Power Wars: Inside Obama's Post-9/11 Presidency

Obama's place in history: Permanent war and the breakdown of American democracy

Part two

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This is the second part of a two-part review. The first part can be accessed here.

Obama maintains indefinite detention

Immediately after having been inaugurated, Obama made a public announcement that his administration would review the files of those prisoners being held indefinitely and without a trial at Guantanamo Bay prison. The move, though heralded by the corporate press as marking the beginning of the end of indefinite detention, was "euphemistic," says Savage. "It could mean only one thing: Obama and his team were leaving open the possibility that they would continue holding some men in indefinite detention without trial" (103).

And this is precisely what they did. Savage shares a telling anecdote that exposes the anti-social character of the war on terror. When John Brennan visited Saudi Arabia in March 2009 to discuss Yemeni detainees at Guantanamo, Savage notes that King Abdullah asked Brennan, "Why not implant electronic chips in the detainees' bodies, allowing their movements to be tracked? This had been done with horses and falcons, he said. 'Horses don't have good lawyers,' Brennan replied" (107).

In February 2009, the Obama administration began arguing that "the Obama administration was sticking with Bush's view about Bagram detainees: they had no right to bring habeas corpus lawsuits" challenging their detention without trial. Though the Obama administration claimed its new standard for detention was different than the standard used by Bush, Savage cites Judge Reggie Walton, who wrote that there was a "distinction of purely metaphysical difference" from Bush's definition, and "appear to be of a minimal if not ephemeral character" (120).

Savage cites Justice Department official Amy Jeffries as having said, "The new definition didn't change much—it was philosophically different, but the outcome was similar. The idea was to put it in place and revisit it later, but the revisiting didn't happen" (120).

Savage cites Phil Carter, a Pentagon official, who said that the ongoing wars were "like a specter hanging over all the discussion of policy" (110).

The drone assassination program

Included in Savage's detailed account of the development of Obama's drone assassination program is the fact that the Obama administration decided not to indict Anwar al-Awlaki—the first US citizen killed by drone strike—because an indictment would have made al-Awlaki a criminal suspect, granting him rights under the Constitution. During discussions between the CIA and the Justice Department, Savage writes that "participants had differences of opinion about whether, if the government indicted al-Awlaki, that might create a 'bad fact' for its belief that it was also lawful to simply kill him" (253).

In other words, al-Awlaki was a test case that the administration did not want to taint by contradicting the premise of the test: the government can kill US citizens without warrant or trial.

Al-Awlaki's mother and father filed a lawsuit against the Obama administration in June 2012 for assassinating their son without due process of law. In April 2014, a judge refused to allow the suit to proceed to an evidentiary hearing and dismissed the case. Savage writes that Judge Rosemary M. Collyer "explained that executive-branch officials carrying out national security operations 'must be trusted' to do the right thing because even the prospect of a later lawsuit could make officials risk averse and 'hinder their ability in the future to act decisively and without hesitation in defense of U.S. interests.'"

Al-Awlaki's father, Savage notes, "decided not to appeal, saying he had lost faith in the American justice system" (290).

Democracy and the secret state

Savage's book includes a detailed account of the unprecedented number of lawsuits the Obama administration filed against whistleblowers. Although these cases have been described in a number of valuable books, Savage explains the chilling impact the crackdown has had on freedom of the press.

"Overnight, the rules changed," Savage writes. "People were going to prison. The crackdown sent fear throughout the national security establishment. The result was that the normal give-and-take, even discussing routine things on background to make sure reporters understood them, became much more difficult. It may not have been obvious amid the deluge of secret diplomatic, military, and surveillance documents in the middle Obama years, but almost all of those came from just two leaks. Ordinary national security investigative journalism—the kind that can bring individual facts to light and keep the public informed in a more routine way—was placed into a deep chill" (359).

Savage cites a June 2012 Defense Department document which read: "Hammer this fact home. Leaking is tantamount to aiding the enemies of the United States" (394).

The Obama administration also expanded the Bush administration's use of executive privilege to prevent the release of information regarding anti-democratic programs related to the war on terror. When Attorney General Eric Holder announced reforms to the Bush administration's standards for invoking executive privilege, Savage notes that former CIA Acting General Counsel John Rizzo told him "it was just a 'face-saving measure' in his view, because for all practical purposes, 'the new policy was not one iota different from the policy we'd been following in the Bush administration.'" (424).

The prospect of permanent war

The final chapter of Savage's book takes up the implications of Obama's entrenchment of what Savage calls "the Forever War." He quotes former Obama administration undersecretary of defense Rosa Brooks:

"'Today it has become virtually impossible to draw a clear distinction between war and not-war. ... ' Brooks called for those who worried about the expansion of state power and the erosion of rights that occurs in wartime to 'abandon the Sisyphean effort to "end" war and instead focus on developing norms and institutions that support rights and the rule of law, but are not premised on sharp lines between war and peace'" (690-91).

This formula is a recipe for a police state. If the government is never at peace, then the "state of exception" justifying the abrogation of democratic rights is no longer a temporary measure, it becomes the rule.

This is the real state of the union as the United States enters its fifteenth year of the "war on terror." In a country where most high school students have lived their entire lives under the shadow of war, the American military-intelligence apparatus has come to play the dominant role in political life. Though Savage doesn't say so himself, the content of his book makes clear that all government conduct is driven by dangerous, deeply anti-democratic undercurrents.

Former "left" figures like Rosa Brooks, the daughter of author Barbara Ehrenreich, epitomize this degeneration. Brooks tells the population they must accept war as a permanent state of affairs, with all the attendant consequences for the erosion of democratic rights. According to these figures, opposition to war is futile and must be "abandoned."

Such sentiments are the excretions of a ruling class in total crisis.

The Obama administration will be remembered for proving that relentless imperialist war abroad is incompatible with democracy at home. The types of policies Savage describes in his book have had an immense impact on political, social, and cultural life. The imposition of military commissions, indefinite detention, mass surveillance, and drone assassination has created fertile soil—ideologically but also concretely—for the emergence of even more powerful dictatorial tendencies within the American ruling class. In the last 15 years, these forces have begun to take on a life of their own.

In his 1948 book *The American Political Tradition*, historian Richard Hofstadter notes a conversation between President Woodrow Wilson and *New York World* writer Frank Cobb. Cobb recalls that Wilson hesitated over bringing the US into the First World War. According to Cobb, Wilson said:

"Once lead this people into war, and they'll forget there ever was such a thing as tolerance. To fight you must be brutal and ruthless, and the spirit of ruthless brutality will enter into the very fiber of our national life, infecting Congress, the courts, the policeman on the beat …" (Hofstadter, 350).

Wilson also feared a confrontation with the working class, whose answer to war and dictatorship is international social revolution. Obama, too, fears such a confrontation. "Terrorism" aside, this plays no small role in the build-up of the legal framework for a police state.

Savage's book is an important contribution to a study of the crucial epoch of the decline of American democracy. It is for the working class to decide, through mass social struggle, what the future will hold.

Conclude