

The Obama-Cheney “debate” and the threat of dictatorship in America

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The fragile state of constitutional government and deep crisis of American democracy has been laid bare by the extraordinary public confrontation between President Barack Obama and former Vice President Dick Cheney on Thursday morning.

Speaking before a public audience at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., Obama accused the previous administration of violating the Constitution. Obama’s speech, devoted to a defense of his decision to close the Guantánamo prison camp, had been scheduled at the last moment. Its purpose, clearly, was to preempt Cheney’s attack, of which the president had been forewarned.

That attack came within minutes of the conclusion of the president’s remarks. Cheney, speaking before members of a right-wing intelligence think tank, delivered a provocative and bitter denunciation of the president. Dismissing with derision Obama’s criticisms of the Bush administration’s policy of “enhanced interrogation”—i.e., torture—the former vice president all but accused the president of aiding and abetting the enemies of the United States.

Cheney has been at the center of an increasingly vitriolic campaign to mobilize opposition in Congress and, more ominously, among his political allies and sympathizers in the military and Central Intelligence Agency, against the Obama administration. The growing effectiveness of this campaign was reflected in the overwhelming congressional vote, on Wednesday, against Obama’s plan to close the Guantánamo prison. Bolstered by testimony from FBI director Robert Mueller III warning of the threat the prisoners would pose if transferred to prison facilities in the United States, the Senate, including most Democrats, voted against the proposed Guantánamo shutdown.

Attempting to defend the policies pursued by his administration, Obama cast his own decisions as a somewhat desperate and rearguard effort to restore constitutional government in the United States after eight years of rampant illegality by the previous administration.

He underscored the gravity of the threat to constitutional rule by noting that he was delivering his address in a hall that exhibits the foundation documents of American democracy—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. Obama reminded his audience that he had taken “an oath to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution,” and declared that “we must never, ever, turn our back on the enduring principles for expedience sake.”

Obama stated that under the previous administration, “our government made decisions based on fear rather than foresight; and that all too often our government trimmed facts and evidence to fit ideological

predispositions.”

Calling for the restoration of “the rule of law and due process,” Obama declared that “the decisions that were made over the last eight years established an ad hoc legal approach for fighting terrorism that was neither effective nor sustainable—a framework that failed to rely on our legal traditions and time-tested institutions, and that failed to use our values as a compass.” The policies of the Bush administration, he said, had undermined “the rule of law.”

In the most significant section of his speech—which throws light on the nature of the political battles that have been raging at the highest levels of the state—Obama declared that opponents of his policy “embrace a view that can be summarized in two words: ‘Anything goes.’ Their arguments suggest that the ends of fighting terrorism can be used to justify any means, and that the President should have blanket authority to do whatever he wants—provided it is a President with whom they agree.”

Using euphemistic wording that belied the seriousness of his statement, Obama warned of the presence of powerful forces that were prepared to break with constitutional measures: “Every now and then,” he said, “there are those who think that America’s safety and success requires us to walk away from the sacred principles enshrined in this building. And we hear such voices today.”

The principal voice to which he was referring was that of Cheney. The president would not have considered himself compelled to reply to the former vice president if Obama viewed him as a disgruntled right-wing eccentric. In fact, Obama knows that Cheney—the real decision-maker in the Bush administration, the man who presided over a secret government—retains enormous influence within the Pentagon, the CIA and other less known sections of the military-intelligence bureaucracy that exercises vast and unaccountable power.

In his remarks to the American Enterprise Institute, Cheney went on the offensive against Obama, treating the administration and the president, personally, with undisguised contempt.

Obama’s criticisms of interrogation methods “do a serious injustice to intelligence operators and lawyers who deserve far better for their devoted service,” Cheney declared. “The danger here is a loss of focus on national security and what it requires.”

Cheney added ominously, “I would advise the administration to think very carefully about the course ahead.”

The former vice president virtually accused Obama of aiding terrorists and committing treason.

“Releasing the interrogation memos was flatly contrary to the national security interest of the United States,” he declared. “The harm done only begins with top secret information now in the hands of the terrorists, who have just received a lengthy insert for their training manual. Across the world, governments that have helped us capture terrorists will fear that sensitive joint operations will be compromised. And at the CIA, operatives are left to wonder if they can depend on the White House or Congress to back them up when the going gets tough.”

These words were particularly provocative and ominous, as they deliberately evoke recollections of the resentments of CIA operatives against the Kennedy administration in the aftermath of the failed 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion.

Cheney gleefully pointed out that the decision to release the memos had been opposed by leading figures inside the Obama administration, including CIA Director Leon Panetta and Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair.

Cheney mocked the “feigned outrage” of those who criticized the interrogation methods employed by the Bush administration. “In my long experience in Washington, few matters have inspired so much contrived indignation and phony moralizing as the interrogation methods applied to a few captured terrorists.” He added that the critics of these methods “are in no position to lecture anyone about ‘values.’”

The former vice president unambiguously defended the torture techniques of the Bush administration, insisting that “to completely rule out enhanced interrogation methods in the future is unwise in the extreme.”

He went on to denounce Obama’s decision to close Guantánamo, warning “I think the President will find, upon reflection, that to bring the worst of the worst terrorists inside the United States would be cause for great danger and regret in the years to come.”

It is no exaggeration to state that this public confrontation between Obama and Cheney has no precedent in modern American history. To believe that this bitter exchange between the president and former vice president does not raise the most serious questions about the viability of American democracy is the height of complacency.

Make no mistake about it: Cheney speaks for powerful segments of the ruling class, backed by substantial sections of the military and intelligence apparatus, who are deeply hostile to democracy.

As for Obama, his own position is riven by deep and insoluble political contradictions. His plea to observe constitutional norms is completely undermined by the fact that his administration has accepted without question the basic premises and foundations of the foreign policy of the Bush administration—that is, that the United States is waging a desperate struggle against “terror.”

While opposing certain actions of the Bush administration, Obama is careful to avoid challenging the central political lie out of which all its crimes developed.

“Al Qaeda is actively planning to attack us again,” Obama declared in the same speech on Thursday. “We know that this threat will be with us for a long time, and that we must use all elements of our power to defeat it.” Indeed, Obama claimed, it was his administration that was carrying

out this battle most consistently by taking “the fight to the extremists who attacked us on 9/11 in Afghanistan and Pakistan.”

If what Obama says is true—that the previous administration adopted a policy of “anything goes”—then those responsible should be prosecuted as political criminals. Instead, Obama presented a defense of their actions as a case of overzealousness in the pursuit of a noble cause. “Faced with an uncertain threat,” he said, “our government made a series of hasty decisions. And I believe that those decisions were motivated by a sincere desire to protect the American people.”

On two occasions, Obama insisted that there would be no “re-litigating” the policies of the last eight years. He opposed the formation of an independent commission and insisted that there would be no attempt to “focus on the past.”

In offering a brief for the conspirators around Cheney, Obama is merely continuing a policy of cowardice and accommodation that has characterized his administration from the beginning. Every concession has merely encouraged the most right-wing sections of the state and facilitated the conspiracy against democratic rights.

Obama’s temporizing, his constant cowering, is conditioned by the class interests that he represents. Whatever his criticisms of the Bush administration’s policies, Obama defends its basic aims. On domestic policy, he is continuing the massive handouts to the banks and Wall Street investors. On military policy, he is continuing the occupation of Iraq, while expanding the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan. His argument for legality is undermined by the fact that his administration has restarted military commissions, refused to publish torture photos, and in general maintained the anti-democratic measures of his predecessor.

Whatever verbal warnings Obama may make about the erosion of democracy in the United States, the actions of his administration facilitate and accelerate its breakdown. It is impossible to combine imperialist war with democracy. The latter cannot survive without opposing the former.

Obama is incapable of exposing the real social and political content of Cheney’s attack, because to do so would require the exposure of the political aims and reactionary class interests that motivate the “war on terror.” Moreover, it would require an appeal for the popular mobilization of the American population in defense of democratic rights. But at a time when the administration is pursuing domestic policies that protect the interests of the financial elite, the Obama administration has no desire to arouse popular discontent.

The defense of democratic rights cannot be safeguarded by any faction of the ruling class. The institutions of American democracy have already reached a very advanced level of decay.

The defense of democratic rights depends upon the independent political organization of the working class.

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