افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مبـــــاد   بدین بوم وبر زنده یک تن مــباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم   از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com   *afgazad@gmail.com*

| *European Languages* | زبان های اروپائی |

http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/06/all-the-infrastructure-a-tyrant-would-need-courtesy-of-bush-and-obama/276635/

All the Infrastructure a Tyrant Would Need, Courtesy of Bush and Obama

More and more, we're counting on having angels in office and making ourselves vulnerable to devils.

CONOR FRIEDERSDORF

JUN 7 2013

Let's assume that George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Barack Obama, Joe Biden, their staffers, and every member of Congress for the last dozen years has always acted with pure motives in the

realm of national security. Say they've used the power they've claimed, the technology they've developed, and the precedents they've established exclusively to fight al-Qaeda terrorists intent on killing us, that they've succeeded in disrupting what would've been successful attacks, and that Americans are lucky to have had men and women so moral, prudent, and incorruptible in charge.

Few Americans believe all of that to be so. Combining the people who didn't trust Bush and the ones who don't trust Obama adds up to a sizable part of the citizenry. But even if all the critics were proved wrong, even if the CIA, NSA, FBI, and every other branch of the federal government had been improbably filled, top to bottom, with incorruptible patriots constitutionally incapable of wrongdoing, this would still be so: *The American people have no idea who the president will be in 2017*. Nor do we know who'll sit on key Senate oversight committees, who will head the various national-security agencies, or whether the moral character of the people doing so, individually or in aggregate, will more closely resemble George Washington, Woodrow Wilson, FDR, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, John Yoo, or Vladimir Putin.

What we know is that the people in charge will possess the capacity to be tyrants -- to use power oppressively and unjustly -- to a degree that Americans in 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, or 2000 could've scarcely imagined. To an increasing degree, we're counting on having angels in office and making ourselves vulnerable to devils. Bush and Obama have built infrastructure any devil would lust after. Behold the items on an aspiring tyrant's checklist that they've provided their successors:

- A precedent that allows the president to kill citizens in secret without prior judicial or legislative review

- The power to detain prisoners indefinitely without charges or trial

- Ongoing warrantless surveillance on millions of Americans accused of no wrongdoing, converted into a permanent database so that data of innocents spied upon in 2007 can be accessed in 2027

- Using ethnic profiling to choose the targets of secret spying, as the NYPD did with John Brennan's blessing

- Normalizing situations in which the law itself is secret -- and whatever mischief is hiding in those secret interpretations

- The permissibility of droning to death people whose identities are not even known to those doing the killing

- The ability to collect DNA swabs of people who have been arrested even if they haven't been convicted of anything

- A torture program that could be restarted with an executive order

Even if you think Bush and Obama exercised those extraordinary powers responsibly, what makes you think every president would? How can anyone fail to see the huge potential for abuses?

I am not saying no one would resist a tyrant. Perhaps Congress would assert itself. Perhaps the people would rise up. Then again, perhaps it would be too late by the time the abuses were evident. (America has had horrific abuses of power in the past under weaker executives who were less empowered by technology; and numerous other countries haven't recognized tyrants until it was too late.) Part of the problem is how much the Bush-Obama paradigm permits the executive to do in secret. Take that paradigm, add another successful 9/11-style attack, even after many years of very little terrorism, and who knows what would happen?

No one does.

That's because we're allowing ourselves to become a nation of men, not laws. Illegal spying? Torture? Violating the War Powers Resolution and the convention that mandates investigating past torture?

No matter. Just intone that your priority is keeping America safe. Don't like the law? Just get someone in the Office of Legal Counsel to secretly interpret it in a way that twists its words and betrays its spirit.

You'll never be held accountable.

This isn't a argument about how tyranny is inevitable. It is an attempt to grab America by the shoulders, give it a good shake, and say: Yes, it *could* happen here, with enough historical amnesia, carelessness, and bad luck. We're not special. Our voters won't always pick good men and women to represent us. Some good women will be corrupted by power, and some bad men will slip through. Other democracies have degraded into quasi-authoritarian states; they didn't expect that to happen until it was too late to stop. We have safeguards to prevent us from following in their footstep. Stop casting them off because you fear al-Qaeda. Stop tempting fate.

Stop acting like the president takes an oath to keep us safe, when his job is to protect and defend the Constitution. Doing so keeps the American project safe. Past generations fought monarchies, slaveholders, and Nazis to win, expand, and protect that project. And we're so risk-averse -- not that we're actually minimizing risk -- that we're "balancing" the very rights in our Constitution against a threat with an infinitesimal chance of killing any one of us? That makes about as much sense as the 5,000 American lives lost when the same ruling class that built the national-security state found it prudent to preempt a perceived threat from Iraq. And we still trust them?

"We have suffered several thousand casualties from 9/11 through today. Suppose we had a 9/11-level attack with 3,000 casualties per year *every year*. Each person reading this would face a probability of death from this source of about 0.001% each year," Jim Manzi once pointed out at

National Review. This is why we're letting the government build an Orwellian spy state more sophisticated than any in history?

Manzi went on:

To demand that the government "keep us safe" by doing things out of our sight that we have refused to do in much more serious situations so that we can avoid such a risk is weak and pathetic.

He was speaking of torture, but the logic applies more generally.

I am not saying that terrorism poses no threat -- of course it does. Of course we ought to dedicate substantial resources to preventing all the attacks that can be stopped *without violating our founding documents, laws, values, or sense of proportion*. For the national-security state, loosed of the Constitution's safeguards, is a far bigger threat to liberty than al-Qaeda will ever be. Vesting it with more power every year -- expanding its size, power, and functions in secret without any debate about the wisdom of the particulars -- is an invitation to horrific abuses, and it renders the concept of government by the people a joke. The ruling class is trying to keep us ignorant of what it's doing on behalf of us, because it doesn't want us to object!

You'd think, listening to those who defend the national security state's expansion, that the excesses detailed in the Church Committee report never happened; that the horrific abuses of our own era never happened; that the FBI and the CIA have unblemished records respecting the rights of Americans. In fact, *America always overestimates its ability to anticipate and preempt abuses*.

Yet Americans think they're special. If you doubt that, ask yourself what the average American would say if they heard about China pulling call records on millions of innocent Chinese people.

"Those authoritarian Communists."

We go easier on our own.

America has stepped back from the brink in the past when wars ended. But we've never had a "war" go on this long -- and there's no end in sight. It's time for the people to pressure their elected representatives, so that, through Congress, we can dismantle the infrastructure Bush and Obama have built. In less than four years, an unknown person will start presiding over the national-security state. He or she will be an ambitious power seeker who will guiltlessly misrepresent his or her character to appeal to different voters, lie countless times on the campaign trail, and break numerous promises while in office. That's a best-case scenario that happens every time!

For once, let's preempt *that* threat.