

Obama continues assault on democratic rights

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Actions taken by President Barack Obama over the past month have confirmed that he is every bit as committed as his predecessor, George W. Bush, to the expansion of the police powers of the state.

Last week, Obama moved to significantly weaken a “media shield” bill advancing through Congress that would give new protection to government whistleblowers and journalists in cases involving sources who speak with reporters on condition of anonymity. It marked yet another *volte-face* for Obama, who as a senator championed a similar measure.

Congressional and media allies were taken by surprise. The two leading establishment newspapers, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, published editorials criticizing Obama’s position. “The administration’s opposition to the core of this bill came as a complete surprise and doesn’t show much concern for compromise,” said New York Democratic Senator Charles Schumer. “This turns the bill’s near-certain passage into an uphill fight.”

A version of the shield law that has been passed by the House of Representatives allows judges to weigh the public’s right to know against considerations of “national security” in instances where the government takes reporters to court to force them to reveal their sources. In opposition to this bill, Obama offered his own version, which would force reporters to reveal their sources whenever the White House claims national security to be at stake.

Obama’s transparent aim is to intimidate the press and prevent members of the intelligence and defense apparatus from revealing government secrets and crimes. Purported threats to national security “was the constant cry from the Bush administration as the public

learned—through the unauthorized disclosure of confidential information—of prisoner abuse, secret CIA prisons for terrorist suspects and warrantless wiretapping,” the *New York Times* noted.

In another effort by the Obama administration to suppress information relating to abuses by the CIA, a federal judge ruled September 30 in favor of the administration’s bid to suppress hundreds of documents relating to the intelligence agency’s destruction of 92 video tapes of detainees undergoing torture.

The American Civil Liberties Union had sued under the Freedom of Information Act for the release of the documents, which also describe interrogation methods used at the CIA’s “black sites.” Current CIA Director Leon Panetta had argued in court papers that revealing any documentation of agency interrogation methods would threaten national security.

Last month, the Obama administration announced that it would seek to extend three provisions of the USA Patriot Act set to expire by year’s end. The provisions allow the government to operate roving wire taps, search any individual’s business, personal, and even library records upon presentation of a national security letter, and spy on so-called “lone wolf” suspects, i.e., foreign nationals who have no known links to groups designated as terrorist.

It now appears that Congress will extend the provisions.

The latest moves follow a well-established pattern. Since his inauguration, the candidate of “change” has consistently upheld the anti-democratic policies of the Bush administration:

- The administration announced its intention to continue the practice of rendition, whereby alleged terror suspects are seized and spirited off to third-party countries that practice torture.

- While announcing his intention to shut down the prison camp at Guantánamo Bay, Obama has opposed the habeas corpus lawsuits of prisoners there and rejected habeas corpus rights for prisoners at the infamous US military prison at Bagram in Afghanistan. The administration has also indicated its intention to carry on the practice of indefinite detention without trial.

- Obama has opposed any investigation of high-ranking Bush administration and CIA officials who ordered and oversaw the torture and killing of detainees. In response to the court-ordered release of a CIA inspector general's report that revealed instances of murder, Obama's attorney general, Eric Holder, announced a token investigation of a few "rogue agents" who overstepped Bush administration torture guidelines.

- Obama has suppressed the publication of photos depicting the torture, murder, and rape of prisoners, as well as other evidence of Bush administration criminality.

- The White House has invoked the state secrets privilege in an attempt to quash lawsuits by victims of torture and rendition, as well as those filed in opposition to warrantless wire-tapping of US residents.

When Obama ran for the presidency, he promised a new era of government openness and said he would curb or reverse the Bush administration's most egregious abuses of democratic rights. He won the election in part because of public opposition to the Bush administration's authorization of police-state methods.

However—as with foreign policy, which has seen the continuation of the Iraq war and expansion of war and military intervention in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and economic policy, which has continued and expanded the government bailout of Wall Street and attacks on

the jobs, wages and benefits of workers—Obama has continued his predecessor's assault on democratic rights.

In the space of 10 months in office, the Democratic administration has confirmed that there remains no serious constituency for the defense of democratic rights in either party or any section of the American political establishment.

The continuity between the right-wing policies of the Republican Bush and Democratic Obama administrations demonstrates that militarism and social reaction are not fundamentally a question of the individual traits of presidents, but rather are rooted in the class structure and historical crisis of American capitalism.

Obama, no less than Bush, represents the interests of the American financial aristocracy. Internationally, it increasingly employs military aggression in pursuit of its global economic and strategic aims in an attempt to offset the decline in its world economic position. At home, it turns to anti-democratic methods to defend an economic system that promotes staggering levels of inequality and growing social misery for broad masses of working people.

The ever more pronounced concentration of wealth at the very top of society and heightening of class tensions are ultimately incompatible with democratic procedures and methods of rule. The trampling of the Bill of Rights and habeas corpus is bound up with an awareness in ruling circles that their policies must give rise to social opposition. The police-state framework built up under Bush and Obama is a response by the ruling elite to a threat not from foreign terrorists, but from its main enemy—the American working class.

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