

# The Nation magazine and Obama's assassination program

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A secret US Justice Department memo came to light February 4 that asserted the right of the president to order the assassination of perceived enemies, including American citizens, anywhere on the globe, without due process or the need to provide any evidence against the intended victims.

On top of that, Barack Obama's nominee for Central Intelligence Agency director, John Brennan, refused at a Senate confirmation hearing last week to rule out such extra-judicial killings on American soil.

These developments represent an ominous warning to the American people that elementary democratic rights are in grave danger.

The overwhelming response of the liberal establishment and its left-liberal and pseudo-socialist flank has been to downplay the significance of the memo, lull the population to sleep in regard to its dangers and, above all, express continued confidence in the Obama administration and the Democratic Party.

In general, the American media, liberal and otherwise, responded indifferently or even sympathetically to the content of the Justice Department memo. Illegal invasion, torture, assassination by drone missile—this is now business as usual for these well-heeled defenders of the existing order.

The left-liberal *Nation* magazine has followed in the wake of the *New York Times* and various Democratic Party figures, who have called for greater “transparency” along with the creation of a secret court to rubber-stamp the executions. The only perceptible difference between these circles and the *Nation* is a sight increase in the nervousness of the latter's tone.

On February 6, the *Nation*'s Greg Mitchell (“Outrage Mounts in Media Over Obama Drone ‘Kill Rules’”) informed his readers that since the leaking of the memo, “the chorus of criticism—mainly from progressives and media outlets long accused by conservatives of being ‘in the tank’ for Obama—has grown to a deafening level.”

Mitchell must have highly sensitive hearing. Given the nature of the revelation, that the president of the United States has arrogated to himself powers historically associated with fascist or military dictators, the response has been remarkably muted.

The approach of Mitchell and the *Nation*'s other commentators is to offer limited criticism of the Justice

Department memo's contents, and then express satisfaction that a “debate” has now opened up as to whether the US government has the right to murder American citizens and anyone else without charging them of any crime.

Thus Mitchell writes: “And although the memo only covered the assassination/murder of Americans... it has sparked a long-overdue reappraisal of the entire drone war, which has taken the lives of thousands, including many non-combatants and children.”

To gloss over the glaring internal contradiction of his position—criticism of the assassination program, on the one hand, and support for the administration that is carrying out that program, on the other—the *Nation* columnist proceeds dishonestly, and demagogically. Mitchell assures us that an “appraisal” of this illegal policy is coming—by whom, and with what potential consequences?

He continues, “This [the debate over the program] promises to get even hotter tomorrow with the start of the congressional confirmation hearings for drone champion (and keeper of the kill list) John Brennan as the new CIA director.”

There will, of course, be no official appraisal. Nor did things get “hotter” during the Brennan hearing. Mitchell simply counts on his readers not remembering from one day to the next what he has written.

So, on February 8, Mitchell was compelled to admit (“As Brennan ‘Escapes,’ Criticism of Media ‘Self-Censorship’ on Drone Program Grows”) that Brennan had “escaped” the Senate hearing unscathed and that the aforementioned “outraged” media, with the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* in the forefront, had been guilty of “self-censorship,” having suppressed for months “the existence of a US drone base in Saudi Arabia.”

In his live blogging at the Brennan hearing, the *Nation*'s chief foreign correspondent, Robert Dreyfuss, already on record as supporting the would-be CIA director, made his position clear. After dismissing anti-Brennan protests as “foolish and counterproductive,” Dreyfuss observed that Obama's nominee for the intelligence post “unlike General [David] Petraeus, is a civilian, and that in itself is a step forward, because the militarization of the CIA over several decades has unsettled many analysts and intelligence professionals.”

Dreyfuss unashamedly presents himself as an advisor to the White House on what's best for the CIA and a spokesman for disgruntled "analysts and intelligence professionals," and probably no one could improve on that self-portrait.

He concludes his blog by noting appreciatively, "Brennan says that he'd always bring the truth to the White House, not tell the White House what it wants to hear. (Unlike George W. Bush's CIA directors, who shaped intelligence according to the desires of the White House. Thus, Iraq.)"

As usual, the most obtuse and brazen apologetics for Obama and the Democrats in the *Nation* have been provided by leading columnist John Nichols, who didn't write about the issue until February 10, almost a week after the memo became public ("Democrats Have a Unique Constitutional Duty to Check, Balance the President").

Nichols is no opponent of drone warfare and assassination. In his article, he identifies himself with Congressman John Conyers and (at the time) Congressman Dennis Kucinich, who wrote a letter to the White House last year opposing the expansion of the drone program, but who "were not suggesting that the United States ought not defend itself." They were merely "demanding transparency, accountability and respect for the rule of law."

This is the *Nation's* advice to Obama, the Pentagon and the CIA: kill whomever you like, but put in place some legal fig leaf that will legitimize the program and our own support for it.

Nichols gives "high marks" to Senator Ron Wyden, Democrat from Oregon "for making the same demands for transparency from Democrat Barack Obama that he would make of a Republican president. 'Every American has the right to know when their government believes it's allowed to kill them.'" This, as the WWS has written, is a rather "truncated vision" of constitutional rights.

Like Mitchell, only more crudely, Nichols attempts to construct the case for opposition to unlimited assassinations and ongoing support for Obama. He writes, "There needs to be much broader recognition within the president's party that it is possible to respect Obama while at the same time respecting the demands of a system where powers are appropriately separated." To underscore the point, he declares that congressional critics of Obama "are not disrespecting the president. They are respecting the Constitution."

There are two possible conclusions to draw. Either Nichols thinks it is not especially noteworthy that the US president claims the power to order the execution of anyone he pleases, and therefore the *Nation* columnist doesn't find it difficult to carry on backing him. Or Nichols recognizes how grave an attack this is and is consciously lining up with the systematic destruction of constitutional rights. Either scenario makes him a scoundrel.

Nowhere in any of the *Nation's* commentary on the administration's drone and assassination program is there a call for a halt to the murderous and illegal operation, or for the

bringing of charges against Brennan and other CIA and Pentagon officials. Nor is there any suggestion that Barack Obama should be impeached for crimes that far surpass any committed by Richard Nixon.

In other words, talk here is terribly cheap, and the *Nation*, for all its protestations, is glued to the Democratic Party and on board with US imperialist policy. The magazine's editors and columnists are not happy, however, about the public exposure of the administration's global operations, as they energetically backed Obama's reelection on the grounds that it was the only possible choice for "progressives."

The pseudo-left International Socialist Organization (ISO), as is the group's custom when it comes to taking a position on principled questions, held off writing on the assassination memo as long as politically feasible. In his February 12 piece, "Execution by Drone," the ISO's Eric Ruder remarks, "The need for a probing assessment of the use of drones couldn't be more urgent." So urgent that Socialistworker.org couldn't get to it for more than a week.

The ISO essentially follows the *Nation's* lead, acting as an adjunct of the Democrats. Like Mitchell, Ruder refers favorably to both the *New York Times'* editorial comments on the Justice Department memo (which include an endorsement of Brennan for CIA director) and Sen. Wyden's intervention.

Socialistworker.org concludes that "we need real debate, not infomercials, about the use of drones—and why we need to challenge the Obama administration's aggressive assertion of practically unlimited executive powers to assassinate anyone, anywhere in the world."

Nothing about the danger of dictatorship, no call for an end to the program, no exposure of the role of the Democrats at the Senate whitewash of Brennan. Instead, this left appendage of American liberalism—and American imperialism—contents itself with references to the "administration's contorted legal justifications," the need for a "real debate," and a "challenge" to the White House.

From the *Nation* and the ISO, complacent to the core and corrupted by the selfish class interests of a privileged, well-off social layer, Obama, Brennan and the rest of the conspirators against democratic rights have nothing to fear.



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