

# Torture and the crisis of American democracy

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The publication of previously classified Bush Justice Department memos detailing and approving forms of torture has become the focus of a political crisis that marks a new stage in the decay of American democracy.

The release of the memos and the Obama administration's rejection of criminal investigations of CIA torturers and the Bush administration officials, beginning with the former president and vice president, who gave the orders for their actions will have far-reaching consequences for the Obama administration and the future political trajectory of the United States.

The question of publishing the memos provoked a bitter conflict within the state. The administration itself was internally divided, with CIA Director Leon Panetta vigorously opposed and Attorney General Eric Holder in favor. In line with his general *modus operandi*, Obama sought to split the difference between the competing factions, but on terms favorable to the most right-wing forces.

Characteristically, Obama sought to give the appearance of a break with the policies of his predecessor by publishing the memos, while seeking to conceal the complicity of the entire political and media establishment and reassure the CIA and the military that his administration would continue the basic thrust of Bush's anti-democratic policies.

Evidently, Obama and his political advisers believed that this solution would contain the controversy over torture. In fact, it has produced the opposite result.

It has led to further revelations on the scale and severity of the abuses while placing the administration in the legally untenable position of admitting that both domestic and international laws were violated, while shielding the lawbreakers from prosecution. This itself, as the United Nations rapporteur on torture has declared, is a violation of international laws which require a government to prosecute

officials involved in torture.

It has only further embittered the conflict within the state. Bush administration CIA Director Michael Hayden, a retired Air Force general, has openly campaigned against the release of the memos. He appeared on "Fox News Sunday" over the weekend to defend the interrogation methods and denounce Obama for allegedly jeopardizing US national security and aiding terrorists by making the memos public.

Obama felt obliged to pay a visit Monday to CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia in an attempt to quell dissent within the agency.

The White House's defense of torturers highlights the growth of the power of the military-intelligence apparatus, a state-within-a-state which is, in practice, beyond any democratic control or accountability. Congress as well as the White House habitually defer to it, in no small part because they are fearful that a situation might arise in which the national security establishment openly defied the authority of the elected government.

The parlous state of American democracy finds expression in methods traditionally associated with totalitarian governments. This is the outcome of a protracted period of decay. There is a striking parallel in the rise over the past three decades of a financial aristocracy based on free market economics and financial parasitism and the eruption of US militarism.

While the military-intelligence establishment has grown in power and political influence, the widening economic chasm separating the financial elite from the broad mass of the people has undermined the socio-economic bases for democratic forms of rule.

It is possible here only to point to the major signposts of the decay of American democracy over the past thirty years. The 1980s saw the Iran-Contra affair. The Reagan administration, in direct violation of the Boland Amendment

passed by Congress in the early 1980s, conducted a covert dirty war in Nicaragua that took the lives of tens of thousands of civilians. But unlike the Watergate scandal, Congress intervened to cover up the crimes committed by Reagan and his lieutenants and block any move to impeach Reagan or hold his accomplices criminally accountable.

The 1990s saw a non-stop conspiracy by right-wing forces, backed by the Republican Party, the courts and the media, to destabilize the Clinton administration, culminating in December of 1998 in the first-ever impeachment of an elected president. This was followed by the theft of the 2000 election, in which a right-wing majority on the Supreme Court sanctioned the suppression of votes and installed George W. Bush in the White House.

There followed the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which were seized on as the pretext for embarking on a right-wing agenda of foreign aggression and domestic repression long in preparation. The role of intelligence agencies in allowing, and very likely facilitating, the attacks was covered up by a series of phony congressional investigations, culminating in the 9/11 Commission whitewash.

9/11 ushered in the “war on terror”—an undeclared and indeterminate faux war that provided the overarching, bipartisan framework for US military aggression, first in Afghanistan, and then, on the basis of outright lies, Iraq. The “war on terror” served as well as the pretext for the erection of the framework for a police state—the Patriot Act, the Homeland Security Department, the Northern Command, the vast expansion of domestic spying, the establishment of gulags in Guantánamo, Iraq and Afghanistan and CIA “black sites” around the world, the denial of habeas corpus, indefinite detention, rendition and torture.

All of this took place with the complicity of Congress and without any resistance from the Democratic Party. The vast and regressive changes in the structure of American society had fundamentally altered the social physiognomy and political outlook of the liberal wing of the ruling class, eroding any previous attachment to social reform or the defense of democratic rights.

Large sections of the constituency for liberalism had profited from the policies of social reaction at home and imperialist aggression abroad, sharing in the general enrichment of the most privileged layers of American society. They had—and have today—little interest in seeking to rein in the financial oligarchy and the intelligence-military

establishment. Their greatest fear is an eruption of class struggle and a challenge to the status quo from the working class.

The death agony of American democracy is inseparable from the failure of US and world capitalism. The growth of authoritarian tendencies becomes all the more dangerous under conditions of deepening economic crisis. The prospect of growing popular resistance to unemployment and poverty means that the national security apparatus will be directed more and more openly against the American working class.

The only basis for a mass movement in defense of democratic rights is the broad mass of working people, guided by a socialist and internationalist perspective. Such a movement must demand unequivocally the criminal investigation and prosecution of all those responsible for torture and all the other war crimes with which it is associated.

The development of this movement, and the program upon which it must be based, will be discussed at regional conferences called by the Socialist Equality Party, the International Students for Social Equality and the *World Socialist Web Site* to be held beginning April 25 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. We urge all those committed to the defense of democratic rights and seeking an alternative to capitalism to attend.

For information on the conferences, click here.

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