

The police-military crackdown in Ferguson, the assault on democratic rights, and the record of the World Socialist Web Site

Tom Carter
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The recent events in Ferguson, Missouri provided a glimpse, behind the increasingly hollow democratic façade, of the real state of political and social relations in America.

After shooting the unarmed, 18-year-old Michael Brown six times, Ferguson police left his corpse face down in the street for hours. The police responded to protests over the killing by placing the largely working class St. Louis suburb under a military-style lockdown. Police in military battle regalia pointed assault rifles at residents, armored vehicles mounting 50-caliber machine guns patrolled the streets, and demonstrations were attacked with tear gas, sound cannons and rubber bullets.

A state of emergency was declared and National Guard troops mobilized to impose a state of de facto martial law.

Media commentators, academics, politicians who were called upon to analyze these events expressed bewilderment. Overnight, the militarization of local police departments in America, a process that has been underway for decades, became a topic for discussion—and was then quickly dropped. There was a systematic effort to portray the events in purely racial terms.

The events in Ferguson, in fact, are situated in a long trajectory of attacks on democratic rights in the US, extending over nearly two decades. Over this period, the *World Socialist Web Site*, employing the method of Marxist analysis, has traced the various stages of this assault and sought to explain its relationship to fundamental historical and social processes related to the deepening crisis of American and world capitalism.

We have in this way sought to alert the working class to the immense dangers it faces and develop an understanding of the roots of the breakdown of democratic forms in the growth of social and class antagonisms. On this basis we have pointed the way forward in the building of an independent political movement of the working class fighting for socialism—the only means of defending democratic rights.

A significant early point on this trajectory was the Clinton impeachment drive in 1998-1999, which the WSWs analyzed in the context of expanding social inequality, the impact of globalization, and the lurch to the right of the American political system and its official parties. In an Editorial Board statement entitled, “Is America drifting towards civil war?” (December 1998), we wrote:

Developments over the past quarter century have in effect turned the United States into two countries, which, as recent events make clear, do not speak the same political language. There are the working Americans, the vast majority, who face a continual struggle against the destruction of jobs and erosion of living standards; and there is the financial elite—the capitalists and a layer

of the upper middle class—who monopolize the wealth and control the political system.

Up to now the conflict in Washington has been confined to the political and media elite, which has either ignored, misjudged, or, as in the impeachment vote, directly defied public sentiment. However, beneath the surface of this frenzied battle, enormous social forces are churning. Regardless of how the crisis plays itself out in the short term, these social contradictions must find their expression in a deep-going social conflict.

The stolen election of 2000, which brought the administration of Republican President George W. Bush to power, was a watershed in the breakdown of democratic processes in America. The WSWs explained in “The Supreme Court overrides US voters: a ruling that will live in infamy” that the Supreme Court’s intervention to stop vote-counting and install Bush as president represented a “fundamental and irrevocable break with democracy and the traditional forms of bourgeois legality.”

In “George W. Bush: president-elect or president-select?” (December 2000), Barry Grey wrote:

The unseemly haste with which the entire political establishment is rushing to put the election crisis behind it testifies to the fragility of the political system and the depth of the crisis of American society. In the end, the impasse revealed the lack of any significant constituency within the ruling elite for a democratic adjudication of the presidential election. The defense of democratic rights, which will increasingly become a mass question in America, falls directly to the tens of millions of working people who have for so long been effectively excluded from the political process, monopolized as it is by two parties controlled by the corporate and financial oligarchy.

On September 12, 2001—the day after the September 11 attacks—the WSWs warned that the attacks would be used as a pretext to dramatically expand US military aggression abroad. We added, “The escalation of US militarism abroad will inevitably be accompanied by intensified attacks on democratic rights at home.”

On September 19, 2001—the week following the attacks—the WSWs Editorial Board issued a statement entitled, “Democratic rights in America: the first casualty of Bush’s anti-terror war.” In that statement, the WSWs wrote:

In the course of the impeachment drive of 1998-99 and the election crisis of 2000, it became clear that within the American political and media establishment, there was no significant constituency for the defense of democratic rights. The predominant sections of the ruling elite had become hostile to the elementary protections of civil liberties and democratic principles set down in the Constitution, considering them an obstacle to the implementation of deeply unpopular policies—militarism and war, the lifting of all restrictions on corporate profit-making, the destruction of guaranteed social welfare provisions such as Medicare and Social Security. The traditional forms of bourgeois democracy had become increasingly incompatible with a social structure marked by ever-increasing inequality and a yawning chasm between the political establishment and the broad masses of working people. The liberal wing of the establishment was, for its part, largely indifferent, and neither willing nor able to oppose the assault on basic rights.

Now, in the wake of the vile and reactionary terrorist attacks of September 11, the profound erosion of democratic institutions has found expression in an overnight decision by the ruling elite, aided by a media that functions as an agency of the state, to plunge the country into a war of indefinite duration against an unspecified list of enemies, and drastically curtail civil liberties, without any public discussion or debate.

The September 11 attacks were followed by the implementation of a sweeping anti-democratic agenda, including the founding of the Department of Homeland Security, the formation of a shadow government, the enactment of the PATRIOT Act and other legislation expanding government spying powers, the Military Commissions Act, and the establishment of Pentagon's Northern Command, among other measures.

In "Bush's war at home: a creeping coup d'état" (November 2001), the WSWS warned:

In the period since the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, the United States has undergone a radical transformation in the structure of the government, in the relationship between the people and the police and armed forces, and in the legal and constitutional framework.

On the first anniversary of the September 11 attacks, the WSWS Editorial Board wrote:

In the space of just one year, this administration has carried out the most sweeping assault on democratic rights in the country's history. What is involved is not merely a strengthening of police powers, but the dismantling of constitutional protections against tyranny that date back to the American Revolution. The very structure of the government is being radically altered, transforming the relationship between not only its three branches—executive, legislative and judicial—but between the people and the armed power of the police and military.

In the period following the September 11 attacks, the US government put its new police state powers to the test, methodically establishing precedents for the incommunicado "rendition" and detention of any person, anywhere in the world, including US citizens (as in the case of

Jose Padilla). Torture was specifically authorized by the Bush administration and put into practice at the Guantanamo Bay prison camp together with "black sites" around the world.

In 2006, as information began to come to light on the scale of the intelligence agencies' spying on US citizens, the WSWS called attention to the growing "framework of a police state," warning:

This threat must not be underestimated. It is the outcome of a protracted breakdown of American democracy, rooted in the crisis of the capitalist system and the resultant malignant growth of social inequality.

The Obama regime came to power on a wave of popular hostility to the policies of the Bush administration, but it represented (as Socialist Equality Party candidates warned) the entrenchment and acceleration of the same processes. One of president Obama's principal innovations was the expansion of the state "targeted killing" program.

On September 30, 2011, the Obama administration, through the CIA murder apparatus, used a drone-launched Hellfire missile to kill US citizen Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen, setting a precedent for the secret extrajudicial killing of US citizens.

In "Obama's global Murder Inc.," the WSWS wrote:

Extra-judicial state-sanctioned killing is a metastasis of the global "war on terror," an escalation of international criminality that has included the launching of aggressive wars, indefinite detention, and torture. It has become a central component of US military policy, including the war in Libya, which was concluded with the US-backed assassination of Muammar Gaddafi. Obama has singled out the extra-legal killing of Osama bin Laden as a high point and defining moment of his administration.

In addition to al-Awlaki, two other American citizens, including al-Awlaki's 16-year-old son, were murdered by drones on the orders of Obama.

The next month, the WSWS published an essay on the implications of the assassination of al-Awlaki, placing the killing in its social, historical, and legal context:

In the final analysis, the killing of al-Awlaki represents the irrevocable crossing by the Obama administration of a political, judicial and moral Rubicon. It is no exaggeration to state that the policy of extrajudicial assassination of US citizens far from any battlefield calls into question the fundamental achievements of the American Revolution itself.

In addition to carrying out thousands of "targeted killings," the Obama administration expanded surveillance of the population, persecuted those who exposed government misconduct, raided the homes of protesters and activists, and worked to shield Bush-era criminals from investigation and prosecution. Throughout this period, Supreme Court worked to overturn and corrupt legal precedents that protected citizens from the state, dramatically expanding the authoritarian doctrine of "qualified immunity" for police.

In April 2013, in response to a terrorist attack on the Boston Marathon, the entire city of Boston was placed under a military-style lockdown, with

the population ordered to “shelter in place” while heavily armed commandos conducted warrantless house-to-house searches.

The WSWS reported at the time that the Boston lockdown had every indication of having been planned far in advance, and that it constituted a dry run for the implementation of martial law in a major US city. In a perspective entitled, “American democracy in shambles,” the WSWS wrote:

With the imposition of a state of siege in Boston, a historical threshold has been crossed. For the first time ever, a major American city has been placed under the equivalent of martial law. The already frayed veneer of a stable democracy based on constitutional principles is in shreds... The very fact that the entire establishment agrees that democratic norms cannot be maintained in the face of violence by a handful of people testifies to the advanced stage of the breakdown of American democracy.

In a further Perspective column entitled “The Boston lockdown and the Bill of Rights,” the WSWS explained how the entire historical framework of American democratic legal protections was ignored in the police siege of Boston:

While the Bill of Rights has not been abrogated formally, it is in many respects no longer in effect. It survives as a “Bill of Suggestions,” to be honored when the ruling establishment approves of its invocation.

In 2013, National Security Agency (NSA) whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed the extent to which a massive domestic surveillance apparatus had been built up behind the backs of the population and in flagrant violation of the Constitution. These revelations, far from leading to the abolition of the programs in question, were followed by the entire political establishment closing ranks behind the NSA and denouncing Snowden as a “traitor” and criminal.

The implications of Snowden’s revelations, and the response of the political establishment, were reviewed by David North in a lecture published by the WSWS and entitled, “Obama, the secrets of the state, and the persecution of Edward Snowden” (August 2013). North explained:

There is an inextricable link between the attack on core constitutional rights and the crisis of capitalism. As the ruling class seeks to impose the burden of the crisis on the working class, it is driven to dispense ever more openly with the forms of democracy.

The capitalist class demands a free hand to pursue its interests within the borders of its ‘own’ country as well as internationally. Arguments in favor of authoritarianism are being advanced more insistently in the media. Is it not necessary, it is being asked, to find a way out of congressional “gridlock”? Hasn’t the time come for “someone” to make the “hard decisions” necessary to eliminate budget deficits, i.e., to slash pensions, medical care and other social services? Such arguments are advanced to prepare the ground for dictatorship. Capitalism and democracy are incompatible.

This year, a major constitutional crisis unfolded following revelations that the CIA had spied on the very Senate committee charged with

overseeing it. In “The CIA spying scandal and the disintegration of American democracy,” the WSWS wrote:

The Obama administration’s decision [not to prosecute] and the acquiescence of the rest of Washington underscore the reality, behind the trappings of democracy, of de facto rule by an unelected and authoritarian military-intelligence apparatus. The military and intelligence agencies that preside over a vast global enterprise of violence and deceit operate in secret without any accountability or restraint, no matter which party controls Congress and the White House.

Nearly 15 years have passed since the stolen election of 2000. That irrevocable break with constitutional procedures was followed by 9/11 and the declaration of the “war on terror”—a political fraud used to justify endless wars overseas and the destruction of democratic rights within the US. The intervening years have seen the growth of unbridled state spying on the personal, political and social activities of the American people; the assassination of US citizens and thousands of “targeted killings”; rendition, torture and indefinite detention. Now the entire political establishment acquiesces in the trampling of the Constitution by the government’s military-intelligence apparatus. The disintegration of American democracy is a product of the intractable crisis of American and world capitalism. The ruling class can no longer accept the restraints imposed by its own laws. It lives in mortal fear of the social implications of its own reactionary and rapacious policies.

In the months preceding the Ferguson violence, the WSWS reported on the ongoing militarization of police in America. In an article, “Militarization of police in America,” the WSWS reported:

During the Obama administration, the Pentagon has been equipping US police departments across the country with a staggering amount of military weapons, combat vehicles, and other equipment, according to Pentagon data...

Increasingly, the methods of imperialist war and military occupation, practiced by the United States with such bloody and disastrous results overseas, are now to be employed in the US. Whether in Iraq and Afghanistan or Los Angeles and Detroit, the purpose is the same: to protect the wealth and power of the corporate and financial oligarchy against an increasingly hostile population.

The period of time described above (1998-2014) witnessed the essential collapse of the country’s democratic institutions. The US was, at the time of its formation, one of the clearest expressions in the sphere of politics of the Enlightenment. It is the country that is associated with the Declaration of Independence, the American Revolution, and the Emancipation Proclamation. It produced figures such as Jefferson, Adams, Washington and Lincoln.

As the WSWS consistently explained, the dramatic and extraordinary collapse of democracy in such a country can be understood only as a consequence of the intense pressures and tensions produced by the current stage of the crisis of the world capitalist system. Otherwise, it is inexplicable how centuries-old democratic institutions, even after a long period of decay and degeneration, could suddenly implode with such violence.

The repression in Ferguson was immediately preceded by horrific mass killings in Gaza. In “The slaughter in Gaza: A warning to the international working class,” the WSWS warned:

The Israeli onslaught in Gaza is a forewarning of the measures that will be used in every country against working-class resistance to war, militarism and the agenda of austerity. The methods developed in the course of a decade of the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to terrorise hostile populations will also be used against workers fighting to defend their jobs, living standards and basic democratic rights.

The scaffolding of a police state has already been erected. In the United States, fundamental democratic rights and constitutional norms have been systematically undermined, most flagrantly in the massive NSA and CIA spying apparatus and in the Obama administration’s authorisation of the assassination of American citizens by drone strikes. The lockdown of an entire American city—Boston—in 2013 by heavily armed soldiers and police backed by armoured vehicles and helicopters exposed the extent of the military-police preparations underway against the working class in the event of widespread social opposition and rebellion.

The preparations are no less advanced in the imperialist centres in Europe, Japan and Australia. Under the banner of the ‘war on terror,’ the legal framework has been laid of profoundly anti-democratic measures, including detention without charge, mass surveillance and the call-out of the military to enforce the dictates of the corporate and financial elite. Major international sporting events and global summits are now routinely surrounded by a massive security presence and function as trial runs for the roll-out of police-state measures to suppress working people.

The ruling class is desperately fearful of the emergence of domestic opposition to its policies. This was clearly evinced in the panicked response of the entire political establishment to the social protests in Ferguson, from bringing in Al Sharpton to bringing in the National Guard. There is a general sense that American society is on a precipice and the smallest nudge could send it over the edge. What on the surface appears as a minor event could touch off massive social upheavals overnight.

The logical end point of the long trajectory outlined above is the implementation of an American police state, which would be the immediate response of the political establishment to any social movement that threatened the status quo. Workers entering into struggle in Ferguson and in future struggles must recognize that they confront not just local corruption or racism, but the entire capitalist social order and the state. For these reason, the struggle against the drive to dictatorship in America must be based on an independent socialist program. This is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party and its sister parties around the world.



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