

The US drone assassination program and the threat of dictatorship

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Thursday's confirmation hearing for John Brennan, President Barack Obama's nominee for director of the US Central Intelligence Agency, provided a revealing and grim spectacle of the disintegration of what remains of democratic rights in the United States.

Some press accounts of the hearing have referred to Brennan being "grilled" on the US drone assassination program. On the contrary, the proceedings resembled nothing so much as a well-fed cat being questioned by a panel of skittish mice.

Brennan came as the representative of those within the US military-intelligence apparatus entrusted with defending the ruling class by means of killings, detentions and torture. As Obama's counterterrorism adviser and the architect and director of an assassination program run out of the White House, he has presided over an unprecedented expansion of executive power and assault on core constitutional rights.

One senator after another, Democrats no less than Republicans, fawned over Brennan, declaring their admiration and gratitude for the bloody work of the CIA and their eager anticipation of confirming him as CIA director and working closely with him in the near future. None of them directly challenged the assertion of the most sweeping of the extra-constitutional powers with which he is identified—the power of the president of the United States to unilaterally and secretly order the assassination of American citizens.

Among those who expressed certain qualms about this system of extra-judicial executions was Senator Angus King of Maine, who helpfully suggested that a star chamber-style secret court be set up to rubber stamp and sanctify the White House's "kill lists."

Senator Ron Wyden of Oregon—in the context of present day US politics the most "liberal" member of

the Senate intelligence panel—merely pleaded with Brennan for more public information on the drone assassination program. "Americans have a right to know when their government thinks it's allowed to kill them," he declared.

Contained in this statement is the tacit recognition that the rights enumerated in the US Constitution, including the 5th Amendment's guarantee that no one "shall be deprived of life ... without due process," have been turned into a dead letter.

Wyden went on to ask for clarification as to whether the administration believes that the president can use this authority inside the United States. Brennan's response omitted any assurance that American citizens will not be secretly murdered on US soil. Instead, he cryptically asserted his determination to "optimize transparency on these issues, but at the same time, optimize secrecy and the protection of our national security." Neither Wyden nor anyone else on the Senate committee attempted to probe further.

With this chilling exchange, the threat of a US police state dictatorship comes clearly into view. Brennan will not disavow the president's "right" to secretly murder US citizens on American soil, because such methods may prove necessary, ostensibly for the struggle against "terrorism" and in defense of "national security."

After all, they proved to be so in other countries. Obama and Brennan did not invent the methods of secret "kill lists" and covert assassinations. They were employed on an industrial scale less than four decades ago in the Chile of General Augusto Pinochet and the Argentina of General Jorge Videla.

There, military and intelligence officials, most of them trained in the US, drew up kill lists of tens of thousands of their own citizens and carried out their assassinations. They also acted in the name of a

struggle against “terrorism” and in defense of “national security,” but had the real aim of crushing the resistance of the working class.

Workers, students, peasants, intellectuals and anyone perceived to be a potential enemy of the state were rounded up by death squads, tortured and killed in secret prisons or thrown alive from airplanes into the sea. Like Mr. Brennan, the officials of the Argentine and Chilean dictatorships refused to acknowledge any role in these state killings, leaving their victims to be counted among the “disappeared.”

Those comforting themselves with the old adage, “It can’t happen here,” should think again. The lurch to the right by the entire American political establishment and its irrevocable break with the democratic principles enunciated in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights are very far advanced.

Less than 40 years ago, a special Senate committee headed by Idaho Senator Frank Church did grill top CIA officials on covert assassinations, denouncing the agency for the practice and introducing a law against it. Even Republican President Gerald Ford was compelled to declare that his administration “does not condone under any circumstances any assassination attempts,” and to “condemn any CIA involvement” in “assassination planning.”

While no doubt the US government and its spy agency continued to carry out crimes in subsequent years, support for bourgeois democratic forms of rule within the political establishment remained sufficiently strong to force the government to officially reject assassination as state policy.

Just four years ago, Brennan’s involvement as a top CIA official under the Bush administration in the crimes of torture, extraordinary rendition and secret CIA “black sites” made it impossible for Obama to nominate him as CIA director. Now, not only are those crimes forgiven, but the even more serious ones involved in the drone assassination program go unchallenged.

We have already seen in the past few years anti-terror laws invoked against domestic protesters and dissidents, from the arrest of five men last May in Chicago on “conspiracy to commit terrorism” charges for their involvement in anti-NATO protests, to the revelation that the FBI carried out a nationwide investigation treating the Occupy Wall Street protests

as “domestic terrorism.”

Driving the turn towards methods associated with police state dictatorships are deep-going changes in the structure of American society. The vast and ever-widening chasm between the billionaires and multi-millionaires who control economic and political life and working people, the great majority of the population, is incompatible with democracy.

This is ultimately what explains the complicity of the Obama administration, Congress, both major parties and the mass media in the drone assassination program. America’s ruling oligarchy realizes that deepening social polarization and the protracted economic crisis are creating conditions for social upheavals, and is preparing accordingly.

The working class must make its own preparations for the revolutionary battles that are to come.



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