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The Inner Crisis of American Society: Civil Liberties, Militarization, Economic Inequality

By Jack A. Smith

October 27, 2013

For all the enervating political tumult and shouting emanating from Washington these days, there is remarkably little to show for it except what has become virtually routine political paralysis.

None of the key differences that are fought over by the politicians seem to directly relate to these five most crucial and threatening specific issues confronting the American people:

1. The erosion of American democracy by a political system flagrantly dominated by great wealth, the big corporations, Wall Street and the major banks. One person may have one vote, but a billionaire — by virtue of funding certain candidates — has the equivalent of thousands of votes on Election Day and in the federal and state legislatures and executive offices thereafter. This more closely resembles an oligarchy (rule by a small group of powerful people and interests) than genuine democracy.

2. The grave weakening of civil liberties and the privacy rights of the American people by the Bush and Obama Administrations has in a dozen years transformed the United States into a global Surveillance State. Whatever happened to the “checks and balances” that were supposed to exist in the U.S. political system to protect the people from such abuses? Our postal mail, email, Internet practices, phones and other electronic devises are now hacked at will by the U.S.

government and many law enforcement agencies. Somewhere in the U.S., a potential Big Brother regime is patiently waiting in the wings for conditions to ripen. The apparatus is at the ready.

In this connection the Washington Post reported Oct. 5: “David Sanger, the New York Times reporter who has spent two decades reporting in Washington, says that the Obama administration is the ‘most closed, control-freak administration’ he’s ever covered. That criticism comes from a forthcoming report on U.S. press freedom written by former Washington Post editor Leonard Downie Jr., in which he claims that national security reporters face “vast and unprecedented challenges” as a result of government surveillance, secrecy and “sophisticated control” of the news media’s access to government.

3. Rapidly rising economic inequality has reached the point where about half the population now is either low wage or poor while the middle class is being depleted and the top 1% to 5% is living like royalty. Meanwhile, unemployment and foreclosures remain high while social programs that benefit the people are on the chopping block. How can there be a healthy democracy if there isn’t even the semblance of economic democracy for the poor, the working class, the lower middle class and now large sectors of the middle class as well?

4. Climate change is already upon us and yet — despite some recent White House mumblings about lowering greenhouse gas emissions — the U.S. will shortly become world’s largest crude oil and natural gas producer, thanks to Obama Administration policies and the proliferation of hazardous fracking. Washington always demands to be recognized the world leader, by force if necessary, and now it’s leading the world toward a disaster by ignoring the climate crisis for fear of disrupting corporate and financial profits.

5. The U.S. government is determined to remain the world’s military superpower, spending over \$600 billion a year on the Pentagon and an equal amount on various “national security” endeavors — more than an annual \$1.2 trillion all told. President Obama is currently fighting ground or drone wars in Afghanistan, West Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia, while continuing to increase the military buildup against China. In addition, Obama is sending special military forces of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) to scores of countries around the globe to advance U.S. interests — and most Americans have no idea this is happening.

Obviously, from a left perspective, the main danger is the Republicans — the far right wing, the Tea Party reactionaries, most of big business and finance, libertarians, intimidated moderates, fundamentalist Bible thumpers, and remnant racists. They usually oppose abortion rights and deny global warming. Many want to “shrink” the federal government in order to eliminate Social Security and all social programs that benefit the people, destroy all regulatory oversight of big business, and erect nearly insurmountable barriers against the labor movement.

However, the five key issues listed above are the product of both the Republican and Democratic Parties. The Libertarians and the Tea Party strongly oppose the erosion of civil liberties. The libertarians are staunchly against imperialist war. Indeed, most Democrats seem to shrug off both issues when their party occupies the Oval Office.

The Democratic Party is a secondary danger (or lesser evil, if you prefer). Despite controlling the White House and Senate for five years and the House for two of those years — it has proven itself incapable of mounting an effective counterattack against rampant right wing ideology, not least because the center-right Democrats have neither the political orientation, nor the will to adequately serve the needs of American working families. Both parties, after all, are wedded to a private enterprise system utterly based on economic inequality at home and imperialist wars abroad. Can this be honestly doubted by liberals and progressives, even as they undoubtedly will pull the lever for Hilary Clinton and more of the same in 2016?

What has the Democratic Party done to halt the erosion of American democracy? What has it done to strengthen civil liberties? What has it done (in the last 50 years) to reverse the ever-widening inequality gap between rich and poor? What has it done to end wars and substantially reduce the bloated military/national security budgets in order to invest in social programs? What has it done to promptly take major steps to convert from fossil fuels to renewable sources of energy? It has done nothing of significance.

Our American society is swiftly changing for the worst. We all can see this. It has a way to go yet, and can be stopped and reversed before the rightist momentum becomes uncontrollable. To accomplish this, a new progressive/left politics is absolutely necessary. The march of the right wing must be halted and pushed back. The march of the left (not the center right lesser evil) must commence. All else, in our view, is wishful thinking.