

Observations on Washington-style democracy

Barry Grey in Washington, D.C.
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Political life in the US capital is increasingly an exercise in deceit and self-delusion. It does not take long for an objective observer to discern that behind the traditional forms of parliamentary democracy—congressional debates, floor votes, hearings, etc.—the machinery of a presidential dictatorship is being consolidated and already operating in key areas of policy, both foreign and domestic.

The Bush administration has successfully asserted, due largely to the compliance of a complicit and cowardly Democratic Party and a corrupt media, a degree of unchecked and unaccountable power that is unprecedented in US history. On the basis of the pseudo-constitutional theory of the “unitary executive” and the supposed war-time powers of the commander-in-chief (in the undeclared, unlimited and phony “war on terror”), the right-wing clique around the White House routinely violates constitutional norms and legal statutes, snubs Congress and takes actions that flagrantly violate the democratic rights of the American people.

All those involved—administration officials, judges, congressmen, the Washington press corps—are well aware of the advanced state of decay of traditional democratic procedures and the buildup of police-state forms of rule. Yet the outer trappings of parliamentary process for the most part continue, by mutual consent of all involved, in what amounts to a democratic Potemkin Village, maintained in part to keep the people in the dark about the imperiled state of their democratic rights.

There are internal debates and conflicts, which can become heated at times, about the wisdom, legality and propriety of the administration’s more brazen assertions of absolute power, but such disputes are never allowed to resonate in any significant way beyond the narrow confines of the Washington establishment.

Among themselves, in their offices, clubs and watering holes, the denizens of the capital engage in gallows humor about the latest administration outrage against democratic norms and the constitutional principle of “checks and balances” between coequal branches of government. But since they all have a stake in maintaining the existing two-

party political monopoly, through which the financial-corporate elite asserts its basic interests, and they all share an allegiance to American capitalism and its imperialist aims around the world, they continue to play the game as though nothing much had changed.

Last Thursday’s appearance by Attorney General Alberto Gonzales before the Senate Judiciary Committee provided the latest example of administration stonewalling and contempt for Congress and the impotence of the legislators.

The day before the hearing, Gonzales notified the committee that the administration had obtained authorization from one anonymous member of the secret Foreign Intelligence Surveillance (FISA) Court to continue its National Security Agency program of electronic surveillance of Americans’ phone calls and e-mails. It was patently obvious that this was a maneuver to provide a judicial fig leaf for an illegal and unconstitutional invasion of privacy, close down court challenges to the program, and provide Bush and other administration officials with legal cover in the event of future criminal action against them.

At the Senate hearing, Gonzales flatly refused to answer questions from committee members about the content of the authorization granted by the unnamed FISA judge or any aspect of the ongoing domestic spying program.

In the course of his remarks, Democratic Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy declared: “In the 32 years since I first came to the Senate, during the era of Watergate and Vietnam, I have never seen a time when our constitution and fundamental rights as Americans were more threatened by their own government.”

But what none of the government critics on the committee dared to state was the obvious fact that the purpose of such domestic spying programs is not to protect the American people against external threats or terrorist attacks, but rather to prepare wholesale state repression against opponents of the government's policies.

The previous week, the Senate Judiciary Committee had held a hearing on the expansion of government data-mining programs that provided some insight into the rapid buildup of a "big brother" police-state apparatus.

In his opening remarks, Leahy said, "The Bush administration has dramatically increased its use of data mining technology, namely, the collection and monitoring of wide volumes of personal, sensitive data to identify patterns and relationships. Indeed, in recent years the federal government's use of data mining technology has exploded, without congressional oversight or comprehensive privacy safeguards.

"According to a May, 2004 report by the General Accounting Office, at least 52 different federal agencies are currently using data mining technology. There are at least 199 different government data mining programs that are operating or planned throughout the federal government....

"The overwhelming majority of them are used to collect and analyze information about ordinary citizens.... [T]hey share this sensitive personal information with foreign governments. They share it with private employers. The one group they won't share it with is American citizens on whom they collect it."

One of the witnesses was former Georgia Congressman Bob Barr, a staunchly conservative Republican who played a prominent role in the impeachment of President Bill Clinton. Barr, a right-wing libertarian and opponent of gun control with close ties to the National Rifle Association, is a critic of government domestic spying and data-mining programs. His testimony provided a stark picture of the assault on democratic rights and the US Constitution.

"As a former member of Congress," he said in his written statement, "I have been disappointed to see Congress shirk its responsibility to the American people and sit silently by while the Constitution is gutted of meaning....

"Data mining presents many serious threats to the First, Second, Fourth and Fifth Amendments to the Constitution. That is nearly half of the Bill of Rights! Where will this end? With the repeal of the Constitution so that the White House won't have to worry about those inconvenient and troublesome laws any more?"

Senator Arlen Specter, the ranking Republican on the Judiciary Committee, casually remarked in the course of the hearing, "You would be amazed how little we find out in closed sessions." He was referring to closed-door meetings between the committee and administration officials where the legislators are supposedly given briefings on sensitive or classified aspects of government programs.

Following the hearing, this reporter asked Committee Chairman Leahy: "How little do you find out in these closed sessions?"

Leahy replied: "We don't find out squat. We find out a lot more about some of these secret programs in the open media than we ever do in the classified meetings. After a while I stopped going to them because I read the newspapers and find out a lot more there."

I then asked Barr: "How far have things gone in terms of a lack of congressional control and oversight over the executive branch?"

Barr replied: "I think it's hard to tell because we don't even know what the executive branch is doing. We have some indications because every once in a while something leaks out.... So we do have some indications that it's progressed extremely far. I'd say that it's at the point where it's out of control..."

I then asked: "How close are we to presidential dictatorship? How concerned should citizens be?"

"I think citizens should be extremely concerned," the former congressman said.



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