

July 4th 2006: The state of US democracy 230 years after the American Revolution

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This July 4 marks the 230th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, a document that launched a revolution against colonialism and despotism, inspiring peoples all over the world. The creation of a new nation, founded on Enlightenment concepts of democracy, equality and the rule of law, foreshadowed the French Revolution thirteen years later and had international reverberations for generations thereafter.

The document signed in 1776 had a profoundly liberating character, proclaiming the right of the people—not only in America, but everywhere—to employ revolutionary means to dislodge governments that trampled on their “unalienable rights.”

Those who led the insurrection against the British monarch were quite conscious of the international implications of their actions and the world historic significance of the Declaration. As Thomas Jefferson wrote to John Adams—both, in a poignant and fitting historical coincidence, were to die on the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence—“The flames kindled on the Fourth of July, 1776, have spread over too much of the globe to be extinguished by the feeble engines of despotism; on the contrary, they will consume these engines and all who work them.”

The Declaration of Independence was imbued with the ideals of the Enlightenment and its abhorrence of ignorance, exploitation and inequality. Marxists, of course, are well aware of the inherent limitations in realizing these democratic ideals, given the socio-economic framework within which they developed, characterized in 18th century America by capitalist property relations and chattel slavery. Yet the democratic content and universal significance of the opening passages of the Declaration are undeniable:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, —That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”

Can anyone claim with a straight face that a document containing similar language would win the approval of either house of today’s US Congress or escape a veto by the current occupant

of the White House? The entire content of the policies and actions—both foreign and domestic—of those who now run the American government amounts to a wholesale repudiation of the ideals and principles of 1776.

Much of the Declaration of Independence consists of a bill of particulars against King George III that could be appropriated, with little revision, either for an indictment of the present Republican administration and its Democratic accomplices on war crimes, or a document politically justifying the actions of Iraqis now resisting the US occupation of their country.

The old British king was charged, among other things, with having “affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power,” an abuse that has become the hallmark of an administration in Washington that continuously justifies its arrogation of unprecedented powers by invoking the president’s status as “commander in chief.”

The declaration accuses the British monarch of “quartering large bodies of armed troops among us,” and “protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States.”

It continues: “He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

“He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.”

Every word—“plunder,” “death,” “desolation,” “tyranny,” “cruelty,” “perfidy”—applies, and with far greater force today, to Washington’s brutal conquest and occupation of Iraq.

Two hundred and thirty years after the revolution against British colonialism that brought it into being, the government of the United States is waging a colonial war aimed at subjugating the people of Iraq and appropriating that country’s oil wealth.

In his own defense, King George could at least argue that he was fighting to preserve an existing empire and defend his rule over lands and subjects long recognized as British.

The US colonial venture in Iraq, on the other hand, is an unprovoked war of aggression launched on the basis of lies about non-existent weapons of mass destruction and terrorist ties. Inevitably, it is producing all of the horrors and crimes associated with such interventions, with the soldiers sent to kill and die on the basis of these lies becoming ever more brutalized, leading to an unending series of war crimes. This criminal enterprise has turned into a political and even moral catastrophe, which no section of the political establishment can or will bring to a halt.

The Declaration of Independence further indicted the British monarch for “depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial

by Jury,” and “transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences.”

Again, the charges against King George have an eerily contemporaneous ring, in the context of a US government that has claimed the right to indefinitely detain without trial or charges those whom it decrees “enemy combatants,” while routinely practicing “extraordinary rendition,” transporting beyond the seas alleged terror suspects, in this case not for trial but for torture.

In an incisive column published by the *New York Times* Monday, Brooklyn College history professor Edwin G. Burrows calls attention to the fate of American colonists imprisoned by the British in New York City during the revolution. He estimates that 12,000 or more died due to the abominable conditions of their confinement, packed aqinto makeshift prisons in public and private buildings as well as on broken-down ships in New York harbor, without adequate food or water or any semblance of sanitation.

He notes that the brutalization of the American insurgents was justified by the British monarchy on the grounds that they “weren’t soldiers but ‘rebels’ and that defining them as prisoners of war amounted to de facto recognition of American independence.”

The tragic fate of the American prisoners, he points out, gave rise to the first treaty, signed in 1785 between the newly independent United States and Prussia, prescribing humane treatment of prisoners of war, a document that served as a precursor of the Geneva Conventions.

Professor Burrows concludes by noting that even if such a treaty had been in effect earlier, it might not have saved the American prisoners. “Britain was the world’s superpower in those days, as the United States is now, and if King George didn’t want to treat the ‘rebel’ prisoners humanely, only principle and conscience stood in his way.”

The historian apparently did not feel a need to spell out the implications of his remarks. The parallels with George W. Bush’s use of the term “enemy combatant” to override the Geneva Conventions, deny minimal rights demanded by international law to those captured in Washington’s “global war on terror,” and even justify their torture are all too obvious.

The nation’s revolutionary founders subsequently spelled out the “unalienable rights” of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” in the Bill of Rights, guaranteeing freedom of speech, religion, the press and assembly, freedom from detention without trial, and freedom from arbitrary searches and seizure.

The gangsters who now control the government are attempting to reverse all of these centuries-old democratic rights, engaging in massive and illegal spying operations against virtually the entire American public in a wholesale repudiation of the Constitution’s Fourth Amendment.

The administration has answered the media’s limited exposure of some of these crimes with a campaign of naked intimidation, its prominent Republican supporters in Congress accusing individual newspapers of “treason” and demanding criminal sanctions. The sinister rationale is that the “global war on terror” has rendered freedom of the press—like so many other basic democratic rights associated with 1776—inoperable.

What is being constructed—with little opposition from within the political establishment—is a presidential dictatorship, free from any of the checks and balances that the American republic’s founders enshrined in the Constitution, and in direct opposition to the fundamental principle enunciated in the Declaration of Independence that the government must derive its “just powers from the consent of the governed.”

Congress has supplemented the executive branch’s assault on democratic rights with a grotesque drive to amend the US Constitution with reactionary and undemocratic measures ranging from a ban on gay marriage to the criminalization of flag burning.

In an attempt to appeal to the most backward sentiments, the Republican right is waging a full-scale war on the secularist foundations of the American revolution and its assertion of freedom not only of religion, but also from religion, as embodied in the separation of church and state spelled out plainly in the First Amendment. There are myriad attempts to legislate religious bigotry and curtail the development of science in relation to everything from global warming to stem cell research and the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases.

The contradiction between the democratic ideals of the revolution and the social, political and economic realities of American society has never been sharper.

Underlying this ever-widening gulf between ideals and reality is the unprecedented social polarization between a narrow layer of the financial-corporate elite and the American working class—the overwhelming majority of the population. The former controls both major parties and all of the institutions of government, while the latter is in practice politically disenfranchised.

The ruling elite of billionaires and multi-millionaires uses its grip on government to repudiate all policies aimed at ameliorating social deprivation and inequality through programs addressing poverty, health care, education, etc. All such measures are rejected as intolerable impediments to the unrestricted accumulation of personal wealth. Instead, those confronting socially created catastrophes are told to rely on the philanthropic largesse of billionaires like Bill Gates and Warren Buffett.

It is impossible to reconcile the democratic principles contained in America’s founding documents with the uninterrupted deepening of social and economic inequality. The underlying social tensions created by this polarization must inevitably find their expression in social and political struggles involving masses of working people, who are becoming increasingly alienated from and hostile to a government that is run exclusively by and for the super-rich.

On July 4, 2006, it is appropriate to recall once again the affirmation in the Declaration of Independence of the people’s right to “alter or abolish” any government that abrogates their “unalienable rights,” and to replace it with a new system that “to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.”

The Socialist Equality Party looks forward confidently to the day when American working people will exercise this universal right, uniting with workers all over the world in a new revolution that will put an end to war, poverty and oppression, establishing a socialist society organized to meet the needs of the majority rather than the profit interests of a ruling elite.