

Democratic rights and the defense of Edward Snowden

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In the wake of President Barack Obama's speech last Friday defending NSA spying programs, the US political and media establishment is escalating its campaign of threats and slander against whistle-blower Edward Snowden.

Snowden, who has performed an immense public service by exposing the police state surveillance programs of the US government and its allies, faces charges filed by the Obama administration under the Espionage Act and calls for his execution or extrajudicial murder. Those who are guilty of treason against the US Constitution are screaming "treason" against the man who has exposed their crimes.

On Thursday, US Attorney General Eric Holder for the first time explicitly rejected proposals to grant Snowden clemency, saying that this would be "going too far." He echoed Obama's own insistence in his remarks last week that Snowden was guilty of betraying state secrets and must return to the US to face charges, placing himself in the hands of a "justice system" that tortured Bradley Manning and locked him up for 35 years.

Holder's remarks came the same day as a report from the Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board (PCLOB), whose members are nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate, which acknowledged the illegality of the programs in question. One of the principal programs exposed by Snowden, the bulk collection of telephone records, "lacks a viable legal foundation," the board concluded, and "implicates constitutional concerns under the First and Fourth Amendment[s]."

In plain language, the NSA programs are illegal and unconstitutional. The PCLOB's findings arise inescapably from any objective examination of the content of the spy programs, which collect the records

of hundreds of millions of Americans without a warrant or probable cause. The White House, however, immediately rejected the panel's conclusions and dismissed its proposal to halt the program.

The renewed witch-hunt of Snowden, encouraged by Obama's speech, began in earnest last Sunday when leading Democratic and Republican congressmen charged that Snowden was acting as a spy for the Russian government. Appearing on "Meet the Press," Republican Mike Rogers, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, described Snowden as "a thief, who, we believe, had some help; who stole information, the vast majority [having] nothing to do with privacy," but rather "had to do with how we operate overseas to collect information to keep Americans safe."

Dianne Feinstein, the Democratic chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, lent credence to Rogers' totally unsubstantiated accusations, saying that "he may well have" been working as a spy for the Russians.

The fact that Snowden is in Russia as the result of an international campaign led by the United States to deny him entry into any other country was simply ignored. In their effort to prevent Snowden from leaving Moscow's Sheremetyevo International Airport last summer, the US and its allies went so far as to force down the plane of the Bolivian president on suspicions that the NSA contractor-turned whistle-blower might be on board.

Responding to the charges of working for the Russians, Snowden replied in an interview with the *New Yorker*, "It's not the smears that mystify me. It's that [media] outlets report statements that the speakers themselves admit are sheer speculation."

The attack on Snowden, however, is based not on facts, but on calumny and lies. For the unpardonable sin of exposing government secrets and crimes, Snowden

must be locked up or worse. This week, Snowden appealed for protection to local officials in Russia. Explaining the move, his lawyer told the media, “Edward really believes his life and safety are at risk.”

For good reason. Snowden’s request followed a *Buzzfeed* report under the provocative headline, “America’s Spies Want Edward Snowden Dead,” based on interviews with military and intelligence officials.

“I would love to put a bullet in his [Snowden’s] head,” one Pentagon official was quoted as saying. “He is single-handedly the greatest traitor in American history.”

A defense contractor overseas declared, “Most everyone I talk to says he needs to be tried and hung; forget the trial and just hang him.” A current NSA analyst said that if he was not prevented from doing so, “I personally would go and kill him myself.”

These fascistic sentiments permeate the state and media apparatus. On Wednesday, the *Wall Street Journal* published a column by Daniel Henninger in which the author suggested approvingly that “Mr. Snowden’s future as a famous American may be closer to the Rosenbergs than to Paul Revere”—i.e., he should suffer the same fate as the victims of one of the most infamous political executions and judicial travesties in American history.

Henninger went on to argue that opposition to state surveillance is a manifestation of “public paranoia.”

That such statements are part of an internationally coordinated vendetta was underscored Thursday when Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop told a Washington DC think tank that Snowden was guilty of “unprecedented treachery” and “continued to shamefully betray his nation while skulking in Russia.”

The hysterical reaction of spy agencies, politicians and governments gives expression not only to hatred of Snowden, but to fears of the broad popular opposition of which Snowden is an expression. The lies and maneuvers of the political establishment, aimed at ensuring that the illegal programs continue, have not dented the deep hostility that exists to the violation of core democratic rights, or the broad public support for Snowden himself.

Behind the destruction of democratic rights lies the efforts of the ultra-wealthy ruling elite to defend its interests against the oppressed and exploited of the

world. In the brutish methods being used against Snowden, workers are getting a foretaste of the methods that will be employed against all social and political opposition to the corporate and financial aristocracy that controls the state.

World society is dominated by a plutocracy whose vast power and privileges are incompatible with democratic rights. Last Monday’s Oxfam report on global wealth inequality showed that the world’s 85 richest individuals control as much wealth as the poorest 3.5 billion people, and that the richest 1 percent of the population controls 46 percent of the planet’s total wealth.

The international working class must rise in support of Edward Snowden. This must be linked to the development of an independent movement to defend democratic and social rights in opposition to the Obama administration, the political establishment and the capitalist system they defend.



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