

# The crisis of American democracy: its social and political roots

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Last week's decision by the CBS television network to withdraw its mini-series on the Reagans was another milestone in the dissolution of American democracy. All it took was a quickly organized campaign of letters, e-mails and protests from right-wing media commentators and the Republican National Committee to convince CBS executives and their superiors at the corporate giant Viacom to pull the television film less than two weeks from its scheduled broadcast date. It marked the first time a major US network removed a completed project from its schedule due to political pressure.

No less significant than CBS's capitulation to the thought police of the Republican right was the reaction of the formerly liberal press. The *New York Times* castigated CBS not for caving in to pressure from the right, but for scheduling the mildly critical film in the first place.

The *Washington Post* began its editorial by belittling the significance of CBS's action, writing: "It's not the dark night of fascism descending on the land when a TV network gets bullied into canceling a controversial program about a national political figure..." The *Post* suggested that the network's decision "might have been the right one" and solidified itself with Ronald Reagan's defenders, calling an anti-gay remark directed against AIDS sufferers attributed to Reagan in the program "neither documented nor in any way characteristic of the former president." Citing his "undisputed accomplishments," the *Post* declared that the ex-president "remains in good standing with much of the country."

Both newspapers ignored the basic and principled issue: the public airwaves are now subject to the veto power of an extreme right-wing element whose sway over the government and the media is grotesquely out of proportion to its actual support among the American people. This element faces no serious opposition from any section of the political establishment.

There is no legal foundation for the blacklisting of the Reagan mini-series. The former president is a public figure, and therefore fair game for writers, producers or directors who choose to portray him in a critical manner.

As a matter of history, the Reagan years marked a turning point in the decay of American democracy. Reagan's administration ended in a morass of scandal and criminality, with the exposure of a White House conspiracy to illegally and secretly finance the Contra terrorists in their war against the government and people of Nicaragua. Had the Democrats retained any serious allegiance to the US Constitution, the so-called Iran-Contra affair would have likely ended with Reagan's impeachment.

The far-reaching significance of the CBS debacle was reinforced by two further political events of the past week. On November 5, one day after CBS pulled its Reagan mini-series, George W. Bush signed the bill banning the procedure dubbed "partial birth abortion" by the anti-abortion lobby. Bush turned the bill-signing into a victory rally, staged in the Reagan office building and attended by hundreds of prominent Christian right leaders and other stalwarts of the Republican Party's "base."

Speaking before such notorious bigots as the Baptist fundamentalist

Jerry Falwell, Bush leveled an attack on the core democratic principle of secular government and the separation of church and state, declaring, "This right to life cannot be granted or denied by government, because it does not come from government, it comes from the Creator of life."

None of the media reports on the event noted the staggering hypocrisy of this statement, coming from a man who, during his five years as governor of Texas, presided over 152 executions.

The bill-signing ceremony was indicative of the political strategy Bush intends to pursue for the 2004 presidential election. The Republican campaign will, in the first instance, appeal to the most backward and reactionary sections of the population. According to the November 3 edition of *Newsweek* magazine, Karl Rove, Bush's chief political adviser, has said he is determined to capture the votes of 4 million evangelical Christians who stood on the sidelines in 2000.

On the same day as the anti-abortion bill-signing, in an action that was barely reported, the Bush White House notified the House and Senate Appropriations Committees that it would no longer respond to questions submitted by members of the Democratic minority. House committee Democrats had just asked for information about how much the White House spent installing the "Mission Accomplished" banner for Bush's May 1 appearance aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln, where the president announced the end of "major combat" in Iraq.

With its November 5 memo, the Bush administration repudiated long-standing parliamentary norms. At a single stroke, it challenged the legitimacy of any political opposition as well as Congress's constitutionally delegated powers of oversight of the executive branch.

Craven cowardice and crass opportunism on the part of network executives, newspaper publishers and Democratic officials played no small role in these events. However, their significance goes deeper than the subjective motives and pliant spines of prominent individuals. The events of last week are significant links in an extended chain of events that, taken together, denote the death agony of democratic institutions in the United States. Such a momentous development must be rooted in objective historical and socio-economic processes.

Democratic forms of rule are not timeless fixtures, anchored for all time in such abstractions as the "American spirit" or legal norms codified in the US Constitution. Ultimately, they rest on the existence of certain social and political relations that simultaneously limit the ability of the possessing classes to establish authoritarian forms of rule and contribute to a political consensus within the ruling elite in favor of parliamentary norms and constitutional checks on executive power. The class that monopolizes economic power, however, has no essential stake in the maintenance of democratic forms of rule.

The Bush administration, the most reactionary government in modern American history, has waged an unprecedented assault on democratic rights and ridden roughshod over such constitutional principles as the separation of powers between the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government; due process; the separation of church and state;

and the liberties codified in the Bill of Rights. It has met with virtually no opposition from within the political and media establishment.

This assault on democracy flows from the origins of the Bush government. It was installed in power as the result of an illegal and criminal conspiracy to override the popular vote by means of electoral fraud and the machinations of a right-wing Republican majority on the US Supreme Court. It should be recalled that the ideological leaders of the Supreme Court majority declared, in their infamous ruling of December 12, 2000, halting the counting of votes in Florida, that the American people have no constitutional right to vote for the president of the United States. Their decision implicitly supported Republican legislators in Florida who were prepared to set aside any vote count giving the Democratic candidate, Al Gore, the state's electoral votes and choose their own pro-Bush electors.

The political crisis that arose from the disputed 2000 election was resolved, not on the basis of fidelity to the principle of elected government and the right of the people to vote and have their votes counted, but rather on the determination of the most reactionary sections of the ruling elite to install their hand-picked candidate regardless of the will of the voters. It was a bloodless coup, and it marked an irrevocable break with traditional democratic methods and norms.

That Gore and the Democratic Party capitulated to this power grab, and the media labored to endow the Bush administration with a cloak of legitimacy, did not alter the facts of the matter.

David North, chairman of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site* and national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of the US, in a report given on December 3, 2000, said: "What the decision of this court will reveal is how far the American ruling class is prepared to go in breaking with traditional bourgeois-democratic and constitutional norms. Is it prepared to sanction ballot fraud and the suppression of votes and install in the White House a candidate who has attained that office though blatantly illegal and anti-democratic methods?" [See "Lessons from history: the 2000 elections and the new 'irrepressible conflict'".]

In a subsequent report delivered in January 2001, this writer summarized the significance of the 2000 elections as follows: "Notwithstanding the attempts of the media and the political establishment—liberal no less than conservative—to pass over the events of November and December 2000 and 'move on,' as though nothing of great significance had occurred, America has been changed in a fundamental way, and nothing will ever be the same in the United States, or, for that matter, the world." [See "The world historical implications of the political crisis in the United States".]

The WSWS and the SEP drew the fundamental conclusion that there exists within the American ruling elite no significant constituency for the defense of democratic rights. This conclusion has been amply confirmed by the events of the past three years.

This political sea change is itself rooted in far-reaching changes in the underlying structure of American society. The most significant factor is the immense growth of social inequality. Over the past quarter century, a vast redistribution of wealth has occurred—fostered by the policies of Democratic and Republican administrations alike—from the working people to the richest 10 percent of the population. By the time of the 2000 election, the concentration of wealth in the hands of an oligarchic elite had reached unprecedented proportions.

To cite a few statistics: since the mid-1970s, the top 1 percent of US households has doubled its share of the national wealth, from less than 20 percent to 38.9 percent. In 1999, the wealthiest 1 percent of the population, 2.7 million people, received as much after-tax income as the 100 million Americans with the lowest incomes. Between 1977 and 1999, the average after-tax income of the top 1 percent soared by 370 percent, from \$234,700 to \$868,000.

During the 1990s, in particular, a virtual mania for unearned income

gripped the ruling class, which felt itself freed of any restraint on the accumulation of personal wealth. During the Clinton-Gore years, CEO compensation rose 535 percent, with the result that a typical corporate boss in 2000 made 475 times the income of the average worker. The opening years of the twenty-first century have seen a continuation of this process.

As the historical experience of humanity has demonstrated, such rampant social inequality is, in the end, incompatible with democratic forms of rule. There comes a point at which the social tensions generated by such extraordinary levels of social polarization cannot be contained within traditional democratic forms. American society has reached that point.

The widening chasm between the financial oligarchy and the masses of working people has been accompanied by other, related processes that undermine the foundations of democracy. The traditional social base for parliamentary democracy is the middle-class layers that serve as a buffer between the two main contending classes—the capitalist elite and the working class. But the vast changes in economic life linked to the globalization of production and the rise of giant transnational corporations have dissipated middle-class America and sharply reduced its social and political weight.

A small section has benefited from the orgy of profit-making and stock market speculation and risen to become a part of the privileged elite. The vast majority of those previously considered to be part of the middle class—professionals, shopkeepers, farmers, white collar employees—have been propelled into the ranks of wage earners, making the working class the overwhelming majority of the population.

The dramatic increase in wealth from speculation in stocks and bonds and other forms of self-enrichment largely separated from the production of useful products, as well as the ascendancy of new industries related to computer technology and telecommunications, has had an enormous impact on the social and political dynamics within the ruling elite itself. A layer of fabulously wealthy *nouveau riche*, who owe their fortunes far less to the erection of industrial empires than to profit windfalls from booming stocks, market manipulation, leveraged buyouts, and sheer luck, has risen to the top of the corporate world. From their ranks have largely come the most parasitic and short-sighted elements, whose political counterparts are to be found in the leadership of the Republican Party.

The agenda of this increasingly dominant element within the ruling elite is the removal of all legal, political and moral restraints on the accumulation of corporate profit and personal wealth—whether in the form of environmental regulations, health and safety codes, anti-trust laws, union rights, minimum wage standards, or limitations on the work day and child labor. These forces demand a vast retrogression in the social conditions and democratic rights of the working class—a return to the policies of *laissez-faire*, but on a more brutal scale than that which prevailed even in the heyday of the robber barons.

Such an agenda cannot be realized by democratic methods. Its implementation inevitably requires the use of brute force and state violence.

As for the so-called "Fourth Estate" of the media, it has lost whatever margin of independence it once retained and become, quite literally, a wholly owned subsidiary of corporate behemoths such as General Electric, Viacom, Disney and the Murdoch empire. What passes for "news" is dictated more directly and completely by the economic interests and political outlook of CEOs and big investors than ever before.

The growth of social inequality is a reflection not of the health and vibrancy of the capitalist system, but rather of its crisis and degeneration. The corporate scandals of the past several years are not mere aberrations. They are symptoms of a diseased social system, which has produced a ruling elite steeped in corruption and criminality. Whether in the media, where ignorant toadies are paid millions to parrot government lies, or in

the corporate world, where CEOs loot their own companies to enhance their personal fortunes and manufacture profits by cooking the books, one is confronted with a spectacle of intellectual, political and moral decay.

This rise of a criminal element finds its consummate political expression in the Bush administration, where naked greed commingles with brutality and contempt for the democratic rights of the people. It is a government of, by and for the American oligarchy.

The defense of democratic rights cannot therefore be entrusted to any section of the ruling elite—liberal or conservative—or to any political force that upholds the existing social order. Democratic rights can be preserved only on the basis of a mass, social and political struggle against the economic foundations of the oligarchy's rule.

It entails a vast redistribution of wealth and far-reaching changes in the economic structure of society to shift control of resources from a parasitic elite to the broad mass of working people. The basic principle of economic life must become the satisfaction of human needs, not the accumulation of personal wealth and corporate profit.

Political democracy can no longer exist unless it is combined with the struggle for social equality. The only social force that can carry out such a revolutionary transformation is the working class. It must be organized as a politically independent force and armed with a socialist and internationalist program. The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* are dedicated to building the new political movement that will carry out this urgent historical task.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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