the relation between American and global capitalism. The most significant feature of these changes domestically is the growth of social inequality, particularly over the past two decades.

Bound up with the growing chasm between a highly privileged elite and the broad masses of the population are other critical developments—the proletarianization of large sections of the middle classes and the decline in the social and political weight of the traditional middle class, the narrowing of the social base of the two bourgeois parties and their ever more pronounced shift to the right, the insulation of the entire political and media establishment and its alienation from the general population, the impact of centrifugal tendencies on all layers of society, including the corporate and political elite. With the end of the Cold War, the basic pillar of political consensus—the struggle against Soviet “communism”—was removed, and the ruling elite was suddenly deprived of its most important ideological means for holding together an increasingly complex, socially polarized and ethnically diverse society.

Even as the Democratic Party and the liberal establishment sought to

adapt themselves to the rightward movement of large and powerful sections of the corporate oligarchy, abandoning any lingering commitment to social reform and adopting the laissez faire nostrums of the Republican right, the conflicts within the ruling layers intensified. As is now manifest, this phenomenon was rooted in the fact that substantial sections of the ruling class were not simply demanding a quantitative expansion of reactionary social policies and attacks on democratic rights, but were, in fact, breaking with the entire framework of American bourgeois democracy. As the Republican insurgents around former House Speaker Newt Gingrich often proclaimed, they considered themselves “revolutionaries,” and, indeed, they were the shock troops of a profoundly anti-democratic tendency that aimed at a counterrevolution in political methods and forms of rule.

An important factor in this process was the demise of the AFL-CIO trade unions as a significant political and social force. To the extent that the labor movement was rendered impotent and the working class deprived of any organized expression of its interests on a mass scale, even in the severely limited form of its traditional trade unions, the most predatory sections of the ruling elite felt themselves free to pursue their policies unhindered by the threat of resistance from what passed for “organized labor.”

This political process was bound up with the growth of parasitism and corruption within the ruling layers of unprecedented proportions. Two decades of stock market boom and social reaction were marked by swindling and criminality in business and political circles on a scale far beyond the worst days of the robber barons. Together with the wholesale looting of the economy came a fixation on the most short-term gains and a decline within the ruling class of any long-term, more far-sighted strategy for maintaining its rule.

We have in the past noted the nodal points in this process. The Republican shutdown of the federal government in 1995-96, carried out in an attempt to impose the social agenda of the extreme right in the teeth of popular opposition, boomeranged, enabling Clinton to win reelection in 1996. This only strengthened the hostility toward democratic forms building up within ruling class layers allied with the Republicans, and heightened their sense that history was moving against them. They concluded that they had to adopt extra-parliamentary means—the methods of political conspiracy, dirty tricks and usurpation—to obtain their ends. Hence the escalation of their covert war against the Clinton administration, culminating in the Paula Jones lawsuit, the Monica Lewinsky provocation, and the impeachment of Clinton in late 1998.

The mid-term election of November 1998 dealt a further blow to the Republicans and heightened their frustration and recklessness. Popular hostility toward the Republican impeachment drive and Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr was reflected in a defeat for the Republicans, who lost seats and barely hung on to their majority in the House of Representatives. Gingrich resigned his seat in Congress only days after the election.

But the popular verdict on impeachment only reinforced the conviction of the right wing that it had to employ extra-parliamentary and pseudo-legal means to achieve its ends. The Republicans proceeded with their coup attempt, and the following month the House, in a strictly partisan vote, impeached Clinton.

In the end, the attempt to remove Clinton from office failed. In the face of overwhelming popular opposition to the Starr witch-hunt, the Senate refused to convict Clinton. However, the craven response of the Democrats, who refused to turn the tables and expose the conspiracy against democratic rights at the heart of the impeachment campaign, and the outright complicity of the liberal media in the sordid and reactionary affair, emboldened the forces involved in the plot. They concluded, correctly, that they would face no serious opposition from within the political establishment to their assault on democratic rights.

For these forces, the 2000 election was a decisive battleground. It was their last best chance to achieve what they had failed to achieve in the Clinton years. Hence the decision to nominate as their standard bearer a political and intellectual cipher—George W. Bush—with acceptable right-wing credentials and blood ties to one of the most corrupt political families in American history.

The election revealed a country deeply split, but one in which the most vibrant centers of industry and urban life, where the bulk of the working class was concentrated, repudiated the nostrums of the Republican right. The Democratic candidate, Al Gore, made a populist appeal to the electorate, campaigning as the spokesman for the “people” against the “powerful,” singling out certain sections of big business and attacking Bush’s plan to slash taxes for the wealthy. Gore’s populism was timid, inconsistent and dishonest, and it was combined with capitulation to the Republican impeachment drive—signified by his selection of Senator Joseph Lieberman as his running mate. Lieberman had distinguished himself by denouncing Clinton in the well of the Senate early on in the Starr investigation of the Lewinsky affair.

Nevertheless, Gore won the popular vote and carried most working class districts. Combined with the protest vote for Green Party candidate Ralph Nader, the election result showed a significant majority in favor of what, in American political terms, constitutes a left-liberal social policy. Popular anger over the impeachment drive was reflected in the defeat of Republican congressmen prominent in the campaign to remove Clinton, and the election of Hillary Clinton to a Senate seat from New York.

Even before the final vote tally was in, the Republican campaign had decided to utilize its support in the media, the military and the courts to overturn the voters’ mandate and steal the election. In numerous articles and statements the WSWS has detailed the methods employed by the Bush campaign. It is not necessary to repeat our analysis of the events of November and December 2000 here. However, one thing should be said: beginning on election night, when Bush held an extraordinary press conference at the governor’s mansion in Austin, Texas to denounce the networks for putting Florida in the Gore column, the Bush campaign never considered allowing the outcome of the election to be decided by the vote of the electorate. It set in motion a massive operation to hijack the White House.

In the course of the five-week struggle over the Florida vote that ended with the intervention of the US Supreme Court, the Republican Party organized a mob attack on election officials in Miami-Dade County that had the intended effect of convincing them to shut down their recount of the disputed ballots. Republican officials and Bush campaign spokesmen made direct appeals to the US military to oppose the recounts that were requested by the Democrats and sanctioned by the Florida Supreme Court. They sought to whip up a pogromist frenzy within the fascist right, employing the technique of the “big lie” to accuse the Democrats of doing precisely what they themselves were doing—stealing the election.

When the right-wing majority on the US Supreme Court handed down its December 12 decision overturning the Florida Supreme Court, halting the counting of votes and handing the White House to Bush, it did so on the basis of a reactionary interpretation of the Constitution that held the American people had no constitutional right to vote for the president of the US.

In light of recent events, one aspect of our analysis of the 2000 election emerges as particularly important. The WSWS pointed to a crucial feature of the election crisis in a November 15, 2000 article entitled “The Bush campaign and the rise of the political underworld.” This is a portion of what we said:

“The events which have taken place in the past week in the US presidential election, beginning with Election Night itself, have cast light on a political phenomenon of immense significance: the rise to the pinnacle of the American political system of elements of a gangster

character.

“These extreme-right elements, who now control the Republican Party, know very well that they cannot take control of the American government by democratic means, because there is widespread popular opposition to their policies. Entrenched in the Republican congressional leadership and the judiciary, they are now seeking to seize control of the presidency through what amounts to a political putsch.

“The right-wing cabal includes operatives for the Bush campaign and the Republican Party, steeped in the method of political ‘dirty tricks’; media spokesmen like the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Post* and an array of talk-radio hosts, for whom no lie is too brazen or absurd; and the network of extreme-right lawyers, like the sinister Theodore Olson [who is now the solicitor general of the United States, appointed by Bush], who played central roles in the Paula Jones lawsuit and the impeachment and trial of President Clinton.”

This article was important because it highlighted a fact that is essential to an understanding of contemporary events, not only in the US, but internationally—the coming to power of a government not only quantitatively more reactionary, but qualitatively of a different character from previous governments, including previous Republican governments. This is a government of the radical right, whose main social base is the most reactionary and parasitic sections of the economic elite and the upper middle class—precisely those elements that acquired enormous wealth and influence in the speculative boom of the 1980s and 1990s. Bush himself, the failed oilman who cashed in on his daddy’s name and was handed a small fortune by Bush family cronies, is very much a man of this social element.

As for the outlook and methods of this underworld element, let me recall an article we posted November 24, 2000 entitled “The Republican right prepares for violence.” We wrote: “The frenzied response of the Bush campaign and its allies in the media to Tuesday’s ruling by the Florida Supreme Court has highlighted a political fact of immense significance: the Republican Party has become the organ of extreme right-wing forces that are prepared to use extra-parliamentary and violent methods to achieve their aims.

“Spokesmen for George W. Bush and pro-Republican media outlets reacted to the court’s decision, which simply affirmed the constitutional requirement that all votes be fairly counted, with calls for the Florida legislature to defy the court and appeals to the military of a semi-insurrectionary character.”

The article went on to cite a column in the *Wall Street Journal* headlined “The Democratic Party’s War on the Military,” which spoke in the language of fascism of the “twitching carcass” of the Democratic Party’s “left”—“teachers’ unions, feminist activists, gay victimologists, black churches, faculty clubs.”

The WSWS also cited an earlier editorial from the *Wall Street Journal* that carried the provocative and sinister headline: “The Squeamish GOP?” The *Journal* wrote: “The conventional wisdom is that if with this hassle Governor Bush does become President he will be a crippled one. Perhaps. But we find it equally plausible that facing down the kind of assault now being waged in Florida would be precisely the best preparation for what may lie ahead. It is Governor Bush’s nature to extend the velvet glove, but he will be much more successful if he and his party can show that within it there is some steel.”

The WSWS commented: “Significantly, the editorial was entitled ‘The Squeamish GOP?’ The *Journal* chooses its words advisedly, in this case employing a term that connotes an aversion to bloodshed. The meaning of the newspaper’s editors was unmistakable—a Republican president must be prepared to use violence and repression to impose his reactionary social agenda. Gaining the White House by suppressing votes and riding roughshod over the popular will is an excellent preparation for dealing with ‘what may lie ahead’—i.e., widespread popular opposition.

“It is high time to stop masking the character of the Republican right with the complacent term ‘conservative.’ These are fascistic elements who are breaking with the traditional methods of bourgeois democracy.

“There is a logic to politics. Once influential sections of the ruling elite conclude they cannot achieve their aims through democratic means and take the path of conspiracy and repression, they are well on the way to civil war.

“It is not here a matter of predicting the imminent imposition of a military dictatorship. But it would be the height of folly to ignore the signposts of such a danger looming ahead. If the campaign the Republicans are waging to gain the White House begins to resemble a covert operation akin to those mounted by the CIA against US imperialism’s liberal and leftist opponents in Latin America—for example, in Chile—then it must follow that an option under serious consideration is the Pinochet solution.”

The assessment we made of the 2000 election has been richly vindicated by the events of the past four months.[The world historical implications of the political crisis in the United States] One year ago, I said in a lecture here in Sydney: “The 2000 election in the United States is a historical watershed. It marks an irrevocable break with the forms and traditions of American democracy.... [America’s] ruling elite has embarked on a course that must lead either to authoritarian rule of a fascist type, or social revolution.”

More recently we wrote: “Future generations will look back on the election of 2000 as the definitive point at which the American ruling class embarked on the road to dictatorship. All of the authoritarian impulses that have assumed such ominous and concrete forms since September 11 were already revealed in the methods employed by the Bush campaign and the Republican Party to effect an electoral coup d’état...”

“A government that seizes power by means of fraud and usurpation must rule by the same means. It is, in objective terms, a government of provocation and coercion, with no democratic mandate and no constitutional legitimacy. Lacking a serious social base of public support, and facing a deepening economic and social crisis, it was inevitable that the Bush administration would turn to repression and violence to defend itself against the threat of resistance from below.”

The 2000 election demonstrated that there is no longer any significant constituency within the American corporate and political establishment for the defense of democratic rights. Powerful and politically dominant sections of the American ruling elite have broken with democratic procedures. Within the liberal sections of the establishment, which long ago abandoned any commitment to social reform or a lessening of economic inequality, the prevailing attitude is a combination of cowardice and indifference. The Democrats’ half-hearted and conciliatory response to the theft of the election demonstrated conclusively that they fear a movement of the masses far more than they fear the fascistic methods and aims of the Republican right. The only social force capable of defending democratic rights is the working class.

How can one sum up the character of the Bush administration? Its watchwords are corruption, reaction and criminality. Of course, these are not novel features of American politics or American governments. But they so thoroughly pervade this administration, and on such a colossal scale, as to distinguish it from previous governments.

In general, the leading personnel consist of either military figures, veterans of the Reagan and Bush (the elder) administrations, who parlayed their political influence into personal fortunes in the corporate world, especially big oil, or ideologues of the extreme right with ties to the Christian fundamentalists, the anti-abortion fanatics, militia elements, and outright racist and anti-Semitic organizations.

For the purposes of this lecture I will focus on certain aspects of Bush’s political team. First there is the CIA-terrorist faction. George W. Bush has brought back into government several key figures from the Iran-Contra

crisis of the 1980s. To refresh everyone’s memory, Iran-Contra became the designation for a secret and illegal operation sanctioned by Reagan to sell missiles to Iran and use the proceeds to finance the Contra death squads in Nicaragua. Lt. Colonel Oliver North, from an office in the basement of the White House, headed up this “off-the-shelf” operation. The entire project was in violation of the Boland Amendment, which had been passed by Congress to prohibit US aid to the Contras. North’s cabal of CIA operatives, military men and Latin American assassins reported to Reagan’s national security chief, John Poindexter, who reported to Reagan. It was a secret branch of the government, dedicated to supporting right-wing terrorism on a mass scale.

George Bush the elder, at that time Reagan’s vice president, was deeply involved in this dirty operation. One of his last actions before leaving the White House after his loss to Clinton in 1992 was to pardon Reagan’s Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger for Iran-Contra-related offenses, as well as Elliot Abrams, an assistant secretary of state under Reagan who was heavily implicated in the crimes of the Contras. Abrams lied shamelessly in congressional testimony and pleaded guilty to perjury in 1991. Last June, Bush the younger appointed Abrams to his national security council as director of its office for democracy, human rights and international operations.

Then there is John Negroponte, who was quietly installed as US ambassador to the United Nations just a week after the September 11 attack. As ambassador to Honduras in the 1980s, Negroponte played a key role in supplying and supervising the Contras, who were based in Honduras. During the same period Honduran military death squads, operating with Washington’s support, assassinated hundreds of opponents of the US-backed regime.

Finally there is Otto Reich, an anti-Castro Cuban émigré whom Bush installed last week, over the objections of some congressional Democrats and while Congress was in recess, making him the new assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs. As head of the Office of Public Diplomacy in the Reagan State Department, Reich worked as the propaganda chief for the Iran-Contra conspirators, floating false reports to the American media to justify the US aggression against Nicaragua. He was subsequently named US ambassador to Venezuela, where he became an advocate for Orlando Bosch, a fellow Cuban émigré who was jailed in Venezuela for 11 years for organizing the 1976 bombing of an Air Cubana flight that claimed the lives of 73 people. Bosch was released from prison a year after Reich arrived in Caracas.

These appointments alone make clear that were Bush to seriously pursue his “war on terrorism,” he would begin with his own administration and his own father.

In the Carlyle Group, the multibillion-dollar private equity firm whose leading lights include George Bush the elder, former Secretary of State James Baker and a number of other US and British military and political figures, corruption and right-wing terrorism converge. This shadowy business entity specializes in defense and aerospace investments. It has long had close relations with the billionaire bin Laden family, whose estate in Saudi Arabia has been visited by both Bush the elder and Baker.

The chairman of the Carlyle Group is Frank Carlucci, who served as secretary of defense and national security adviser to Reagan. Those who have seen the new film *Lumumba* may recall the scene in which an American named Carlucci is present, along with the US ambassador and top Congo leaders, at a meeting where a vote is taken to order Lumumba’s murder. This is the same Carlucci, then an up-and-coming foreign service officer, who today heads the Carlyle Group and socializes with his good friend, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

Finally there is the Enron connection. The Enron fiasco has particular significance because this company and its leading personnel embody the social layers that dominate the Bush administration, and which Bush himself very much personifies. The rise and fall of Enron is almost an

allegory of the speculative bubble that boosted to the top of the corporate and political world the most predatory, rapacious, parasitic, narrow-minded and criminal social elements within the ruling circles of American society.

Enron, under its chairman Kenneth Lay, became the toast of Wall Street by producing nothing. One of its major outlays was the systematic bribing of politicians—of both parties—to speed up the deregulation of the utilities, so that it could play the role of middleman and market-maker in the chaotic and feverish selling and buying of electricity and natural gas contracts. In Lay and Enron were concentrated the socially destructive, irresponsible and reckless attitudes that became the hallmarks of the so-called “new economy” and stock market boom of the 1990s.

Bush and Enron are virtual twins. Kenneth Lay was Bush’s biggest financial backer, beginning in Texas and continuing in Bush’s bid for the White House. A recent press report noted how Bush left the campaign trail in April of 2000, during a critical swing through California, the country’s most populous state, in order to be with his buddy Kenneth Lay for the opening of Enron Stadium in Houston, which, interestingly enough, was built by Halliburton, the giant oil construction firm then headed by Dick Cheney.

The intimate ties between Bush administration officials and Enron are numerous and, by now, fairly well documented. Just to note a few: Bush’s top economic adviser, Lawrence Lindsey, is a former adviser to Enron; Attorney General John Ashcroft has recused himself from the recently announced federal probe of Enron because his unsuccessful Senate reelection campaign in 2000 received \$55,000 from Enron, including \$25,000 from Lay personally; Presidential Adviser Karl Rove sold more than \$100,000 in Enron holdings in June of 2000.

As for Enron’s criminal activities, here are some highlights: concealing hundreds of millions of dollars in losses and debts from shareholders, government watchdog agencies and the general public by shifting them to scores of off-the-book “partnerships”; allowing 29 Enron executives and directors, including Lay, to sell 17.3 million shares of Enron stock from 1999 through mid-2001, thereby pocketing \$1.1 billion; blocking Enron employees from selling their 401k holdings in Enron stock, resulting in the destruction of the retirement savings of thousands of Enron workers. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of other workers have lost much of their retirement nest egg as a result of Enron’s fraudulent practices.

Meanwhile, Lay and other Enron executives were meeting with Cheney and his energy task force in closed-door sessions to formulate the Bush administration’s energy program. Lay pressed Bush to remove the Clinton administration holdover and had his handpicked man, Pat Wood, installed as head of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. As this was taking place, Enron was playing a key role in jacking up the price of electricity and natural gas in California, resulting in months of rolling blackouts last spring and summer, with the consequent economic and social havoc.

The Bush administration has refused to comply with an order from the General Accounting Office, the watchdog agency of the Congress, that it reveal the names of those involved in Cheney’s energy task force. Bush chief economic adviser Lindsey recently called the Enron bankruptcy “a tribute to American capitalism.” Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill, who admitted over the weekend to having spoken privately with Lay last fall about the company’s dire financial condition, without alerting either the Securities and Exchange Commission or the public, told “Fox News Sunday”: “Companies come and go. Part of the genius of capitalism is people get to make good decisions or bad decisions, and they get to pay the consequences or enjoy the fruits of their decisions.”

One last point on Enron: the company’s business practices and political connections cast an instructive light on the United States’ international crusade for corporate “transparency” and against “crony capitalism.”

To be continued



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