

American democracy and the “disposition matrix”

Joseph Kishore
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The media and political establishment have responded with near total silence to the *Washington Post*'s revelation last week that the Obama administration has transformed extra-judicial assassination into a permanent practice of the US government.

What should be immediate grounds for the impeachment of the president has been met with indifference, most notably from liberal and “left” supporters of Obama's re-election. If the initial *Post* article has something of the character of a trial balloon—to see to what extent the revelation of such measures would be met with official opposition—the results are conclusive: there is no significant commitment to democratic rights in the media and political establishment.

By any objective account, the *Post*'s revelations are extraordinary. “Targeted killing”—a euphemism for assassination—“is now so routine that the Obama administration has spent much of the past year codifying and streamlining the processes to sustain it.” The administration has transformed “ad hoc elements into a counterterrorism infrastructure capable of sustaining permanent war.”

Kill lists “that were regarded as finite emergency measures after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, are now fixtures of the national security apparatus.” At the same time, it is “a policy so secret that it impossible for outsiders to judge whether it complies with the laws of war or US values—or even determine the total number of people killed.”

In other words, the administration has systematized a process by which the executive branch, with no judicial oversight, kills people—including US citizens—routinely all over the world. From a “state of exception,” the administration has transformed these powers, without any public discussion, into a state of permanence.

The language used by government officials to justify

such measures is chilling. The list of potential targets has been dubbed a “disposition matrix.” One former administration official noted that they faced a “disposition problem”—i.e., the government faced the challenge of disposing of targets. Wary of a potentially messy legal process, whether in civilian courts or before military tribunals, the Obama administration has elected more and more to simply kill people.

Writing in the Council of Foreign Relations, Micah Zenko cites one military official involved in the targeted killing program: “To emphasize how easy targeted killings by special operations forces or drones has become, this official flicked his hand back over and over, stating, ‘It really is like swatting flies. We can do it forever easily and you feel nothing. But how often do you really think about killing a fly?’”

Employing a somewhat different analogy, former CIA analyst and Obama adviser Bruce Riedel, told the *Post*, “The problem with the drone is it's like your lawn mower. You've got to mow the lawn all the time. The minute you stop mowing, the grass is going to grow back.”

Thousands have been slaughtered in this way, including many entirely innocent civilians. Among those assassinated by the American government were US citizen Anwar al-Awlaki, accused of propagating Islamic fundamentalist ideas. Obama has declared that ordering the killing of al-Awlaki was “an easy one.” Robert Gibbs, a top Obama adviser, declared in relationship to the killing of al-Awlaki's 16-year old son, also a US citizen, who was accused of nothing, that “he should have had a more responsible father.”

It is impossible to speak of the “erosion” of American democracy any longer. The situation is far more advanced. Such language reflects a political establishment for which the most basic democratic conceptions are entirely foreign. It is language befitting a police state.

The implications go far beyond the use of drones. In seeking to justify its program of state killings, the Obama administration has in effect obliterated the legal basis for all constraints on executive power. The core concept of due process is inscribed in the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution, which declares that “no person shall...be deprived of life, liberty or property, without due process of law.”

The concept of due process traces its roots to the very origins of constitutional monarchy and the limitations on arbitrary power in Britain—the Magna Carta. In brief: a person cannot be deprived of his rights, including his right to life, without a legal and judicial process. According to the Obama administration, however, this due process requirement is satisfied by the internal deliberations of the executive—by the president and his closest advisers.

And if the president can kill anyone, including US citizens, without judicial review, what power does he not have? Any but the most formal distinction between democracy and presidential dictatorship is swept away.

Such measures will ultimately be used within the United States. Particularly since the September 11 attacks, the American government has constructed a huge spying apparatus, an apparatus currently overseen by the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC)—the same body that is at the center of the assassination program.

In March, the Justice Department modified guidelines to allow the NCTC to collect and “continually assess” information on American citizens for up to five years, from 180 days as established under Bush. In July, the American Civil Liberties Union remarked that the changes amounted to “a reboot of the Total Information Awareness Program” which Bush was forced to formally abandon in 2003 after intense public opposition, though it was continued in different forms.

The terminal crisis of American democracy is deeply rooted in the structure of American capitalism, and in particular the vast growth of social inequality. Over the past several decades, a tiny financial aristocracy has monopolized enormous resources on the basis of speculation and increasingly criminal operations. After creating the economic and financial crisis that erupted in 2008, this same social layer is determined to pursue unpopular policies at home and abroad.

It is worth noting in this context a column by prominent political commentator George Will, appearing in the *Washington Post* earlier this month. Under the headline, “Seeds of Our Dysfunction,” Will complains that “America’s public-policy dysfunction exists not because

democracy isn’t working but because it is.” People are not being sufficiently “reasonable,” Will complains, particularly because they do not recognize the need for massive cuts in social programs. “People flinch from confronting difficult problems until driven by necessity’s lash.”

Will is simply giving voice to conceptions more broadly felt in the ruling class. The political system, even under its current anti-democratic form, is seen as a hindrance to implementing policies that are determined to be “necessary.”

In fact, the two political parties are as united in their commitment to a wholesale attack on the working class as they are in supporting the policy of extra-judicial assassination abroad. In the aftermath of the election, whether Obama or Romney wins, the ruling class is planning immediate measures to slash social program upon which millions of people depend.

Unending war, social reaction, and the repudiation of legality—this is the program of the American ruling class. Democracy is incompatible with the continued rule of the financial aristocracy, and the continued existence of the social system, capitalism, upon which it rests.

The task of defending and extending democracy, therefore, lies with the working class—through its independent political mobilization in the fight for socialism.

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The Socialist Equality Party is intervening in the 2012 elections to fight for a socialist leadership in the working class. To sign up to attend one of the regional conferences in New York (November 3) and Michigan (November 4), [click here](#).



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