

A week of crisis and deepening dysfunction in US politics

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Every day last week brought new demonstrations of an unprecedented crisis within the Trump White House and US state apparatus. The Trump administration is torn by internal divisions, amidst palace coup conspiracies involving the corporate media and sections of the military-intelligence apparatus, as well as the Democratic Party.

On Tuesday, initial reports on the new book by Bob Woodward portrayed top Trump aides deriding his intelligence and even sanity, working behind the scenes to derail his most inflammatory orders—such as a demand for the assassination of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Trump administration officials were carrying out what Woodward characterized as “an administrative coup d’état,” i.e., disobeying his wishes and carrying out their own.

The next day, the *New York Times* made public an op-ed, written for its Thursday print edition, in which an unnamed “senior administration official” presented himself as the spokesman for a cabal of top officials working to keep Trump in check. “We are the real resistance,” the official claimed, making clear his support for the main elements of the administration’s right-wing program.

On Friday, Barack Obama weighed in with a campaign-style speech—unusual for an ex-president in the first election after leaving office—in which he described the Trump administration as “radical” and “not normal.” He called on Republicans, conservatives and Christian fundamentalists to vote for Democratic candidates in November, to “restore sanity” in Washington and allow a Democratic-controlled House of Representatives to provide an institutional check on Trump.

President Trump responded in kind. On Monday, he attacked his own attorney-general, Jeff Sessions, for not quashing Justice Department investigations into two Republican congressmen indicted on criminal charges of stock market swindling and theft. On Tuesday he

denounced the Woodward book as a fabrication, and on Wednesday he called the *New York Times* op-ed an act of treason. On Thursday, he told a campaign rally in Montana that they had to vote Republican in November to prevent his impeachment. On Friday, he tweeted his demand that Sessions have the Justice Department investigate the *New York Times* op-ed and identify the anonymous writer.

Top Trump aides like chief of staff John Kelly, national security advisor John Bolton, press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders and son-in-law Jared Kushner reportedly met with Trump Thursday in an effort to convince him that none of them was the author of the op-ed and that he could still trust his inner circle. Some two dozen top officials issued formal denials that they were the anonymous writer.

There is simply no precedent in modern American history for such a level of political conflict and dysfunction within the leading institutions of the capitalist state. How is this to be explained? What direction will the crisis take?

It is entirely superficial to root such an explanation in the personality of Donald Trump. Even Obama in his Illinois speech admitted that Trump is not the cause, but merely the symptom, of more profound processes. But Obama, of course, covered up his own role, depicting his presidency as eight years of heroic efforts to repair the damage caused by the 2008 financial crash. At the end of those eight years, however, Wall Street and the financial oligarchy were fully recovered, enjoying record wealth, while working people were poorer than before, a widening social chasm that made possible the election of the billionaire con man and demagogue in November 2016.

This social crisis underlies the political convulsions in Washington. There are, of course, political differences within the two factions fighting it out within the ruling

elite. They are deeply divided over foreign policy, particularly over how to deal with the failure of US intervention in Syria and the Middle East more broadly, and over whether to target Russia or China first in the struggle to maintain the global dominance of American imperialism. The most significant passage in Obama's speech was his criticism of the Republican Party for having retreated from its Cold War, anti-Communist roots by tolerating Trump's supposed "softness" toward Putin.

More fundamental, however, is the growing concern within all sections of the ruling elite over the possibility of a renewed economic crisis under conditions of mounting social opposition from below, following the initial stirrings of the American working class this year—the series of statewide teachers' strikes, the mounting resistance of industrial workers to sellout contracts imposed by the unions, and the buildup of anger over super-exploitation by giant employers like Amazon and Walmart.

Facing an impending eruption of the class struggle, there is little confidence in corporate boardrooms, on Wall Street, or at the Pentagon and CIA that the current chief executive of the American government can meet the test of great events.

One of the premier institutions of big business, JP Morgan Chase, issued an internal report on the eve of the 10th anniversary of the 2008 crash, which warned that another "great liquidity crisis" was possible, and that a government bailout on the scale of that effected by Bush and Obama will produce social unrest, "in light of the potential impact of central bank actions in driving inequality between asset owners and labor."

The report went on to note that political explosions on the scale of 1968 could develop, facilitated by the role of the internet as a means of dissemination for radical political views and a means of political self-organization. "The next crisis is also likely to result in social tensions similar to those witnessed 50 years ago in 1968," the bank report warned. "Similar to 1968, the internet today (social media, leaked documents, etc.) provides millennials with unrestricted access to information ... In addition to information, the internet provides a platform for various social groups to become more self-aware, polarized, and organized."

The ruling class response to this danger is to prepare domestic repression on a massive scale. In that respect, there is no difference between Trump and his opponents, except the ferocious disagreement over who should be in control of the forces of repression that will be unleashed

against the American working class. Trump, of course, is an authoritarian through and through, organizing a fascistic attack on immigrant workers and developing tools that will be used against the entire working class.

However, his opponents, utilizing the methods of the palace coup—intrigues, leaks, media smears, special prosecutors and other provocations—are no more wedded to democratic forms than Trump. The essence of the drive to censor the internet, spearheaded by the Democratic Party, is revealed by the JP Morgan report: it is the platform for "social groups," above all, the working class, "to become more self-aware."

As one of Trump's leading media critics, *Washington Post* columnist Anne Applebaum, a frothing anti-communist, wrote Sunday, "Maybe we have also underestimated the degree to which our Constitution, designed in the 18th century, has proved insufficient to the demands of the 21st."

Trump's political opponents seek to use the Democratic Party campaign in the November elections both to further the preparations for repression and to disguise them from working people. The disguise is provided by a handful of self-styled leftwing and even "socialist" candidates for the House of Representatives, many aligned with Bernie Sanders, like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ayanna Pressley.

The substance is provided by the much larger number of Democratic candidates drawn directly from the military-intelligence apparatus, nearly three dozen in all, who will hold the balance of power if the Democrats win control of the House of Representatives. The policy the Democrats will pursue if they win the election has already been demonstrated by the anti-Russia campaign and the accompanying demands for internet censorship.

Whatever the outcome of the elections, it will not resolve the crisis in Washington nor alter the basic trajectory of politics, which is bringing the working class into explosive conflict with the ruling class, the entire state apparatus, and the capitalist system.



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