

Obama signs bills for record Pentagon, Homeland Security spending

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In a ceremony Wednesday, US President Barack Obama signed legislation authorizing the largest ever military budget, a gargantuan \$680 billion for the Pentagon, including \$130 billion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. On Thursday, he signed a spending bill funneling another \$44 billion into the Department of Homeland Security, to strengthen the apparatus of state repression within the United States.

The back-to-back bill signings are a clear demonstration that Obama is extending and intensifying the program of militarism and attacks on democratic rights for which the Bush administration was deservedly hated, in the United States and worldwide.

Each of the bills contained provisions aimed at further restricting democratic rights. The Pentagon budget bill authorizes the use of military tribunals to try prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and others seized illegally, either overseas or within the US, as part of the “war on terror.” It also bars the release of Guantanamo prisoners—even those found completely innocent—into the United States. It prohibits bringing Guantanamo prisoners to trial on US soil without a 45-day advance notice to Congress.

The Department of Homeland Security appropriations bill effectively prohibits the release of photographs taken by US military personnel during torture sessions at US bases in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay. It exempts these photos from the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act, under which the American Civil Liberties Union and several media outlets have filed suit in federal court. The exemption would apply, not just to the photos sought by the ACLU, but to any photos taken between September 11, 2001 and January 22, 2009 to which the Pentagon has objections.

Obama signed the record Pentagon budget less than three weeks after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. He then traveled to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware to be photographed late Wednesday night standing at attention as the coffins of 18 US military personnel killed in Afghanistan in the last few days arrived in the United States.

A decision on how many additional US troops will be sent to Afghanistan is expected late next week, likely in the interval between the runoff presidential election in Afghanistan November 7 and Obama’s departure for a lengthy trip to Asian capitals November 11. Obama ordered 21,000 more troops to the war last March, and the top US commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, has requested an even greater number this fall to escalate the war.

The \$680 billion authorized for the Pentagon in fiscal year 2010 is an increase of about 4 percent over the \$654 billion authorized for fiscal year 2009, despite the pledged drawdown of US forces deployed in Iraq. The number of US troops in Iraq is projected to fall from 120,000 today to about 50,000 by September 2010. If the drawdown is significantly slower, or the war in Afghanistan escalates rapidly, the Obama administration will request a supplemental appropriations bill that could take total military spending beyond the highest level reached under George W. Bush.

At the signing ceremony, Obama singled out defense secretary Robert Gates, a holdover from Bush, for special praise, declaring, “this effort would not have been possible without an extraordinary secretary of defense...on behalf of the American people, I want to thank you, Bob, for your extraordinary efforts.”

The Pentagon bill includes a 3.4 percent pay raise for all military personnel, and increases troop levels by

55,000, to a total of 1,425,000 in the US armed forces. The military buildup had overwhelming bipartisan support, with all but one Senate Democrat backing the legislation, while some Republicans opposed because of the unrelated gay rights provision that was attached to the bill.

The US media paid relatively little attention to the bill's passage, or to the perfunctory, rubber-stamp character of the congressional debate. Absurdly, the *New York Times* headlined its report on Obama's signing of the largest-ever military spending bill, "Victory for Obama Over Military Lobby," claiming that the deletion of a few big-ticket weapons systems, notably the F-22 fighter jet, represented "reform."

The combined total of \$724 billion for war and repression demonstrates the real priorities of the Obama administration, and the American ruling elite as a whole. At that rate, the Pentagon and DHS will spend more in 18 months than the entire cost of Obama's so-called health care reform. Two months of Pentagon/DHS spending would cover the budget deficits of all 50 states.

The appropriations bill for the Department of Homeland Security includes a raft of reactionary provisions:

- Continued funding for the next three years of the E-Verify program, requiring employers to check the immigration status of workers against a federal database.
- Funding a new program to monitor visitor exits from the United States, in addition to the current system of recording entries.
- A 27 percent increase in cybersecurity spending, to \$397 million.
- \$800 million for security measures along the US-Mexico border.
- \$1.5 billion to accelerate deportation of immigrants facing criminal charges.

One component of the Pentagon authorization bill is the Military Commissions Act of 2009, which retains the military tribunals established by the Bush administration with a few cosmetic changes, such as prohibiting the use of prisoner testimony derived from torture. Administration lobbyists successfully watered down more restrictive provisions adopted in the House version of the bill earlier this month.

A Department of Justice spokesman told *Esman* magazine that the military commissions would be a "viable option" for certain Guantanamo prisoners. White House officials have already made clear that they will not meet the January 20, 2010 deadline for emptying Guantanamo, set by Obama amid much fanfare when he took office.

Obama's cynical attitude toward democratic rights was on display after the signing ceremony for the Pentagon bill. He hailed the portion of the bill that extends federal hate crimes laws to include violence against gays and lesbians, meeting with the parents of Matthew Shepard, the young gay man beaten to death in Wyoming in 1998.

The next day, the Obama administration moved quickly to enforce the prohibition on the release of military torture photos. Solicitor General Elena Kagan sent a letter Thursday to the Supreme Court, apprising it of the legislation and declaring that she would file a supplemental brief on its effect on the ongoing ACLU lawsuit before the Court's conference November 6.



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