The political implications of the NSA exposures

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Underlying the crisis that has erupted over the latest National Security Agency (NSA) revelations is a deep fear within the ruling elite over the political consequences of the continuing exposures of its global spying apparatus.

Top officials in the Obama administration have predictably waved the bloody shirt of 9/11 to justify the programs and denounce those who have exposed them, above all, former NSA contractor-turned whistleblower Edward Snowden. Their real concern is not that terrorists will know what the US government is doing, but that the American people and broad masses of people around the world are beginning to see what the US government is doing.

What remains of the political and ideological foundations of capitalist rule in the United States? Since the end of World War II, the American government has sought to present itself as the leader of the "free world," the supposed champion of democratic rights and individual liberty.

It now stands exposed as the perpetrator of a global police state operation involving the illegal monitoring of the communications of hundreds of millions of people. With its vast databases, the American government has the ability to discover the social and political connections of virtually any individual. This negates the basic freedoms—speech, political assembly, privacy—laid down by the US Constitution and its Bill of Rights.

The Obama administration is implementing a "pivot to Asia," a geo-strategic reorientation aimed at containing the growing influence of China in the Pacific and beyond. It has routinely cited alleged Chinese cyber-spying as part of its ideological justification for an aggressive militarist policy. The exposure this week of "Special Collection Service" listening posts, jointly run by the CIA and the NSA, in Asia and all over the world makes clear that the United States, not China, is the main threat to the democratic rights of the people.

And what of the "war on terror"? US officials continue to evoke the still unexplained events of September 11, 2001 to justify every act of aggression and every attack on democratic rights. On Thursday, US Secretary of State John Kerry, responding to the latest NSA revelations, insisted, without any evidence, that "we have actually prevented airplanes from going down, buildings from being blown up, and people from being assassinated because we've been able to learn ahead of time of the plans."

Kerry is lying. But he is speaking for a government and a political establishment that lie continuously and without restraint.

In testimony before Congress earlier this week, NSA Director Gen. Keith Alexander and Director of National Intelligence James Clapper brazenly defended all of the spying programs, insisting they were all essential to the struggle against Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Those who exposed the spying programs were endangering "national security," jeopardizing the lives of Americans, and aiding the terrorists, they argued.

But in the next breath, Clapper defended NSA wiretaps on the leaders of governments allied to the US, such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel, on grounds completely unrelated to a supposed "war on terror." There was a whole range of strategic reasons, Clapper said, why Washington needed to know what US allies were thinking and saying.

Those reasons, which Clapper did not care to elaborate, have to do with the global hegemonic aims of American imperialism.

Not one congressman, Democratic or Republican, pointed out the glaring contradictions between what the two spy chiefs said one minute and what they said the next.

The entire political system has been caught out in a massive conspiracy against the democratic rights of the

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people. The elevation of Obama, the first African American president, was intended to give the ruling class a certain cover to continue unpopular policies. The "candidate of change"—the man whose election was hailed as "transformative" by pseudo-left organizations that promote the Democratic Party—has gone far beyond his predecessor, George W. Bush, in eviscerating core Constitutional rights.

When the first major NSA scandal erupted under Bush, the scope of the exposed program (the so-called "Terrorist Surveillance Program") was far more limited than many of the programs disclosed over the past five months by Snowden. The *New York Times* article in December 2005 detailed a program, initiated after September 11, 2001, that involved the warrantless monitoring of "hundreds, perhaps thousands" of emails and phone calls of individuals within the United States who were communicating with supposed terrorists overseas.

In response to these revelations, Bush felt compelled to insist that no monitoring of domestic communications took place without a warrant. Even prior to its public exposure, the program was sufficiently controversial to generate fissures within the Bush administration itself, including an internal revolt in 2004 by then-Attorney General John Ashcroft and his deputy, James Comey.

With the full collaboration of the Democratic Party, the Bush administration carried out a tactical shift after the first NSA exposures. The Terrorist Surveillance Program was formally ended in 2007 and the American people were told that the warrentless spying had ended. Behind their backs, however, a new foundation for even more expansive programs was being laid.

Congress passed the FISA Amendments Act of 2008 to give retroactive immunity to telecommunications companies and modify the 1978 Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act to provide a pseudo-legal cover for the spying programs. Among those voting for the bill was then-presidential candidate Barack Obama, who took office six months later.

Bush's NSA chief Michael Hayden would note several years later that, under Obama and with the new law in place, "NSA is actually empowered to do more things than I was empowered to do under President Bush's special authorization."

Among the most significant revelations of the past week, and perhaps the most significant exposure yet by Snowden, is an NSA program to secretly gather in bulk all communications from Google and Yahoo. The personal communications of *millions of American citizens*, along with a significant portion of the rest of the world, are being monitored, searched and stored by the NSA without a warrant or even the pretense of judicial oversight.

All of this is blatantly unconstitutional. Obama himself is guilty of clearly impeachable offenses, not just for spying, but for the extra-judicial assassination of US citizens and other crimes. From the political establishment, however, there is no suggestion that the NSA programs should be shut down or that those responsible for them should be prosecuted.

Lawmakers are again discussing ways to put a fig-leaf of "transparency" on illegal activity, with Kerry suggesting that an effort is needed to "clarify and make clear for the people" what is being done. This, of course, is nonsense. The people are shocked, angered and frightened precisely because they have learned what is being done.

The collapse of democratic rights in the United States reflects a deep and unbridgeable social gulf between a parasitic financial aristocracy and the working class, the vast majority of the population. Those who dictate the policy of the government look around and see enemies, real and potential, everywhere.

On the basis of speculation and fraud, a tiny layer has amassed unprecedented wealth. Social inequality is greater than ever. Just yesterday, amidst record corporate profits and the unending flow of money from the Federal Reserve to Wall Street, the most basic form of nutritional assistance in the US, food stamps, was slashed, affecting more than 47 million people. More severe cuts are to come.

The ability of the ruling class to maintain its stranglehold through its traditional ideological and political structures is breaking apart. The emergence of individuals like Snowden and Manning is itself a reflection of shifts taking place more broadly. Within broad sections of the population, what is emerging is disgust and hostility to the entire system—a pre-revolutionary sentiment.

This sentiment must be given conscious expression and transformed into a socialist movement of the working class directed against the capitalist system.

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