New York Times history lesson on civilian control of the military: Why now?

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On Monday the *New York Times* ran a column on the historical origins of civilian control of the military.

Contributing author John R. Miller—a fellow at the conservative Discovery Institute—attributed it to a speech George Washington, then commanding the American armies in the Revolutionary War, gave in 1783 to officers disgruntled over lack of pay. Reading a letter from a congressman to 500 near-mutinous officers gathered in Newburgh, New York, Washington put on spectacles and said, "Gentlemen, you must pardon me, for I have grown not only gray but blind in the service of my country." The officers were moved, and a military revolt against the young government was averted, according to Miller.

Why did the *Times* run a column on the subject now? For whom was this history lesson intended?

For most of US history, the principle of military subordination to elected government has been accepted without comment—except in the two instances where its assertion was the most controversial: Abraham Lincoln's sacking of General George McClellan in the Civil War, and Harry Truman's dismissal of General Douglas MacArthur during the Korean War.

Especially noteworthy are the column's opening and closing passages, which clearly refer to the present. "Civilian control of the military is a cherished principle in American government," Miller writes. "It was President Obama who decided to increase our involvement in Afghanistan, and it is Congress that will decide whether to appropriate the money to carry out his decision. It is the president and Congress, not the military, that will decide whether our laws should be changed to allow gays and lesbians to serve in our armed forces. The military advises, but the civilian leadership decides."

Having told the story of Washington at Newburgh, Miller begins his last paragraph with a stark warning: "But powerful armies often make their own rules, and many nations have succumbed to military control despite strong constitutions."

The *Times*' decision to run this comment must be seen in light of the growing power of the military-intelligence apparatus and its increasingly open role in US political life. This power has grown immeasurably since 1961, when President Dwight Eisenhower warned of the threat to democracy posed by the "military-industrial complex" whose "total influence," even then, was "felt in every city, every Statehouse, every office of the Federal government."

Evidence of the growing power and impunity of the military and spy agencies abounds:

• January 27 Congressional testimony from State Department Under Secretary Patrick Kennedy implied that the Flight 253 bomber, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, boarded his Christmas Day flight from Amsterdam to Detroit with the complicity of one or more US intelligence agencies. It has also been revealed that US spy agencies had Abdulmutallab's name, knowledge that an attack organized in Yemen was likely to take place on December 25, and warnings from British intelligence and even the young man's own father.

No one in any US spy agency has been held accountable for what, according to the official version of events, is an inexplicable breakdown of the most expensive and expansive intelligence system in the world; Kennedy's revelations have been subjected to a media blackout. A more plausible explanation is that powerful elements inside the state thought an attack, failed or otherwise, might be used to destabilize the US government. ["Why the media silence on the Flight 253 bombing hearings?"]

•In the months leading up to his announced surge in Afghanistan, sources within the US military close to generals Stanley McChrystal, US commander in Afghanistan, and David Petraeus, head of the US Central Command, maintained a steady stream of leaks in a frankly acknowledged bid to shift US policy on Afghanistan. McChrystal openly campaigned for an expansion of forces close to what Obama eventually ordered—a campaign supported by prominent members of the Republican Party.

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• Last year, after the court-ordered release of Bush Justice Department memos that created a pseudolegal rationale for torture of "terror suspects" prompted widespread calls for investigations, former Vice President Dick Cheney mounted a public attack on the Obama administration. Since then, intelligence agencies and the military have, through press leaks and statements from allied political figures like Cheney, mounted a full-throated defense of torture and other antidemocratic aspects of the "war on terror."

• In July 2009, it came to light that House and Senate intelligence committees were kept in the dark for eight years about a "secret counter-terrorism program" overseen by Cheney. Obama's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director, Leon Panetta, only learned of the program months after taking control of the CIA. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that the program "went beyond the widely publicized warrantless wiretapping program...encompassing additional secretive activities that created 'unprecedented' spying powers."

• On April 27, 2009, one of two Air Force One planes—the Boeing 747s used by the US president—flew at low altitude over New York City escorted by fighter jets. Officials absurdly claimed the operation was necessary to get a picture of Air Force One against the backdrop of the Statue of Liberty. The flight, which provoked panic in Manhattan, took place without the knowledge of Obama or New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg. ["What happened in the skies over New York City?"]

• After his inauguration, Obama left largely untouched the US military command and high-ranking personnel in the main spy agencies, while promoting generals to top civilian positions and maintaining Bush's defense Secretary, Robert Gates, in the same position. Done in the name of "continuity," these personnel decisions illustrated Obama's contempt for the popular hostility to the Bush administration's war policies that underlay his election.

• In September 2007 it was revealed that a nuclear-armed B-52 bomber had flown over the US without authorization.

• After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington D.C., Cheney initiated and headed a program called "Continuity of Government" that created a secret government in an "undisclosed, secure location," where he subsequently spent much of his time. The shadow government was drawn entirely from the executive branch, the military, and spy agencies. Elected members of Congress were not included and were unaware of its creation. Whether or not the shadow government has been disbanded is unclear.

• There remains no credible explanation for the 9/11 attacks. As in the Flight 253 bomb plot, not a single member of the US intelligence agencies ostensibly responsible for protecting the American people has been held accountable for what is, if the official version of events is accepted, the greatest domestic security failure in US history—an event seized upon to launch the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and unprecedented attacks on basic democratic rights.

• In the disputed 2000 presidential election, which the Supreme Court handed to George W. Bush by ordering a halt to ballot counting in Florida, Al Gore conceded defeat amid fears of opposition from the military, which the Republican Party openly courted during the struggle over election results. A source close to Gore said he "got very stuck on the notion that if he became president it was not in the national interest that he have a relationship characterized by his mistrust of the military."

Commenting on these and similar comments attributed to Gore, the *World Socialist Web Site* noted "they amount to the acceptance of a military veto over the outcome of a national election and the occupant of the White House. The subordination of the military to civilian rule is a cardinal principle of the US Constitution. The fact that this cornerstone of democracy has become so eroded is a stark indication of the decay of bourgeois democratic institutions in the US." ["New York Times documents military role in theft of 2000 election"]

This list, which could be much longer, is the context in which the *Times'* history lesson on civilian control of the military appears.

In fact, Monday's column is the newspaper's second reference in recent weeks to fears of the dangers posed to civilian rule by the military and intelligence agencies.

The first was more oblique. A January 23 article, "Gates Sees Fallout From Troubled Ties With Pakistan," covered a recent trip to Pakistan by Defense Secretary Robert Gates and concluded with the following line: "His final message delivered, he relaxed on the 14-hour trip home by watching 'Seven Days in May,' the Cold War-era film about an attempted military coup in the United States."

Given the growing assertiveness and impunity of the security apparatus, it seems unlikely that the decision to disclose this piece of information was gratuitous.

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