

WSWS International Editorial Board meeting

The social and political crisis in the United States and the 2006 SEP election campaign

Part Two

Patrick Martin
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Published below is the conclusion of Patrick Martin's two-part report to an expanded meeting of the World Socialist Web Site International Editorial Board (IEB) held in Sydney from January 22 to 27, 2006. Part one was posted on March 7. Martin is a member of the WSWS IEB and the Socialist Equality Party (US) central committee.

WSWS IEB chairman David North's report was posted on 27 February. SEP (Australia) national secretary Nick Beams' report was posted in three parts: Part one on February 28, Part two on March 1 and Part three on March 2. James Cogan's report on Iraq was posted on March 3. Barry Grey's report was published in two parts: Part one on March 4 and Part two on March 6.

Let me now address the signs of acute political crisis in the US. It is increasingly clear that America is wracked by social and political tensions for which the existing political system has no answers. Or, more precisely, a central feature of the crisis is the discrediting and collapse of the old political institutions. This is one hallmark of a revolutionary crisis: the masses find the existing order intolerable, while the ruling elite too finds that it cannot go on in the old way. It is compelled to find new forms of rule.

You are all familiar with the analysis presented in Comrade Dave North's book on the breakdown of US democracy. I would simply like to add some points based on a review of the most recent political developments: the January 16 speech by the Democrats' 2000 presidential candidate Al Gore, the most recent speeches by Bush and his political aide Karl Rove, and the call by the *Nation* magazine, the leading liberal publication, for Bush's impeachment.

Gore's speech is quite lengthy and will receive further analysis in the *World Socialist Web Site*, explaining both the significance of the warning made by Gore, and the limitations—quite devastating politically—in his critique of the Bush administration. In that context, I'd like to deal with several passages that follow the long section quoted by Dave yesterday, which concluded with the quote from Dean Harold Koh of Yale Law School, who said that a president who has commander-in-chief power to commit torture has a similar power to commit genocide.

Gore says the following:

"As a result of its unprecedented claim of new unilateral power, the Executive Branch has now put our constitutional design at grave risk. The stakes for America's representative democracy are far higher than has been generally recognized. These claims must be rejected and a healthy balance of power restored to our Republic. Otherwise, the fundamental nature of our democracy may well undergo a radical transformation."

Gore repeatedly poses the traditional distinction, first posed in classical

liberalism, between a government of laws and a government of men, warning that the trajectory of the Bush administration is to reject all legal restraint and elevate the executive as all-powerful. A question could be posed to the former vice president, "Was the 2000 Supreme Court decision in *Bush v. Gore* an example of a government of laws, or of the shift towards a government of men?"

Gore tries to address this indirectly in the following passage:

"For more than two centuries, America's freedoms have been preserved in part by our founders' wise decision to separate the aggregate power of our government into three co-equal branches, each of which serves to check and balance the power of the other two. On more than a few occasions, the dynamic interaction among all three branches has resulted in collisions and temporary impasses that create what are invariably labeled 'constitutional crises.' These crises have often been dangerous and uncertain times for our Republic. But in each such case so far, we have found a resolution of the crisis by renewing our common agreement to live under the rule of law."

Clearly he's trying to absolve himself of responsibility, through his capitulation in 2000 in Florida, for the emergence of the tyranny-in-the-making which he now criticizes.

He accepts and emphasizes in the following quote that there is a necessity for the ruthless use of executive power:

"Don't misunderstand me: the threat of additional terror strikes is all too real and their concerted effort to acquire weapons of mass destruction does create a real imperative to exercise the powers of the Executive Branch with swiftness and agility. Moreover, there is, in fact, an inherent power that is conferred by the Constitution to the President to take unilateral action to protect the nation from a sudden and immediate threat, but it is simply not possible to precisely define in legalistic terms exactly when that power is appropriate and when it is not."

He continues: "But the existence of that inherent power cannot be used to justify a gross and excessive power grab lasting for years...." Presumably then, a more modest power grab, perhaps lasting only months, would have been justified. There is similar language throughout the speech: everything is a mistake, misguided or self-defeating—not criminal, not intentional.

This critique, moreover, is directed entirely to a section of the ruling elite, not to the American people. After the speech he declined offers of television interviews, where he could have reached a much broader audience.

He seeks to influence sections of the ruling elite who are concerned that the Bush administration's flagrant trampling on the constitution is undermining the legitimacy of the whole political order. He is even

making an appeal to a section of the ultra-right: his appearance was sponsored by Bob Barr and various libertarian and anti-tax organizations, and hailed by the libertarian web site antiwar.com.

Moreover, Gore avoids a decisive issue in his lengthy critique of the Bush administration. He never addresses the growing social inequality that underlies the attack on democratic rights, just as he is silent on the material causes for the war in Iraq. The word “oil” does not pass his lips.

It is worth noting that the week before Gore’s speech, Bush made a particularly savage attack on opponents of the war in Iraq, demanding that charges that oil was the motivation for the war be declared off limits during the 2006 election campaign. Gore did not take up this subject, either for its own enormous intrinsic significance, or as a further demonstration of the administration’s determination to suppress democratic rights. Despite the bitter tone of his indictment, on this critical question Gore has the same position as Bush.

It has become clear over the past week that the Bush administration has decided to brazen out the National Security Agency (NSA) spying revelations, taking the position that it has full legal authority to do what it is doing, as well as maintaining that the communications intercepts were narrowly focused on Al Qaeda and its sympathizers and agents. This is combined with a McCarthy-style smear campaign that anyone objecting to the spying on civil liberties grounds is a tacit accomplice of the terrorists.

The signal for this campaign came in a rare public address Friday by Karl Rove, Bush’s principal political adviser, to the Republican National Committee. He made it clear that the Republicans intend to make charges of disloyalty and surrender to terrorism the axis of their campaign in the 2006 elections, just as they did in 2002 and 2004.

He suggested that the Democrats should be attacked for their alleged policy of “cut and run” in Iraq, for blocking renewal of the Patriot Act, and for questioning the NSA spying. “Republicans have a post-9/11 world view and many Democrats have a pre-9/11 world view,” Rove said, pointing to Democratic concerns over the Patriot Act and the spy program.

He added, “The United States faces a ruthless enemy, and we need a commander in chief and a Congress who understand the nature of the threat and the gravity of the moment America finds itself in. President Bush and the Republican Party do. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of many Democrats.”

On Monday, General Michael Hayden, the former head of the NSA who is now deputy director of national intelligence, gave a press conference in Washington—an almost unheard-of event for such a high-ranking intelligence officer. He claimed: “The purpose of all of this is not to collect reams of intelligence, but to detect and prevent attacks. The intelligence community has neither the time, the resources nor the legal authority to read communications that aren’t likely to protect us. And NSA has no interest in doing so. These are communications that we have reason to believe are Al Qaeda communications.”

He said the “reason-to-believe” standard was looser than the “probable cause” standard required by the FISA intelligence court, since that legal term means that the evidence must point to a specific individual, rather than to the whole class of recipients of emails or phone calls.

And now it has been announced that on Wednesday [January 25], tomorrow in the US, Bush will visit the headquarters of the National Security Agency at Fort Meade, Maryland. This again is unprecedented—to focus media publicity on the most secretive of federal agencies.

The Democratic response to this attack was to present themselves as even more bloodthirsty opponents of Al Qaeda, essentially legitimizing Rove’s McCarthyite-style demagoguery. Congresswoman Jane Harman, a multi-millionaire and the senior Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, said, “The terrorists aren’t going to check our party registration before they blow us up ... We’re under attack as America.”

The defeated Democratic presidential candidate from 2004, Senator John Kerry, said, “Osama bin Laden is going to die of kidney failure

before he’s killed by Karl Rove and his crowd.”

Several senators, Democrat and Republican, suggested on last Sunday’s talk shows a fall back position, not directly opposing the spying but urging Bush to go to Congress to get legal authority to continue doing it. These include Republicans John McCain and Arlen Specter, and Charles Schumer, Democrat of New York. Schumer called on Bush “To go to Congress and say, here are the problems, here’s the changes in the law that have to be made. There would be a debate, and it would usually work out. It always has in the past where the president is given the tools he needs, but with certain checks in place to prevent excesses.”

This is the predictable response of the Democratic Party establishment. What about the left-liberals? Here we should examine the cover story in last week’s edition of the *Nation*, written by former congresswoman and former New York City comptroller Elizabeth Holtzman.

Holtzman was Brooklyn district attorney in 1981 and thus had responsibility for the trial of Angelo Torres and Edwin Sequinot for the murder of our comrade Tom Henehan. She never replied to our inquiries about the unanswered questions in that case.

Her lead article in the *Nation* begins with a remarkable demonstration of the prostration and impotence of contemporary liberalism. She sees the removal of Nixon not as a positive act, but a regrettable necessity: “As a Democrat who opposed many of President Nixon’s policies, I still found voting for his impeachment to be one of the most sobering and unpleasant tasks I ever had to undertake. None of the members of the committee took pleasure in voting for impeachment; after all, Democrat or Republican, Nixon was still our President.”

Holtzman makes several important historical points. She notes in passing that during the Watergate crisis, the Democrats on the House Judiciary Committee decided not to include the secret bombing of Cambodia among the charges against Nixon, in order to avoid any suggestion that the removal of Nixon from office was motivated by antiwar sentiments.

She points out that the 1978 FISA law, requiring court approval of any wiretapping, was written in direct response to Watergate, especially the charges against Nixon that he ordered the bugging of political opponents, using “national security” as a pretext. The main purpose of the FISA court was to insure that no future president could do that. Bush’s decision to bypass the court has no credible explanation except as an effort to order politically motivated spying that a panel of federal judges would balk at approving.

Holtzman suggests that one of the grounds for impeaching Bush is his failure to adequately equip the troops or plan for the occupation of Iraq. In other words, she advocates impeachment not for deciding to wage an aggressive war, but for incompetence and recklessness in carrying out the aggression. Like Gore, she refrains from using the word “oil” in a lengthy attack on Bush’s Iraq policies.

Finally her conclusion: “The American people stopped the Vietnam War—against the wishes of the President—and forced a reluctant Congress to act on the impeachment of President Nixon. And they can do the same with President Bush. The task has three elements: building public and congressional support, getting Congress to undertake investigations into various aspects of presidential misconduct, and changing the party makeup of Congress in the 2006 elections....

“If a Republican Congress is unwilling to investigate and take appropriate action against a Republican President, then a Democratic Congress should replace it.”

So there it is: rather than addressing the fundamental social and political crisis posed by the illegal war in Iraq, Holtzman and the *Nation* attempt to leverage their call for impeachment as one more reason for voting for the Democrats in the 2006 elections.

The SEP election campaign in the United States will advance a program based on the international mobilization of the working class against

capitalism, and within that framework focus on the struggle against imperialist war, growing social inequality, and the defense of democratic rights. The election statement we published earlier this month is an important advance both in our analysis of the social and political crisis in the United States and in how we seek to persuade the most advanced sections of workers and youth to join our party and fight for its policies.

As has already been remarked, we have had an unprecedented response to the election announcement. I'd like to read a few of the comments from those who've written in to join the campaign:

From Pittsboro, North Carolina:

"I love that we can start to really spread the idea that we need another party who can give voice to the people, like me, that cannot identify with either the Democrats nor the Republicans and would like to see this country become a real democratic country, and that will have social and political and international justice as the top goal for a sane and livable world.

"Knowing the phobia of the American people toward anything that has the label of 'socialism,' I strongly would suggest not to have it on the name of the Party, but have social meaning on anything we promote. We would love to win, after all, and it isn't the label that counts. We live in a legally corrupted system where labels don't really mean much behind what they are trying to sell you, and 99 percent of the time they sell you junk. I always look for the real content of the package."

From Ft. Collins, Colorado:

"I would like to explore the possibilities of promoting the SEP message in Colorado, be it through my own candidacy or through the support of another SEP candidate in local/state races."

From Cocoa Beach, Florida:

"I do not have an extensive knowledge of Marxist theory and history. I started out about twenty years ago as a Democratic Socialist of America and eventually joined the Socialist Party USA. I have been reading material from the WSWs for several months and am interested in learning more. I stopped practicing law (criminal and immigration defense) two years ago. I now teach scuba diving in Florida. Thanks in advance for any information you send."

From Moorpark, California:

"I have been a socialist for quite some time now. I am good friends with J, who is also a part of the SEP, and would like to be active. I consider myself a Marxist-Leninist and believe our current political system doesn't work. Please let me know how I can be of assistance to the SEP in any way. Thank you."

These comments give a glimpse the wide range of people who are being propelled by the crisis into political action and attracted by our program. In the election announcement, we explain that the extent of the campaign we are able to wage this year will be determined by the support we can mobilize from new layers of working people and youth coming into political life.

This perspective is by no means a passive one. It places at the center our own activity in the SEP and WSWs and the activity of the working class in response to the crisis. We have every reason to be confident that in the coming months our campaign will attract and mobilize new forces and bring them into revolutionary politics.

Concluded



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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