

The death agony of American democracy

David North
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For the past week, the Obama administration and the media have attempted to generate enthusiasm in the American public over the killing of Osama bin Laden. No sooner had Obama completed his speech announcing Bin Laden's death than the media broadcast images of students outside the White House spontaneously celebrating the news. Though the presence of beer bottles and signs of public inebriation detracted seriously from the scene's "iconic" value, it was intended, quite obviously, to serve as a demonstration of an outpouring of popular support for the assassination.

In fact, there has been little sign that Bin Laden's killing has evoked among the broad mass of the American people anything approaching the wild enthusiasm of the media. Except for a small number of orchestrated events, the American people have during the past week gone about their increasingly difficult lives as they normally do. They did not regret Bin Laden's death, but they saw no reason to participate in the media's celebration of his killing. Despite all the efforts over the past 30 years to extinguish democratic consciousness among the people, it still exists. The practice of "targeted killings" is not a popular one.

The media, which seems to sense the public's unease, has responded with increasing belligerence. In a column published Sunday in the *New York Times* entitled "Killing Evil Doesn't Make Us Evil," Maureen Dowd lashed out at expressions of public doubt about the legitimacy of Bin Laden's assassination. She denounced the "inane debate" over the legality of the killing. "I want memory, and justice, and revenge," she declaimed. Ms. Dowd does not recognize that there is a basic incompatibility between justice, which is an ideal embedded in democratic principles, and revenge, the pursuit of which has sent lynch mobs into action.

"The really insane assumption behind some of the second-guessing," Dowd continues, "is that killing Osama somehow makes us like Osama, as if all killing is the same."

Dowd has missed the irony of her remark. Assassination is, indeed, a very exceptional and *illegal* type of killing. Its practice by a state—and, in particular, the United States—has far-reaching political implications, since the act is recognized as the most extreme violation of democratic and

legal norms. The involvement of the United States in political assassinations in the 1960s was part of a pattern of illegal actions that led to the wholesale criminality of the Nixon administration and its violations of democratic rights in the United States.

The famous 1976 report of the Senate committee chaired by Frank Church explicitly condemned assassinations as "incompatible with American principles, international order, and morality."

The Obama administration, aware of the strictures on assassination, attempted to evade the legal problems posed by the killing of Bin Laden by claiming that he had been killed in the course of a violent firefight and that he had met his death arms in hand. During the past week, this initial version has been abandoned. There was no firefight and Bin Laden was unarmed.

Even in the most lenient interpretation of the law—which was provided in a 2005 essay published in the *Duke Law Review* ("Targeting Osama Bin Laden: Examining the Legality of Assassination as a Tool of US Foreign Policy")—the real circumstances of Bin Laden's death condemn the action of the Obama administration. In a commentary that examines the legality of assassination under conditions of war, the author, Howard A. Wachtel, states: "For example, if Osama bin Laden was in the process of surrendering, it would be illegal for a US soldier to kill him." But that appears to be precisely what occurred.

In any event, Dowd is not attempting to base her defense of the killing on legal subtleties. She simply does not see what all the fuss is about. She, and for that matter the *New York Times*, write as if legal issues are of no consequence and that debates about the killing are simply "inane."

It is worth recalling the response of the *Times*, in April 1988, to the Israeli government's assassination of the military leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Khalil al-Wazir, also known as Abu Jihad. Though Israel did not officially take responsibility for the killing, it was assumed that Abu Jihad's assassination had been ordered by the Shamir government, which, in unofficial statements, justified the act as a defensive measure against a "terrorist" leader who was organizing and directing the Palestinian

uprising in the occupied territories of Gaza and the West Bank.

In an angry comment, Tom Wicker, who was then the leading columnist of the *New York Times*, declared that the assassination “violated...the decent behavior demanded of a democratic and law-abiding government.” He expressed his dismay with “the idea of Israel’s highest, most responsible leaders deliberately approving a political assassination.”

Wicker’s column rejected as a justification for the killing the argument “that Israel lives in a virtual state of war, surrounded by implacable enemies.” He declared, “Calculated murder is terrorism’s instrument, not that of decent societies, in which it must always be illegal, inhumane, immoral.”

The sentiments expressed by Wicker cannot be found in the establishment media today. The past quarter-century has seen a collapse in the commitment of the American ruling elite to democracy.

The reason for this lies not in the “threat” allegedly posed by terrorism to the United States. Even before 9/11, American democracy was already in an advanced state of decomposition. During the late 1990s, a conspiracy to remove an elected president from office (the impeachment of Clinton) nearly succeeded. The 2000 election ended with the suppression by the Supreme Court of the most basic of democratic rights—the right of citizens to have their votes counted.

The decay of democracy was accelerated by 9/11, a day which remains shrouded in mystery. Wars were launched on the basis of massive lies, and the endlessly hyped terrorist threat has been invoked throughout the past decade to justify the evisceration of constitutional principles and rights.

What accounts for this reactionary process? One would need to be blind to miss the connection between the massive accumulation of wealth by a small elite and its ever more blatant hostility to democracy.

In this context, it is appropriate to take note of another essay published last week in the *New York Times*, by columnist David Brooks. Entitled “The Politics of Solipsism,” it denounces democracy as a perversion of the founders’ vision of a republic. “The distinction [between a republic and a democracy] has been lost over the past few decades, but it is an important one.”

Brooks continues: “Over the years, the democratic principles have swamped the republican ones. We’re now impatient with any institution that stands in the way of the popular will, regarding it as undemocratic and illegitimate.”

Brooks is vague about the democratization process that he deplores. He speaks only of “the past few decades” and “over the years.” In fact, he is denouncing the entire democratic tradition that drew its inspiration from

Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, which proclaimed “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” as inalienable rights.

To be more historically specific, Brooks—who serves as the political philosopher of the *Times*—is aiming his guns at the “new birth of freedom” proclaimed at Gettysburg by Lincoln, who asserted as his ideal “government of the people, by the people, for the people.” For this sweeping democratic vision, Brooks feels only the deepest contempt. “Politicians,” he writes, “see it as their duty to serve voters in the way a business serves its customers.”

The immediate cause of Brooks’ diatribe against democracy is the popular resistance to the massive cuts in social spending that the financial and corporate aristocracy is demanding. He declares, “Voters will have to embrace institutional arrangements that restrain their desire to spend on themselves right now.” They will be required to accept that “politics can no longer be about satisfying voters’ immediate needs.”

We are not dealing here merely with the essays of individual writers. The columnists of the *Times* are giving expression to deeply reactionary political moods and tendencies within the American ruling class. Its commitment to democracy is vanishing. It is obsessed with the accumulation and protection of its wealth, which has been derived from criminal financial manipulations at home and unending violence abroad.

Beyond the borders of the United States, the victims of American imperialist militarism during the past decade number in the hundreds of thousands, if not millions. Within the United States, the ruling elite is intensifying a social counterrevolution that threatens vast sections of the working class with poverty.

Unlimited violence, the repudiation of legality, and the suppression of democracy: this is the reactionary trajectory of contemporary American capitalism.

The defense of democratic rights and the defeat of social reaction depend on the political mobilization of the working class, on the basis of an international socialist program. This is the task to which the Socialist Equality Party is committed.

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