

Panetta and Washington's endless war

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After a week of bitter recriminations between the Central Intelligence Agency and the Democratic Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi over what she was told about torture, CIA Director Leon Panetta sought to put a stop to this public discussion, employing language that echoed the rhetoric of the Bush administration.

Giving his first public speech since he was tapped by Obama to head the CIA, Panetta described the US as “a nation at war” and insisted that the crimes of the Bush administration not become a distraction from current operations by the US military and intelligence apparatus.

“I don’t deny them the opportunity to learn the lessons from that period,” Panetta told his audience at the Pacific Council on International Policy in Los Angeles. “But...we have to be very careful that we don’t forget our responsibility to the present and to the future. We are a nation at war. We have to confront that reality every day. And while it's important to learn the lessons of the past, we must not do it in a way that sacrifices our capability to stay focused on...those who threaten the United States of America.”

“We are a nation at war.” This phrase was invoked hundreds if not thousands of times by Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rice, Gonzales and others to justify military atrocities in Iraq and Afghanistan, torture, extraordinary rendition, illegal domestic spying and an imperial presidency’s arrogation to itself of unprecedented powers.

Earlier this year, White House aides indicated to the media that the Obama administration was dropping references to the “global war on terrorism,” the Bush administration’s all-purpose justification for its wars abroad and assault on democratic rights at home.

What is becoming ever clearer, however, is that the methods introduced under Bush are being maintained largely intact by the new Democratic administration, while its dishonest rhetoric justifying them is sounding

more and more like that of its predecessor.

What does it mean to say America is “a nation at war”? The US Congress has not issued a declaration of war against any country.

America is a nation at war only in the sense that its military is perpetually employed in carrying out illegal invasions, colonial-style occupations, bombings, assassinations by predator drones and other acts of violence against peoples unfortunate enough to find themselves in the way of American capitalism’s plundering of the world’s resources and markets.

The enemy’s identity in this never-ending war is deliberately kept vague as the targets for US military aggression are ever changing. Thus, Panetta refers only to “those that would threaten the United States of America.”

To call this Orwellian is not hyperbole. The perpetual state of war imposed upon the oppressed citizens of Oceania in Orwell’s “1984” could have been written as an allegory for modern US state policy under both Bush and Obama.

Panetta left little to the imagination about the political implications of this supposed state of war.

The CIA director said that he wouldn’t “deny them,” meaning the US Congress, “the opportunity to learn the lessons from that period.” However, he cautioned that any investigation must be done in a “very careful” manner. Probing the war crimes of the past must not interfere with the war crimes of the present and the future.

This warning about circumscribing the scope of any investigation of torture—and above all preventing any top official from being held accountable for this crime—follows Panetta’s public rebuttal of Pelosi’s claim last week that the CIA had lied to her in 2002 about its use of waterboarding in the interrogation of detainees.

Pelosi’s complicity in the policy of torture

notwithstanding, it is extraordinary that Panetta, an unelected appointee of the president, felt no compunction about publicly rebuking the elected speaker of the house, who constitutionally is the second in line for succession to the presidency.

When Panetta was first nominated as CIA director, Republicans and some Democrats pointed to his lack of any intelligence experience. In the end, however, he was confirmed by the unanimous consent of the Senate.

He is a man clearly trusted by America's ruling elite to protect its interests. First a Republican aide to the Nixon administration, he became a Democratic congressman and then chief of staff to President Clinton. Afterward he pursued profitable relations with the centers of corporate and financial power, while remaining deeply involved in state policy. In 2006, he joined the Iraq Study Group, which was formed to effect a tactical shift in US war policy. In 2008, he was paid more than \$830,000 in consulting fees and honorariums by the likes of the BP Corporation, Merrill Lynch and the Carlyle Group.

Panetta speaks for the state-within-the-state, the permanent apparatus of the military and the intelligence agencies that dominate the US government no matter which party is in power.

These layers are pushing back following the limited exposure of the Bush administration's crimes with the release of the torture memos last month. This was further indicated in an article that appeared Tuesday in the *Washington Post* by Walter Pincus, who enjoys close ties to the CIA. It cited concerns by "agency personnel" that they would not be able to "conduct interrogations effectively," given new proscriptions against torture, and that "other operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan will come under review."

The Democrats are cowering before these pressures. Obama's press secretary has refused to utter a word about the clash between Pelosi and Panetta, while Democrats in Congress are shying away from the debate on torture, treating it increasingly as a distraction.

The Obama administration is acting to perpetuate and politically legitimize the criminal policies initiated under Bush, while shielding those responsible. The two wars launched to assert US hegemony over the Persian Gulf and Central Asia are continuing with bipartisan support, and Obama is responsible for his own war

crimes, including this month's bombing that slaughtered 150 civilians in Afghanistan. Domestic spying, extraordinary rendition and military commissions have all been upheld by the administration. The resumption of torture is inevitable and in all likelihood has already begun.

In the end, this entire process exposes the futility of elections under America's two-party system. Those who take office—Obama no less than Bush—are accountable not to the American people, but to a narrow constituency consisting of the financial oligarchy, the military command and the intelligence agencies, those who really rule America.

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