

The scaffolding of an American police state

Bill Van Auken
6 January 2012

With his December 31 signing of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), allowing for indefinite military detention without charges or trial, Barack Obama has made an infamous contribution to the steady march towards police-state dictatorship in the United States.

The sweeping implications of this act, pushed through to provide \$662 billion to feed the US war machine, could not be concealed by the shamefaced signing ceremony, held in private and late in the day on New Year's Eve to minimize media coverage and public attention.

Nor is the objective content of the clauses legalizing the military's locking up of American citizens and non-citizens alike on the sole say-so of the White House changed in the slightest by the hypocritical signing statement the president issued in enacting the legislation.

Claiming "serious reservations" about the law he was enacting, Obama declared that "my Administration will not authorize the indefinite military detention without trial of US citizens." He allowed that such a practice would "break with our most important traditions and values as a nation."

Obama's pledge is as duplicitous as it is worthless. As one of the legislation's key Democratic sponsors, Senator Carl Levin of Michigan, revealed, the Obama White House intervened directly into the legislative process to kill amendments that would have specifically prohibited the military from indefinitely imprisoning US citizens without trial. It viewed such an exemption as an unacceptable restriction on presidential power.

The Obama administration's record over the last three years speaks for itself. The Democratic president was swept into office on a wave of popular revulsion towards the Bush administration's criminal wars and attacks on democratic rights. He vowed to close down the Guantanamo prison camp within one year and,

during his campaign, condemned Bush for establishing a system in which he could "lock people away without ever telling them why they're there or what they're charged with."

Once in office, the administration intervened repeatedly in court cases to quash any attempt to hold its predecessors to account for everything from torture to illegal domestic spying. It upheld the president's "right" to order indefinite military detentions and continued the odious practice of "rendition"—in which suspects are abducted and bundled off to foreign countries for interrogation and torture.

Going significantly further than the Bush administration, the Obama White House arrogated to itself the "right" to order the assassination of US citizens without presenting any evidence against them, carrying out such extra-judicial murders against the New Mexico-born Islamic cleric Anwar al-Awlaki and his 16-year-old son.

Now, Obama has signed into law provisions essentially legalizing the kind of atrocities associated with fascistic military dictatorships, such as those spawned by the Pentagon and the CIA in Latin America, where thousands of workers, students and political opponents of these regimes—who were branded as terrorists—"disappeared" into secret detention and torture centers, never to be seen again.

The assault on the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the centuries-old principle of *habeas corpus*, and the steady erection of the scaffolding for an American police state are not simply the outcome of the personal views or politics of either Bush or Obama.

The process is bound up with the social, economic and political contradictions of American capitalism. It has been developing in an uninterrupted fashion over the course of well over a decade.

In the 2000 election crisis, the Socialist Equality Party warned that the decision of the US Supreme

Court to halt the counting of the ballots in Florida and install Bush as president, despite his losing the popular vote, made clear that there existed no significant constituency for democratic rights in the American ruling elite and its political system.

This assessment has been confirmed in spades over the last 11 years. Using the September 11 attacks as a pretext, the government set up a vast apparatus of domestic spying, enacted the Patriot Act, founded the Department of Homeland Security, created the Pentagon's Northern Command that cleared the way for the use of the military in the US itself, and established a global network of CIA-run detention and torture centers. More recently, the American people have witnessed the systematic and coordinated suppression of nationwide Occupy Wall Street protests by militarized police forces.

The mounting threat of dictatorship has deep historical roots. The post-World War II period has seen repeated and sustained attacks on democratic rights, ranging from the McCarthyite witch-hunts of the 1950s to the CIA-FBI spying and "dirty tricks" that culminated in the Watergate crisis in the 1970s.

These earlier assaults on constitutional rights, however, encountered significant resistance within the political establishment. President Harry Truman, for example, used his veto in an attempt to kill the 1950 McCarran Act, the last time legislation was passed giving the government powers of indefinite detention without trial. Truman called the legislation "a long step toward totalitarianism" and a "mockery of the Bill of Rights."

What is perhaps most significant about the passage of the NDAA and its codification of indefinite detention is the lack of any significant opposition. The mass media and the political establishment passed over Obama's signing of the bill in virtual silence.

This shift is bound up with fundamental changes in the structure of US society—in particular, the unprecedented growth of social inequality. This gulf, dividing the billionaires and multi-millionaires that make up the top one percent from the great mass of working people, is incompatible with even the pretense of democracy.

With American and world capitalism confronting a historic breakdown, the ruling class, which controls both the Democratic and Republican parties, is

prepared to employ whatever means are required—including those of police-state dictatorship—to defend its monopoly of wealth and power against a resurgence of class struggle. Similar developments are taking place throughout Europe and internationally under the impact of the global crisis.

The defense of democratic rights is inseparable from the fight to defend jobs and living standards and is impossible today without a direct assault on the immense concentration of wealth in the hands of a financial oligarchy.

Such a struggle can be mounted only by means of the independent political mobilization of the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program for the reorganization of economic life on the basis of social need, rather than private profit.

Bill Van Auken



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact