

The decomposition of American democracy

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On Thursday, Assistant Defense Secretary Michael Sheehan told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the war on terror would continue at least another 10 or 20 years. Alluding to last month's lockdown of Boston, he said the president and the military would continue to assert "wartime" powers, unchecked by Congress or the courts, extending from "Boston to FATA [the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in Pakistan]." These asserted powers include the power to unilaterally launch new wars and the power to carry out assassinations, including of US citizens.

On the same day, Obama gave a press conference in which he bluntly defended his administration's unconstitutional spying on the press, exposed by the revelation that the Justice Department had secretly seized the telephone records of Associated Press editors and reporters. As grounds for this patently illegal action, Obama stated that "national security" and other government interests trumped the Bill of Rights in this instance.

The Pentagon's assertion of the power for the indefinite future to unilaterally deploy the US killing machine wherever the president sees fit—including within the US and without any oversight or "checks and balances"—amounts to an announcement of a semi-dictatorship in the US. Sheehan's assertions are all the more remarkable for the fact that they encountered no serious opposition on the Senate Armed Services Committee or more broadly within the media or the political establishment.

Pursuant to military regulations already in place, the military is authorized to deploy itself within the US to suppress "civil disturbances" and "provide for the restoration of law and order in a specific State or locality." The regulations define a civil disturbance as "[g]roup acts of violence and disorder prejudicial to public law and order."

These regulations state that the military may be deployed within the US where "[d]uly constituted Federal, State, or local authorities are unable or decline to

provide adequate protection..." In other words, the military expressly asserts the power to intervene with force and violence to put down what it has determined to be an unacceptable "civil disturbance," including over the opposition of civilian federal, state or local agencies. The regulations even authorize military action in response to "large-scale, unexpected civil disturbances" where "prior authorization by the President is impossible."

In his Senate testimony, Sheehan cited the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF), passed in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, as authority for the assertion of unchecked presidential and military power. As the *World Socialist Web Site* previously observed, "The AUMF, presented at the time as a temporary and limited measure of self-defense against those who committed acts over 11 years ago, is well on its way to being transformed into something akin to the Reichstag Fire Decree or the Enabling Act—an all-purpose pseudo-legal rationalization for police state measures and unfettered executive power for the indefinite future."

Just as the Pentagon's assertion of unbridled executive power encountered no significant objections within the political establishment, no serious opposition has emerged to Obama's embrace of the "balancing" theory of constitutional rights, according to which basic rights can be trampled on where "government interests" outweigh them. This view, which three decades ago would have been considered a fringe, ultra-right position, is now the virtually unanimous view in American courts, the political establishment, and academia.

It is worth recalling that the first Gulf War in February 1991 was preceded by a congressional debate and vote on whether the US should undertake military action in Iraq. By contrast, the US president now asserts the power for the indefinite future to launch wars based on his own secret determinations, without accountability to anyone, and without regard for the Constitution or international law.

The chief base of support for the abrogation of

democratic rights and the lurch towards a police state lies in the financial aristocracy, i.e., the tiny layer of multimillionaires and billionaires who have made spectacular fortunes by means of speculation, theft, criminality and corruption. This layer has grown even richer since the eruption of the global economic crisis in 2008, subsidized to the tune of trillions of dollars by the state, while the working class has been devastated by mass unemployment and austerity policies.

Democratic rights and historic reforms mean nothing to these kleptomaniacs, who view the broad mass of the population with extreme fear and hostility. Jealous of its ill-gotten gains, this layer supports police-state measures to violently suppress social opposition.

Behind Obama, and next to the financial aristocracy, stands a privileged middle class layer—approximately the top 90th to 99th percentile. Some within this layer maintain minor differences with the financial aristocrats on lifestyle, race, culture and identity issues. However, they depend on the existing setup for their privileged status, income and respectable positions in corporate management, university departments, law firms, the entertainment industry, the trade unions, NGOs, the media and so forth. On board for imperialist war and the defense of the capitalist system in general, this layer is prepared to go along with a police state if the alternative is a revolutionary overthrow of the system by the working class.

The vast majority of the American population—the bottom 80 to 90 percent—is wholly excluded from the official political life of the country. Obama does not address himself to them. Their interests are not taken into account in any major political decision. They do not matter.

Ask an American worker in that bottom 80 to 90 percent whether the First Amendment contains mere suggestions conditioned on “government interests,” or whether it guarantees absolute, inalienable rights. Ask whether the US president and military should have unlimited and unchecked powers for the indefinite future, up to and including the power to violently suppress “civil disturbances” without regard for the Constitution or basic rights. Ask whether the president should be able to secretly order the assassination of US citizens. Ask, and you are highly likely to get very different answers than if you ask a Supreme Court justice, a member of Congress, a “liberal” newspaper columnist or the president (who is purportedly a one-time “constitutional law lecturer” at a top US law school).

Analyzing the theft of the 2000 election, the *Socialist Web Site* observed at the time that there remained no significant constituency for the defense of democratic rights within the American ruling class or its political establishment. The WSWS predicted a rapid shift towards authoritarian forms of rule and reiterated these warnings in the period following the September 11, 2001 attacks.

It is now necessary to issue a new warning. More than a decade has passed since the launch of the so-called “war on terror.” The process of disintegration of American democracy has accelerated and advanced sharply, in particular under the Obama administration. Now looming on the horizon is an American police state.

The only social force capable of halting and reversing the drive toward dictatorship is the working class—the bottom 80 to 90 percent which is everywhere locked out of the gated community of official politics. Here is where a deep-seated commitment to democratic rights resides. But to realize this commitment, the working class must develop its own organizations, program and leadership, independent of the bourgeois political establishment and the rotten milieu of its “left” apologists. The working class must take up the fight for a workers’ government, the confiscation of the fortunes of the financial aristocrats and nationalization of the banks and corporations, and the termination of imperialist war—in a word, the fight for international socialism.

The ruling class is urgently strengthening the repressive apparatus of the state. The working class must urgently build the parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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