

The police state implications of Obama's assassination program

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The Obama administration's recently-leaked "white paper" on the assassination of US citizens, and the actions carried out on the basis of the arguments it advances, must be taken as a dire warning to the working class in the United States and around the world. The democratic rights of the people are in grave peril. The American ruling class, steeped in lawlessness and violence, is moving toward dictatorship.

The administration's frontal assault on democratic rights and constitutional protections—asserting the "right" of the president to unilaterally and secretly order the state murder of American citizens—is undeniably grounds for impeachment. The crimes of Richard Nixon, who nearly 40 years ago resigned the presidency rather than face impeachment and removal from office, pale in comparison to Obama's assertion of unconstrained executive powers.

The pseudo-legal arguments of the Justice Department memo, recalling the Bush administration's infamous torture memoranda, boil down to the following:

The president and the military-intelligence apparatus, based solely on their own internal deliberations, have the power to assassinate any US citizen who they decide is a leading member of Al Qaeda or its "associated forces." This power has no geographic boundaries. Nor can it be limited by any form of congressional or judicial oversight. The White House and its military/intelligence advisers are judge, jury and executioner.

The entire document is an exercise in doubletalk and sophistry. While it asserts, for example, that those selected for elimination have to pose an "imminent threat of violent attack," it proceeds to define "imminent" to mean its opposite. The government needs no proof that any specific action is planned or

that something is to take place in the immediate future.

In the end, nothing remains of core democratic rights. The principle of due process—with roots going back to the 13th century and enshrined in the Fifth Amendment to the US Constitution's assertion that no individual can be "deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law"—is dispensed with.

The justifications for this assertion of dictatorial powers—national security and the requirements of war (in this case, the global "war on terror")—are the same as those invoked by every military and fascist regime, from Hitler to Pinochet.

Yet these developments have provoked no significant opposition from within the political or media establishment.

The response of the *New York Times*, the main newspaper of American liberalism, is particularly significant. In an editorial published Wednesday, the *Times* regrets the undisguised character of the administration's contempt for constitutional restraints and proposes measures to give the killing operation, including of American citizens, a legalistic gloss. It suggests the creation of a "special [i.e., secret] court to handle this sort of sensitive discussion, like the one it created to review wiretapping." In other words, a star chamber to rubber-stamp state murders in similar fashion as the secret FISA court sanctions unlimited domestic spying.

The *Times* does not call for a halt to program of extra-judicial assassinations, nor does it suggest that Obama and his accomplices be held to account.

In a section of the *Times* published online, entitled "Room for Debate," the newspaper presents various opinions on the assassination doctrine, most of which are in favor. Saikrishna Prakash of the University of Virginia School of Law (and former clerk for US

Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas) proclaims the legal arguments in the white paper “exhaustive.”

Gregory McNeal of Pepperdine University (and former top adviser to the Guantanamo Bay military commissions under the Bush administration) insists that “wartime targeting decisions are entrusted to political branches, not unelected and unaccountable judges.”

Criticisms of the program presented by the *Times* are muted. Jameel Jaffer of the American Civil Liberties Union worries that the executive should not be entrusted alone to carry out such actions because they can “make mistakes.”

Such is the official “debate.”

The acceptance and support by the American liberal establishment of presidential assassinations, including of American citizens, is the outcome of a decades-long evolution ever further to the right. As the Democratic Party has abandoned any commitment to social reform, it has accepted and promoted attacks on basic democratic rights—from the cover-up of the Iran-Contra scandal in the 1980s; to the attempted right-wing coup, in the form of the Starr investigation and Clinton impeachment, in the 1990s; to the theft of the 2000 elections; to the raft of police state measures implemented in the aftermath of 9/11 and the launching of wars based on lies of the 2000s.

Now, in the form of the Obama administration, the Democratic Party and the upper-middle class liberal milieu that forms its personnel and periphery is carrying out criminal policies both at home and abroad that go beyond even those implemented by the Bush administration.

This is not to be explained by the “war on terror” and the campaign against Al Qaeda. Behind these ideological pretexts lie profound and political and social processes.

The policy of extra-judicial assassination of American citizens underscores the inextricable connection between militarism abroad and the destruction of democracy within the United States. In response to its declining economic position, the American ruling elite has sought to leverage its overriding military power to maintain its position of global domination. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in particular, the US has launched one war after another, now accompanied by a campaign of drone assassinations.

The decline of American capitalism has at the same time been accompanied by a further concentration of wealth in the hands of an increasingly parasitic financial aristocracy, a process that has only accelerated since the onset of the world economic crisis in 2008.

The ruling class is well aware that the unending attack on jobs, wages and social programs is generating mass opposition. The erection of the framework of a police state is directed against the inevitable eruption of mass social struggles.

There is no genuine constituency for democracy within the American ruling class and its political representatives in the Democratic and Republican parties. Democratic rights are increasingly incompatible with the financial aristocracy and the social system upon which it rests—capitalism.

The defense of democratic rights, as with all social and political rights, depends on the independent political organization and mobilization of the working class in the struggle for socialism.



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