

Obama announces task force on gun violence

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Two interrelated features have characterized the official political and media response to the horrific mass killing in Newtown, Connecticut last Friday. First is the deliberate attempt to obscure the relationship between the regularity of such tragedies and the relentless promotion of militarism and violence by the state. Second is the virtually exclusive focus on gun control, in the name of which the Obama administration is seeking to expand the police powers of this very same state apparatus.

Both aspects were on display Wednesday as President Obama announced the creation of a new task force, headed by Vice President Joseph Biden, to develop policy proposals in the wake of the Newtown massacre.

While indicating his support for measures to ban assault weapons and close loopholes on background checks for gun purchases, Obama made clear that Biden would be tasked with proposing other measures aimed at reducing “the epidemic of gun violence that plagues this country every single day.” Obama pledged to use “all the powers of this office” to accomplish this goal.

Obama’s remarks mirrored comments by congressional Republicans as well as Democrats that any restrictions on automatic weapons must be part of a broader approach. Obama indicated the character of what is being prepared when he cited as a qualification for Biden’s selection to head his task force the latter’s authorship of the Violent Crime and Law Enforcement act of 1994, signed into law by then-President Bill Clinton.

The 1994 law included far more than a ban on assault weapons (which was allowed to lapse in 2004). It greatly expanded the federal death penalty and increased policing powers, providing funding for 100,000 new police officers nationally. It was followed two years later by the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 (passed in the wake of the

Oklahoma City bombing of 1995), which further expanded the death penalty and reduced the rights of death row inmates.

In calling for broad measures to address gun violence, Obama referred to several killings since Newtown, including the shooting of three police officers in Memphis and Topeka. He said nothing about the rash of killings *by* police officers, including the recent shooting of unarmed individuals in Cleveland and Chicago. (See, “ Killings highlight epidemic of police violence in the US ”).

Obama also referred to the need to address “a culture that all too often glorifies guns and violence.” This was said by a president who, on a weekly basis, selects individuals around the world, including American citizens, to target for extra-judicial assassination as part of the “war on terror,” and who never misses an opportunity to praise the US military and Special Operations forces.

Obama heads a state apparatus that is engaged in daily atrocities all over the world. According to conservative estimates, 176 children have been killed in drone strikes in Pakistan alone. Monday was the third anniversary of a missile attack in Yemen that massacred 35 people, including 21 children. And it is only nine months since a US Army sergeant walked into a rural village in Kandahar, Afghanistan and murdered 16 people, including 9 children.

On Wednesday, *Zero Dark Thirty*, a film by director Kathryn Bigelow that glorifies the CIA, torture and the assassination team that killed bin Laden, opened in select cities to general media acclaim. It has renewed a debate within the political establishment over torture that focuses almost entirely on whether it “works” and virtually excludes questions of legality, constitutionality or morality.

At the same time that torture is being widely discussed in the media and treated as a legitimate

policy question, one searches in vain for commentary suggesting a link between such state-sponsored violence and the events in Newtown. Both the official debate on torture and the evasion of any discussion of the social and political roots of events such as the Newtown massacre reflect the decomposition of American democracy.

There is no question that the ability of Adam Lanza and other deranged individuals, typically, like Lanza, dressed in combat fatigues, to carry out acts of mass violence is facilitated by the widespread availability of deadly weapons in the United States. The right-wing promotion of “gun rights” is deeply reactionary and anti-social. However, the promotion by the ruling class of gun control is both a diversion from the more fundamental issues and an attempt to shore up its own monopoly on violence and repression.

The basic framework of the political establishment’s response to the Newtown massacre was provided by the *New York Times* on Monday in a series of editorials devoted to the issue of gun control. The *Times* began by declaring: “Americans are ready to shoulder burdens—as we did after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks by accepting increased security when we travel and military actions we might previously have avoided.”

With these words, the leading media voice of American liberalism and the Democratic Party not only excluded from its discussion of the Newtown tragedy any critique of the militarism and police-state measures carried out in the name of the “war on terror,” it explicitly endorsed them. This was the framework for its argument in favor of gun control.

In the course of that argument, the *Times* made the extraordinary statement: “There are no rights granted by the Constitution that are so absolute that they erase concerns about public safety and welfare.” Such a statement goes far beyond a call for banning assault weapons and the assertion that free speech does not cover shouting “Fire!” in a crowded theater (first used in 1919 by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes to support an anti-democratic Supreme Court ruling banning the distribution of leaflets against the draft). It can reasonably be taken as a sweeping declaration of support for anti-democratic actions supposedly carried out to protect “public safety and welfare”—the standard justification for every attack on democratic rights.

The direction that the ruling class is seeking to take

the “national discussion” following Newtown is also indicated by the personnel leading it. In addition to Biden, this includes Democrat Dianne Feinstein, the head of the Senate Intelligence Committee, who has been intimately involved in all the attacks on democratic rights over the past decade. Feinstein is expected to introduce some form of gun control legislation in January.

The other major figure at the forefront of the debate is New York’s billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, who has tied gun control to the need for more “proactive policing,” such as that implemented in New York City. Under former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and now Bloomberg, the city has expanded the power of police to arrest and search “problem people” in “problem areas,” as Bloomberg put it in an interview last Sunday.

Immediately after Obama’s announcement on Wednesday, Bloomberg spoke to Biden on the phone to offer his “full support” for the task force.



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