From Selma to the CIA

John Lewis, Donald Trump and the demise of the “civil rights” establishment

Patrick Martin
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In an interview conducted Friday for NBC’s Sunday morning program “Meet the Press,” Democratic Representative John Lewis announced that he would boycott the inauguration of President Donald Trump because, “I don’t see this president-elect as a legitimate president.”

There are many reasons to reject and oppose the presidency of Donald Trump: he personifies the financial oligarchy that now dominates the US political system and seeks to subordinate all public policy to its mad drive to amass ever-greater wealth; he has filled his cabinet and White House staff with ultra-right ideologues, fellow billionaires and ex-generals; his government is committed to a program of drastic cuts in spending for education, health care and other public services, combined with a massive military buildup.

Lewis, however, mentioned none of these things. He based his rejection of Trump on the report by US intelligence agencies about Russian hacking during the 2016 presidential election campaign. “I think the Russians participated in helping this man get elected, and they helped destroy the candidacy of Hillary Clinton,” he said. “That’s not right. That’s not fair. That’s not the open democratic process.”

No evidence has been presented proving that the Russian government was responsible for hacking the Democratic National Committee and the Clinton campaign. The hue and cry over Russian hacking has two purposes: to conceal the actual content of the leaked emails, which showed the right-wing and antidemocratic character of the Clinton campaign, and to whip up public opinion in the United States in favor of political, economic, diplomatic and ultimately military “retaliation” against Russia.

There is not the slightest genuine democratic content to Lewis’s critique of Trump. He did not cite Trump’s loss of the popular vote by nearly three million votes, or the impact of voter ID laws enacted by many Republican-controlled state governments to suppress minority voting. His attack on Trump consisted solely of embracing the CIA-led anti-Russian campaign in language reminiscent of the 1950s redbaiter Joseph McCarthy.

There is a grim historical irony here. During the years of the most intense struggles for civil rights in the South, in the 1950s and 1960s, the FBI, the police in cities like Birmingham, Alabama, and the southern Democratic politicians all claimed that protests against segregation were the work of “outside agitators,” communists sent in to do the bidding of the Soviet Union. But John Lewis, who played a significant role as a student leader during those years and led the march for voting rights from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, has remembered only one thing: denouncing your opponents as tools of Russia is a proven propaganda tactic.

A congressman from Atlanta for the past 30 years, Lewis personifies the recruitment and corruption of a section of middle-class African-Americans to reinforce the domination of capitalist politics. Civil rights leaders like Lewis were co-opted as part of a conscious strategy of the US ruling elite to refurbish the Democratic Party and the state machinery as a whole.

Dozens of major cities were turned over to African-American mayors, some of them veterans of the civil rights struggles, others merely cashing in on it. The Congressional Black Caucus expanded its number from a handful to more than thirty. With the assistance of

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programs like affirmative action, slots were created for black academics, government officials, military officers, corporate executives and ultimately CEOs.

These positions were not very numerous, but they were well paid, politically symbolic and gave a cover of "diversity" for the depredations of American big business and the crimes of the Pentagon. US imperialism incinerated tens of thousands of defenseless Iraqi conscripts while General Colin Powell, the first black chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, briefed the press on the progress of the 1991 Persian Gulf War. In similar fashion, Powell, as the first black secretary of state, and Condoleezza Rice, the first black female national security adviser, were at George W. Bush's side when he launched the illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq.

This process culminated in the election of Barack Obama, the first African-American president—also the first president to assert the right to assassinate American citizens, using drone-fired missiles, anywhere in the world. Obama, a creature of the military-intelligence apparatus, expanded the war in Afghanistan, launched a new war in Libya and engaged the US military once again in war in Iraq and Syria. He continued and strengthened the police state operations of the CIA, the FBI and the National Security Agency.

It is noteworthy—and characteristic of this corrupt layer of African-American Democratic politicians—that John Lewis has never opposed the military-intelligence operations of the Obama administration. On the contrary, Lewis received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Obama in 2011, the same year Obama authorized the drone-missile assassination of Anwar al-Awlaki, an American citizen.

Some 50 years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. made a critical step forward when he sought to combine the struggle for democratic rights at home with opposition to imperialist war abroad, courageously coming out against the war in Vietnam. There is not a shred of such principle among those who today seek to wrap themselves in King's mantle in order to cover their own right-wing politics.

After Dr. King's assassination in April 1968—an event that was undoubtedly linked to his turn against the Vietnam War—his acolytes made their peace with the establishment. Some of them, like Andrew Young, who had always stood on the right wing in King's councils, became open apologists for US imperialism, with Young serving as US ambassador to the United Nations in the Carter administration.

Others, like Jesse Jackson, Julian Bond and John Lewis, became political hacks for the Democratic Party, giving this party of big business a "progressive" cover as it moved further and further to the right. Lewis also served in the Carter administration, running several antipoverty programs, before winning a congressional seat in 1986. In recent years, he has cashed in quite literally on his role in the 1960s, with his Faith and Politics Institute selling seats to lobbyists for $25,000 apiece to his annual visit to Selma to reenact the 1965 march.

The enlistment of Lewis in the warmongering anti-Russian campaign only underscores the political challenge facing the American working class. No section of the Democratic Party will conduct a genuine or principled struggle against the monstrous right-wing program of the Trump administration and the Republican Congress. The Democratic Party, like the Republicans, defends the profits and wealth of the financial aristocracy and the global interests of American imperialism.

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