

Democratic rights are at stake in fight to defend Edward Snowden

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There is something profoundly unsettling about seeing a young person fleeing a vindictive government for having exposed a massive political conspiracy against the democratic rights of the American people and the people of the world.

Edward Snowden has been charged with espionage and is being denounced by American politicians and media commentators as a traitor who is spying for the enemy. But to whom is he giving information? To the American people. In the eyes of Snowden's accusers, the enemy is the American people.

The people have a right to know that every telephone call is recorded, every email is monitored, every Skype conversation is listened into; that every communication, Internet download and credit card purchase is collected and stored in vast National Security Agency (NSA) databases. Those private communications that are not immediately wiretapped or read are collected for future snooping.

The so-called "metadata" of phone and electronic communication records provide the military and intelligence agencies with a wealth of information about every man and woman in the country—who they associate with, what they read, what they purchase, how they spend their time.

Those who dismiss the revelations of vast state spying operations, who say people have nothing to fear if they have nothing to hide, display ignorance and indifference to the question of democratic rights. To them, the Constitution is superfluous.

The endless stream of denunciations of Snowden by politicians and media commentators continues unabated. It is an attempt, first, to disorient public opinion and shift attention from the real issue raised by his exposure of US spying programs, and, second, to make an example of Snowden so as to intimidate others from exposing government crimes.

On the Sunday interview programs, politicians of both parties lined up to denounce Snowden as a criminal and defend the illegal surveillance operations. Speaking on "Face the Nation," Democrat Dianne Feinstein, who heads the Senate Intelligence Committee, declared that she had seen "no abuse by these agencies" and accused Snowden of damaging programs "that have worked well and disrupted terrorist plots."

"I want to see him caught and brought back for trial ... the chase is on," she added, and went on to imply that WikiLeaks should be prosecuted for "aiding and abetting" Snowden.

Senator Bob Corker, a Republican, said he viewed Snowden as a "criminal" guilty of "breaking national laws that have jeopardized our citizens."

On "Meet the Press," Republican House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Rogers suggested that Snowden was spying for Russia and denounced him as someone who "betrays their country." On "Fox News Sunday," Republican Senator Lindsey Graham said, "I hope we'll chase him to the ends of the earth, bring him to justice and let the Russians know there will be consequences if they harbor this guy."

The bipartisan defense of the secret spying operations and vilification of Snowden show that, for all the supposed "gridlock" in Congress, when it comes to defending blatantly unconstitutional measures, there is complete harmony between the two big business parties.

It is an attempt to criminalize not the crime, but the exposure of the crime.

The claim, moreover, that the vast police state operation has something to do with a war against terrorists is an insult to the intelligence of the people. These operations are motivated by fear of the population. The ruling elite is terrified by the growth of

social opposition to its policies of war and austerity. It seeks to establish social and political control over the population, putting into place the methods and structures of a dictatorship.

The infrastructure of a police state is well in place. A violent act by a disoriented individual, perhaps facilitated by elements of the state apparatus, can become the pretext for an attempt to impose openly authoritarian forms of rule.

The scale of the violations under Barack Obama of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, which expressly bar unreasonable searches and seizures, go far beyond those which led to impeachment proceedings against Richard Nixon 39 years ago. Yet today, not a single prominent politician or media commentator has called for impeachment proceedings against Obama—a president who has ordered the extra-judicial assassination of thousands of people, including American citizens—or criminal prosecution of NSA, FBI, CIA and Pentagon officials.

James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, which nominally oversees the NSA, has been caught perjuring himself while testifying under oath before Congress, but there is no demand for his prosecution.

This demonstrates the degree to which democratic consciousness has collapsed within the ruling elite, the state and the media and been superseded by conceptions of an authoritarian and even fascist character.

American democracy is disintegrating beneath the weight of staggering and unprecedented levels of social inequality and the general militarization of society. Democratic processes are incompatible with a society where wealth and power are concentrated in a tiny layer at the top. Likewise, they cannot survive under conditions where wars are waged in defiance of popular opposition and the military assumes an ever greater role in civilian and political affairs.

Fifty-two years ago, in his farewell address, President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned of the peril embodied in the growth of what he called the “military-industrial complex.”

“This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience,” he said. “The total influence—economic, political, even spiritual—is felt in every city, every statehouse, every office of the federal

government ... we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications ... In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists, and will persist.”

The only safeguard of “our liberties,” Eisenhower declared, was “an alert and knowledgeable citizenry.”

Fifty years on, Eisenhower’s warnings are being born out. Snowden has sought to alert the population to the menace of the nexus between the military and intelligence apparatus and giant telecom and Internet corporations, and for this he is being hunted down.

The defense of Snowden, as well as Julian Assange and Private Bradley Manning, is an obligation of working people, youth and students in the United States and internationally. It is clear it will not come from any section of the political establishment.

Support must be built up at work locations, colleges and schools, and in working class neighborhoods to demand the dropping of all charges against Snowden and the release of all documents related to state surveillance.

The defense of those targeted by US imperialism for exposing its crimes must become the starting point for an offensive in defense of democratic rights. This movement must be consciously developed as part of a political movement of the American and international working class against capitalism, which is the source of war, social inequality and the threat of dictatorship.

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