

The CIA spying scandal, Watergate and the decay of American democracy

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In the nine days since Senator Dianne Feinstein revealed that the Central Intelligence Agency had spied on Senate Intelligence Committee staffers investigating CIA torture programs, the issue has been all but dropped by the political establishment and the media.

The White House and Congress, including Feinstein herself, are seeking to move any further discussion of the matter behind closed doors. The aim is to prevent any broader public airing of the fundamental democratic issues at stake in both the spying and the underlying crime, torture, which the CIA and the Obama administration are seeking to cover up.

Involved are impeachable offenses implicating the intelligence agencies and top officials in the administration, including the president. In her remarks on the Senate floor last week, Feinstein charged that the CIA violated the “separation of powers” principle embedded in the US Constitution as well as the Fourth Amendment and legal prohibitions against domestic spying. Since these remarks, the White House has publicly defended CIA Director John Brennan and acknowledged that the Obama administration deliberately withheld documents relating to the Senate investigation.

It is instructive to compare the actions of the CIA and the White House today to the Articles of Impeachment against President Richard M. Nixon approved by the House Judiciary Committee on July 27, 1974. Nixon was accused of engaging in a criminal conspiracy to steal Democratic Party documents relating to the 1972 elections from an office in the Watergate Hotel. He used the CIA and other intelligence agencies to cover up the break-in and intimidate political opponents in order to obstruct the investigation into the incident.

The Articles of Impeachment included the charge that Nixon “engaged personally and through his close subordinates and agents in a course of conduct or plan designed to delay, impede, and obstruct the investigation”

of the Watergate break-in so as to “cover up, conceal and protect those responsible; and to conceal the existence and scope of other unlawful covert activities.”

In pursuit of this cover-up, the House committee charged, Nixon was involved, among other things, in “withholding relevant and material evidence or information from lawfully authorized investigative officers and employees of the United States;” “interfering or endeavoring to interfere with the conduct of investigations” by government bodies; “endeavoring to misuse the Central Intelligence Agency;” and “making or causing to be made false or misleading public statements for the purpose of deceiving the people of the United States into believing that a thorough and complete investigation had been conducted with respect to the allegations of misconduct on the part of personnel of the executive branch...”

Changing what needs to be changed, the same accusations can be leveled at Obama and the White House today. Evidence of criminality, including videotapes of CIA torture of terrorist suspects, was destroyed by Bush administration officials, and the Obama administration has assisted in the cover-up by “withholding relevant and material evidence,” including thousands of pages of documents. The administration is “interfering or endeavoring to interfere with the conduct of investigations” by the Senate Intelligence Committee, and is working with the CIA to “conceal the existence and scope” of illegal activities.

As for Obama’s insistence that documents must be withheld from the Intelligence Committee to protect “long-recognized executive prerogatives and confidentiality interests” (according to Obama spokesman Jay Carney), and that the 9,400 documents the White House is withholding are only a “tiny percentage” of the documents that have been turned over—these statements also mirror the events of 40 years ago. Nixon cited

“executive privilege” to withhold White House tapes documenting his crimes, a claim ruled invalid by the Supreme Court. And the eighteen-and-a-half minutes that Nixon deleted from the tapes were only a “tiny percentage” of the 3,700 hours that were eventually turned over.

Whereas Nixon’s cover-up involved “dirty tricks” operations—including burglary, theft, illegal wiretapping, victimization of political opponents and election fraud—the Obama administration is covering up even more serious crimes—an international program of state torture and assassination, carried out in direct violation of the Geneva Conventions and the Eighth Amendment’s prohibition of “cruel and unusual punishment.”

And by spying on a congressional body charged with oversight of the executive branch, the Obama administration is violating the governing principles of “separation of powers” and “checks and balances” between the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government that are fundamental to the constitutional framework established by the American Revolution. This is a milestone on the road to dictatorship.

In the Watergate crisis, the leaks provided to *Washington Post* journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein by whistleblower William Felt (a.k.a. “Deep Throat”) generated widespread media attention and resulted in televised congressional hearings watched by millions of viewers, as well as calls by leading political figures for a criminal investigation of the president and his co-conspirators. Nixon was forced to resign in August of 1974.

The intervening 40 years have seen a steady erosion of democratic processes. The intelligence agencies today operate as laws unto themselves. The White House functions as an arm of the military-intelligence apparatus in alliance with the financial aristocracy, with Congress little more than a bribed rubber stamp body. The media serves as a propaganda arm of the government.

The theft of the 2000 elections was a turning point. The years that followed the installation of George W. Bush were characterized by a series of expanding and overlapping political conspiracies against democratic rights. These found legislative expression in the Authorization for Use of Military Force, the PATRIOT Act, the Military Commissions Act, the FISA Amendments Act and other laws that greatly expanded the power of the executive to make war, spy on the population and strip the people of basic rights such as habeas corpus.

The antidemocratic measures begun under Bush have been expanded and institutionalized by the Obama administration. Obama has granted himself a license to kill without a warrant or trial. His administration has overseen an unprecedented witch-hunt of whistleblowers and journalists whose “crime” was to expose government lying and criminality. The Obama Justice Department has attacked press freedom by spying on journalists and threatening them with prosecution.

National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden has revealed a government operation to collect and store the personal communications of hundreds of millions of people in the US and around the world. Just this week, documents from Snowden reported by the *Washington Post* have revealed an NSA program that records “100 percent” of the telephone calls of an unspecified foreign country.

Two conclusions are to be drawn from a review of this history. First, the entire political establishment and both big business parties, Democratic and Republican, are responsible for the assault on democratic rights in the United States.

Second, the erosion of democratic rights is rooted in fundamental social processes, most importantly the immense growth of social inequality. As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in 2000: “The division of America between a fabulously rich upper crust and the vast majority of the population is, in the end, incompatible with democratic forms of rule.” Since then, both the concentration of wealth at the very top of American society and the erosion of democratic processes have vastly accelerated.

It remains to be seen whether this latest scandal can be completely contained. However, a real accounting for the crimes of the state and its intelligence agencies depends upon the intervention of the working class as an independent and revolutionary political force.



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