

The CIA, the Senate and the breakdown of American democracy

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Tuesday's extraordinary public criticism of the Central Intelligence Agency by one of the CIA's longtime apologists—Dianne Feinstein, chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee—is an expression of the terminal crisis of American democracy.

Only the direst of circumstances could have compelled the California Democrat to make a public declaration that the CIA “may well have violated the separation-of-powers principle embodied in the United States Constitution,” and also “the Fourth Amendment, the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, as well as Executive Order 12333, which prohibits the CIA from conducting domestic searches or surveillance.”

Feinstein was evidently driven to make her protest over CIA spying on the Senate because the CIA made a criminal referral to the Justice Department, seeking to prosecute staff of the Intelligence Committee, and possibly members of the Senate themselves, for unauthorized use of classified documents. This was the culmination of months of wrangling over a massive report on CIA torture prepared by the committee.

There was a stark contrast in demeanor between Feinstein, visibly tense and seemingly frightened as she spoke for nearly an hour on the Senate floor, and CIA Director John Brennan, who arrogantly rebuffed her claims of misconduct in a speech to a foreign policy think tank a few hours later, then smirked through a press interview afterwards.

Feinstein has been an unquestioning defender of countless illegal and unconstitutional operations by the US intelligence apparatus, from CIA assassinations using drone-fired missiles, to FBI abuses under the Patriot Act, to systematic NSA collection of the telephone and Internet communications of the entire world.

There is a powerful element of hypocrisy, as NSA whistle-blower Edward Snowden noted, “where an

elected official does not care at all that the rights of millions of ordinary citizens are violated by our spies, but suddenly it's a scandal when a politician finds out the same thing happens to them.”

But there is a more fundamental issue at stake: the mounting threat to democratic rights and constitutional processes that emanates from the military-intelligence apparatus of the US government.

For all the media publicity devoted to the political infighting between the White House and Congress, or the decisions of the Supreme Court, the real power in America is in the hands of an unaccountable, murderous apparatus of violence, provocation and spying that includes the Pentagon, CIA, NSA, FBI and a dozen other such agencies.

The various Senate and House committees exercising “oversight” are little more than rubber stamps for the operations of this vast and secretive apparatus. But the slightest semblance of democratic supervision is treated as an affront by the officials who control armies of spies and assassins. They are quite prepared to use the same methods against their domestic critics as they employ against the targets of American imperialism overseas.

President Obama stands at the head of this apparatus, as the “commander-in-chief,” and a White House spokesman sided unambiguously with the CIA against the Senate, declaring that Brennan had the president's full confidence.

Brennan's own career is revealing—from overseeing torture operations at CIA secret prisons under President George W. Bush, to working in the Obama White House as the head of the drone-missile assassination program, to elevation by Obama to the top position at the CIA. He personifies the continuity of the operations of the military-intelligence apparatus from president to president, from one big business party to the other.

In the course of the past decade, the operations of this network—always violent and anti-democratic—have become increasingly criminal in nature. The current clash stems from one of the worst of these crimes, the establishment of secret CIA prisons in a half-dozen countries where individuals seized in the course of the “war on terror” could be tortured and interrogated without limit.

These prisons were established in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, authorized by the Bush-Cheney administration, sanctioned by the notorious “torture memos” drafted by Bush-era lawyers in the Justice Department, and operated by thousands of CIA officers, military personnel and other federal agents. One of Obama’s first actions on assuming office was to block prosecution of anyone responsible for these systematic violations of American and international law, including the Geneva Conventions.

As Feinstein recounted in her Senate speech, the crime of torture was followed by the crime of cover-up, including the deliberate destruction of video records of torture in defiance of congressional subpoenas, and then years of stonewalling as the CIA sought to obstruct the drafting of the Senate Intelligence Committee report and then block its publication. This culminated in the unprecedented spying by the CIA on the staff of the very committee that is supposed to oversee its operations.

The trajectory of this conflict is an ominous warning: the criminality of the military-intelligence apparatus is metastasizing into an open onslaught on constitutional principles, including such fundamental precepts as the separation of powers.

Neither Feinstein nor any other capitalist politician in Washington, Democratic or Republican, is capable of serious resistance to the emergence of a police state in the United States. This is not merely because of their political cowardice and venality, although there is plenty of that.

They cannot defend democratic rights because democratic rights are increasingly incompatible with the capitalist profit system, characterized by rampant social inequality and deepening economic crisis. It is impossible to maintain even a semblance of democracy in a society so deeply polarized along class lines, with a relative handful of billionaires and multi-millionaires gorging themselves on wealth, while the vast majority

of the population faces layoffs, wage cuts and the destruction of pensions, health benefits and public services.

The only basis for the defense of democratic rights is the mobilization of that oppressed majority, the working class, in an independent political movement, based on a revolutionary socialist program.

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