

The Joke of Democratic Accountability

Kevin Carson

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Back in 2008, now-president Barack Obama ran against the Bush administration's runaway national security state, created partly via legislation like USA PATRIOT and partly via executive practices like warrantless wiretapping, waterboarding and the like. One of Obama's biggest applause lines was "We worship an awesome God in the Blue States; and in the Red States we don't like federal agents poking around in our libraries." Obama strongly suggested — in vague but quite vehement language — his intention of rolling back this national security state. And besides that, he promised "the most transparent administration in history."

I, cynical anarchist that I am, considered it entirely plausible that we might expect as vigorous a rollback of executive power under Obama as the Church Commission carried out after Watergate.

So much for that theory. Obama may actually be telling the truth about ending torture at Guantanamo. But he still explicitly supports so-called "extraordinary rendition," by which "terror suspects" are handed over — with a wink and a nudge — to allied regimes that do practice torture. He claims to have shut down so-called "Black Ops" sites where the military and CIA practiced torture under Bush — although there's no way of verifying this. And Afghanistan's Bagram Airfield (aka Guantanamo East), where we have no idea what still goes on, is still very much in business.

Obama's attitude toward torture and illegal surveillance by the Bush administration, in every case, has been to use the full power of his office to prevent prosecution of Bush era officials for their crimes against humanity. For this, Obama should personally apologize to the families of the Nazis executed at Nuremberg.

As for Obama's promises of transparency, in office he has in fact pursued whistleblowers with a level of vindictiveness unprecedented in recent years. He's actually resurrected Wilson-era legislation like the Espionage Act — originally used against Wobbly and Socialist political prisoners who opposed WWI as a "rich man's war and a poor man's fight" — to go after those who've exposed the sordid workings of his national security apparatus. Nixon would be proud.

On virtually every aspect of his 2008 promises to scale back Bush's executive power grabs and restore civil liberties, Obama has proven to be an out-and-out liar. Far from undoing Bush's police statism, in the words of Rehoboam, Obama's little finger has been thicker than Bush's loins. Whereas Bush chastised us with whips, Obama has chastises us with scorpions.

The remedy for this sort of thing, as it's presented in the civics texts, is to punish such betrayal by voting against the betrayer next time. But thanks to the "lesser of evils" dynamic inherent in America's two-party system, this is impossible.

An entire community of "Pragmatic Progressives" have circled their wagons in defense of Obama (or PBO, as they call him) against left-wing critics who might weaken him against Republican nominee Mitt Romney. Some, like leading PragProg Scott Finley, have actually resorted to baiting left-wing critics of the American security state for their lack of patriotism, making tactical alliances with right-wing troglodytes like Todd Kincannon to harass them. A movement founded on the unum necessarium of defending Obama against the GOP at all costs has gradually slipped down the proverbial slope, now actually allying itself with the GOP to suppress Obama's left-wing critics.

Mainstream "Progressives," the most vocal opponents of the Imperial Presidency during Republican administrations, become a captive clientele — no matter how egregious the executive power grab — when a Democrat's in power. Because, you see, no matter how disappointing they may privately concede Obama's performance on civil liberties has been, Romney would be even worse! And believe me, his frustrated supporters' sense of nowhere else to go isn't lost on hacks like Obama. So in practice, the lesser of evils seems to get a little more evil with each election cycle. And the repressive apparatus of the state ratchets ever upward.

Even when you get an ideal "Progressive" candidate who says all the things that make your heart go pitty-pat, you have absolutely no way of knowing until he gets elected whether he's a damned liar. And once he's in there, you've got nowhere else to go — because the other guy's always worse.

All this should be more than sufficient as an object lesson on the futility of political reform in ending economic exploitation and state repression. Any movement that seeks social justice through political involvement and attempting to hold public officials democratically accountable is doomed to failure. The only real way to achieve social justice is by bypassing the state, treating it as irrelevant, and building the kind of society we want without the government's permission.

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