

The war against Syria and American democracy

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US Secretary of State John Kerry and President Barack Obama made clear in separate statements yesterday afternoon that the rejection by the British parliament on Thursday of a pro-war motion would have no impact on the US administration's plans to attack Syria.

In his remarks, Obama pretended that he had "not made a decision about various actions that might be taken." The discussions in Washington, however, relate more to the tactics and timing of an attack rather than whether it will take place.

Obama also repeated the lie that the assault will be "limited" in scope. In fact, the operation contemplated by Washington is aimed at reversing the course of the US-stoked civil war in Syria, ousting Assad, and undermining the position of Iran, Russia and China in the Middle East.

As it rushes to war, the American ruling class is contemptuous of the anti-war sentiments of the vast majority of the population. More than a decade of unending war, the continuous invocation of the "war on terror," the experiences of Afghanistan and especially the lies told to justify the invasion of Iraq—all of this has had an impact on public consciousness.

Polls show that as little as 9 percent of the American people support military strikes on Syria, rising to only 25 percent if it is proven that the Syrian regime of Bashar Al-Assad used chemical weapons—the central propaganda claim of the US and its allies.

Yet these sentiments find no expression in the political establishment and the auxiliary institutions of state power, even within the limited framework of bourgeois politics. The government and the media are solidly pro-war. The vast majority of the population—after more than a decade of endless and disastrous military operations—is against yet another

attack on make-believe enemies.

The chasm that separates official opinion from the real sentiments of the mass of the people is virtually without precedent. During the Vietnam War, it is worth recalling, the political establishment was torn by divisions over the US involvement. Both political parties had significant "anti-war" factions. The congressional hearing chaired by Senator William Fulbright contributed significantly to the growth of anti-war sentiment.

In 1990-91, as the first Bush administration geared up for the first war against Iraq, it felt compelled to have an authorization vote, which passed with 48 senators voting against. Even as late as 2003 and the period following the war in Iraq, there were efforts by Democratic Party politicians to posture as critics of the second Bush administration. Kerry won the Democratic nomination in 2004 and Obama the presidency in 2008 while making a gesture, however hypocritical and insincere, to anti-war sentiment.

Now, with polls showing opposition to war even greater than in 2003, there is nothing.

The media has followed a similar course. It is not difficult to list a dozen journalistic personalities of the Vietnam era who contributed significantly to the public anti-war consciousness by exposing the lies of the government—culminating in the publication of the Pentagon Papers by the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* in 1971.

The media today functions openly as a mouthpiece of the government, seeing its central purpose as disseminating state lies and covering up for government secrets. It has been transformed through a process of corporatization, of "embedding" journalists in the military, of the purging of anyone who displayed an ounce of critical thought (e.g., CNN's firing of Peter

Arnett in 2003 over his critical coverage of the Iraq invasion).

The generally authoritarian sentiment that prevails in the media today was expressed by the *New York Times*' Roger Cohen in his column Friday advocating war against Syria. Popular sentiment be damned, the liberal columnist wrote. "War fatigue in the United States and Britain is not an excuse for the surrender of a commodity of enduring strategic importance—national credibility—to an ephemeral one—public opinion."

Ten years after the war against Iraq, launched on the basis of complete fabrications, not a single major corporate-controlled newspaper or media outlet has questioned the litany of lies and unsubstantiated claims emanating from the White House.

How is this transformation to be explained? The crisis over Syria is revealing the deeper reality of political life in America. In May 2003, the WSWS noted that "the massive and blatant character of the lies upon which [the Iraq] war was based, and the indifferent and cynical response of the media, are significant manifestations of the general breakdown of bourgeois democratic norms. The political life of the United States reflects in ever more grotesque forms the increasingly oligarchic character of the American state."

Ten years later, these tendencies have only metastasized. The corporate and financial aristocracy has utilized the crisis that began in 2008 to concentrate in its hands an even greater proportion of the nation's wealth. Government policy is determined by the interests of the top one percent of the population.

Foreign policy is inseparably linked to domestic policy. The complete indifference of the institutions of the state to all the social concerns of the masses—poverty, unemployment, the destruction of social services—finds its natural complement in foreign policy. What the lower 90 percent income bracket thinks amounts to nothing, with the media assigned the role of attempting to manipulate this thinking with propaganda and lies.

The preservation of the forms of bourgeois democracy is incompatible with the levels of social inequality prevailing in the United States today. The vast spying apparatus revealed by Edward Snowden—the framework of a police state—is directed above all to the emergence of opposition to the

demands of the ruling class for war and social counter-revolution.

There is one other significant difference between the war drive against Syria and the previous wars launched by the American ruling class. The Vietnam War provoked mass anti-war protests, and there was significant opposition organized against subsequent interventions, from Nicaragua and El Salvador to the Iraq war in 1991. Ten years ago, there were mass protests involving millions of people against the Iraq war.

Today there is nothing. This is not because popular sentiment has become pro-war. In fact, there is even less public support for action against Syria today than there was for war against Iraq. Rather, what was for a long time referred to as the "anti-war movement" was led by a section of the middle class tied to the Democratic Party. Over the past several decades, this social layer has become increasingly integrated into the political establishment, growing wealthy through the rise of the stock market, feeding off the crumbs of the financial aristocracy.

The middle class "left" responded to Iraq War protests by channeling opposition behind the Democrats and, with the advent of the Obama administration, shutting them down. They have now become the most fervent supporters of war, of "human rights" imperialism, the culmination of a process that included support for the 1999 war against Serbia. The war in Syria is very much "their war."

This transformation makes it all the more clear that the real mass base for the fight against war is the working class. A revival of the anti-war movement is necessary, but it can develop only in opposition to the corporate and financial aristocracy and its pseudo-left appendages. The bloody catastrophe that the American ruling class is preparing for the people of Syria, the Middle East and the entire world can only be countered through the independent mobilization of the working class, in the United States and internationally, on the program of World Socialist Revolution.



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