

US political life 227 years after the Declaration of Independence

The editorial board
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The United States of America marks the anniversary of its founding revolution under conditions in which the political life of the country has entered a state of paralysis and its economic and social foundations are beset by crisis.

According to one news report, amid the flag-waving and patriotic rhetoric, Fourth of July celebrations are being scaled back around the country as the massive budget deficits facing state and local governments force local officials to think twice about using scarce cash for fireworks displays.

Moreover, the official celebrations of America's Independence Day—the onset of a struggle to cast off colonial rule—ring all too hollow under conditions in which Washington is enmeshed in a colonial occupation in Iraq that is producing daily casualties—both US and Iraqi. While unease over this enterprise is steadily growing, it can find no expression in the existing political setup.

The Fourth of July is a suitable occasion for serious reflection on the state of political life in the United States. The day marks the approval of the Declaration of Independence, a document that gave meaning to the anti-colonial struggle that had broken out over the course of the previous decade and proclaimed the birth of a new nation.

For their time, the men who drafted and signed this document were extraordinary iconoclasts and immensely brave. Their declaration proclaimed profound democratic principles, the “self-evident” truths that “all men are created equal” and endowed with “inalienable rights,” among them the right to overthrow by means of revolution a despotic and unrepresentative government.

Spelling out in detail the abuses of the British monarchy, the document was read aloud in town squares and posted in public places, becoming well known to the broad layers of the population. Published the same year, Thomas Paine's famous pamphlet “Common Sense,” denouncing monarchy and urging revolution against colonial oppression, sold half a million copies in a country with less than three million people.

For all of the limitations of a bourgeois revolution, the struggle of 1776 was an epochal and profoundly liberating world event that saw a high level of political consciousness and participation by broad masses of the American people.

It is fitting to ask, what is the state of American political life 227 years on? Even a cursory examination of the present situation reveals both the stunning decline in the political participation of the country's people and an even greater fall in the caliber of its political leaders.

None of the critical issues facing the American people can be seriously discussed in a broad public debate: neither the war that—two months after the president declared it over—grows bloodier every day; nor an unemployment rate approaching 6.5 percent; the crisis of the

health care system; nor the lack of pensions for the great majority of retirees.

The Republican-controlled House of Representatives last week quietly killed two resolutions that sought to expand a congressional investigation into the Bush administration's fabrication of intelligence in promoting an unprovoked and illegal war against Iraq.

There was no protest from the Democratic leadership over the refusal to deepen this probe. Rep. Jane Harman (Democrat of California), the senior Democrat on the House intelligence committee, acknowledged that she opposed such a move out of concern that it would interfere with a “bipartisan” approach to an investigation into whether the president lied to Congress and the American people. The result will almost certainly be reduced to a few closed-door hearings followed by an official whitewash.

So brittle and controlled is the US political system that it makes Britain look by contrast like a flourishing democracy. Hearings conducted by the British Parliament's foreign affairs committee on lies told by Labor Prime Minister Tony Blair's government to further the war on Iraq have received testimony and evidence, while Blair has faced pressure to testify himself.

Washington's method of dealing with what is arguably the most explosive political issue today is symptomatic of a political system that, for all practical purposes, has ceased to function.

Not only does the existing two-party system offer no alternative to the predatory social and military policies pursued by the Bush administration, on every serious question confronting the American people the entire structure of official politics and the mass media virtually excludes any discussion of the issues and interests at stake.

Observance of what amounts to a political taboo is enforced by the bellicose Republican right, which enjoys the backing of the predominant sections of the financial aristocracy; and is accepted by a spineless Democratic Party. Meanwhile, the mass media is dedicated to echoing the propaganda of the White House and Pentagon, while polluting the airwaves with distractions—sensational murder cases, kidnappings and an endless parade of “human interest” stories masquerading as news; in short, whatever serves to stultify public opinion.

The list of “forbidden topics” has grown continuously since the coming to power of the Bush administration. There is first of all the illegitimacy of Bush's presidency itself. While he was installed through the suppression of votes and judicial fiat, the unelected status of the American president is not a fit subject for public discussion.

Then there are the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, supposedly the reason for all of the sweeping measures that the administration has implemented in curtailing

democratic rights at home and engaging in unprecedented acts of military aggression abroad. While Bush continuously—and fraudulently—invokes the tragic death toll from these attacks to justify his policies, his administration has mounted a full-scale cover-up of essential information relating to what happened that day and its own actions in the months leading up to the attacks. The media, meanwhile, studiously ignores the work of a so-called independent commission to investigate the attacks

There is no real discussion of the vast corruption exposed at the highest levels of the US corporate and financial world, nor of the Bush administration's intimate connections to those implicated—from Enron's Kenneth Lay to Cheney at Halliburton—in criminal double-dealing that wiped out the jobs and life savings of hundreds of thousands of workers.

Fundamental attacks on democratic rights go almost unmentioned by either the politicians or the media. Last month, Bush closed down judicial proceedings against a man charged with credit card fraud and lying to an FBI agent by decreeing him an enemy combatant and whisking him off to indefinite incarceration in a military brig without charges, trial or right to an attorney. Cases such as these, which represent a frontal assault on the foundations of constitutional rights in America, evoke no protests on the floors of Congress, nor do they receive even one percent of the media coverage lavished on the Laci Peterson case, which the mass media peddles to the American public like a cheap soap opera.

Finally, there is the Iraq war, and the growing and irrefutable body of evidence that the Bush administration launched the war based on fabricated pretexts—nonexistent “weapons of mass destruction”—for the benefit of the same corporations and financial institutions that put him in the White House.

The media pundits claim that Americans don't care whether they were lied to or whether US soldiers are killing and dying every day in pursuit of interests that have been concealed from the public.

That is a lie. There is popular outrage over the deliberate deception used to carry out this war. There is anger that working class youth in uniform are being sacrificed so that oil conglomerates and firms like Halliburton, with the closest ties to corporate criminals who dominate the White House and Pentagon, can lay hold of Iraq's resources and turn them into profit.

Yet the present political system provides no outlet for this anger. It is not expressed in the impotent campaign of the Democratic presidential hopefuls nor by any section of the corporate-controlled media.

There are objective reasons for the ritualization of political life and the muzzling of the press in America. At the same time, the near exhaustion of the US political system has profound objective significance.

The social polarization between wealth and poverty in America has grown so vast that there exists not a single serious political question upon which a common position can be taken that serves the interests of both the ruling elite and the vast majority of working people.

Figures released by the US Internal Revenue Service recently showed that just 400 individuals now account for \$70 billion in income. Over the past decade, this obscenely rich aristocracy has seen its income rise at 15 times the rate of the bottom 90 percent of Americans. The average income of those at the very top was \$175 million, 6,400 times the yearly average for nine of ten Americans, which stood at just \$27,000.

These figures are the result of policies introduced over the two

decades before the second Bush administration was installed in the White House. The massive tax cuts implemented by this administration and Congress will only accelerate this trend, while starving the government of funding for health care, education, housing and all other services provided to working people and the poor.

The present two-party system—totally subordinated to enhancing the wealth of a narrow, privileged elite—is incapable of expressing even in a distorted form the interests of the majority of working people in the United States. For the same reason, its usefulness as a means of mediating social conflict in America is at an end. Those who today look to the Democratic Party as a vehicle for serious social reform are few and far between. No such measures have been enacted in more than three decades, while those that did exist have been seriously eroded.

It is not the case that the ruling circles in America are all of one mind. Behind the scenes, there are bitter differences. But their common concern is that any public discussion on the issues that divide them could rapidly spin out of control. Those at the top of society are conscious of their own isolation and the precarious status of the vast wealth they have amassed. They live in the guilty fear that any political issue that is seriously probed will result in dreadful revelations of corruption and criminality that will spell their downfall. Thus, they support every attempt to exclude the broad mass of the population from political life.

That the deep-seated anger and frustration of millions of Americans find no expression in either the two major parties or the mass media does not mean they cease to exist. To the extent that none of the existing institutions serve as an outlet for their sentiments, they will seek new and unanticipated channels. The ruling elite cannot keep a lid on it forever. The masses will enter political life with or without its permission.

The refusal of the political system to air these differences does not mean that the sharp clash of social interests has disappeared. Rather, it signals that the system itself is teetering on the edge of collapse. Driven underground, this conflict must lead, sooner rather than later, to explosive and revolutionary upheavals.



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