

“Democratic Dictatorship”: The Transition towards Authoritarian Rule in America

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As must appear self-evident to both historians and astute observers by now, the United States, in its history, has had a rather facile and at times acrimonious relationship to the idea of domestic democracy (If this is not self-evident, see Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival*, along with *Failed States*. For a specific analysis of this observation applied to the USA Patriot Act, see my *A User's Guide to the USA Patriot Act*). What is seldom noticed, however, is the speed with which the U.S. has moved from a liberal democracy to, at best, an authoritarian government.

To demonstrate this rapid movement in U.S. government, we will use as a base Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" address to Congress, on January 6, 1941. By all rights, and regardless of FDR's real intent (some say it was to garner support for U.S. involvement in WWII), very few would doubt that his elucidated four freedoms form an important base for understanding liberal democracy. Here are FDR's own words, quoted at length:

"The first is freedom of speech and expression — everywhere in the world.

The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way — everywhere in the world.

The third is freedom from want — which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants — everywhere in the world.

The fourth is freedom from fear—which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world.

That is no vision of a distant millennium. It is a definite basis for a kind of world attainable in our own time and generation. That kind of world is the very antithesis of the so-called new order of tyranny which the dictators seek to create with the crash of a bomb.

To that new order we oppose the greater conception—the moral order. A good society is able to face schemes of world domination and foreign revolutions alike without fear."

The point of this article is to compare Roosevelt's understanding of a "moral democracy," with where our domestic "democracy" stands today. I will assume that the Four Freedoms are in stark contrast to Authoritarianism, Totalitarianism, and Fascism. But by way of general definition, just for purposes of reference for this article, I would like to adopt the following general definitions of Authoritarianism and Totalitarianism. Authoritarianism exists

when an elite group monopolizes all political power; Totalitarianism exists when an elite group monopolizes power on every aspect of society, such as economy, education, art, and acceptable moral codes. When combined with a strong nationalism and militarism, such forms of government become Fascism.

With these contradictory positions as our bookends (i.e. democracy versus Authoritarianism and its extreme forms), the comparison we will make here yields the inevitable conclusion that the U.S. has gone a long way, with increasing speed, in the opposite direction of freedom and a moral society that Roosevelt thought was the key to a thriving democracy.

Roosevelt's First Freedom: Freedom of speech.

How free is speech in the U.S. today? Even if, in principle, people are free to use technology to communicate their thoughts with others, the squelching of this freedom can easily occur with knowledge of such programs that seek to record such speech, such as the NSA spying programs. Without privacy in sharing our thoughts with others, there is neither freedom of speech nor of association. No protests or dissenting movements can be successful, since those against whom the dissent occurs and who are eavesdropping will be enabled to have all their plans to squelch it in place in advance, based on their pre-knowledge of any dissent and its planned actions.

Contrary to that, the Supreme Court ruled, in *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People v. Alabama* (1958), that not only was freedom of association protected by the First Amendment, but that privacy of membership was an essential part of this freedom. Worse yet, if the government knows where every person is and with whom they are associating by tracking their technology use, how truly free is our speech? In other words, if you know there is a spook around every corner listening to you, would you alter your speech? Most people would. In short, government programs that seek to have knowledge on and about persons and organizations by collecting it all, "willy-nilly" as Obama stated it, without probable cause that they are engaged in illegalities, directly undermine democracy, if for no other reason than that we do not surrender our right to privacy, of speech, or of association—all of them arguably the engine of democratic discourse—simply because we choose to express to others our disagreement with our government or the corporations with whom they work, or choose to associate with like-minded people.

In direct contradiction to FDR's First Freedom and the Constitution's First Amendment regarding free speech, let us examine some NSA programs regarding speech. One is called "Co-Traveler," the cell phone mapping program that tracks not just the locations of cell phones, but which other cell phones they are in geographical proximity to. It doesn't matter if your cell phone is off: the program still tracks it. The NSA engages in this operation without warrant or court authorization.

If this wasn't enough, other Snowden revelations concern malware that the NSA is now sending out to the individual computers in which they are interested. Called the "Computer Network Exploitation," it is estimated in the Snowden documents to have infected 50,000 computers so far. The malware is powerful enough to take control of the computer it infects. Add to this the facts that corporations such as Google now place cookies on computers for the purpose of government information collection, and the NSA's "Special Source Operations" (SSO), which "manages surveillance programs that involve collaboration with corporate communication providers" (Robert Stevens, "New Documents Expose More NSA

Programs," World Socialist Web Site, December 14, 2013).

Add to all this what we already know about corporate spying on people. For example, according to a new report on corporate spying, corporations such as Kraft, Cola-Cola, Burger King, McDonald's, Monsanto, Shell, BP, Chevron, Dow, [Wal-Mart, Bank of America, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce now engage in espionage against nonprofit civic organizations and the individuals involved in them](#), summarized nicely in Ralph Nader's article "Corporate Espionage Undermines Democracy," November 26, 2013). Take all of this together, and you have a powerful but small group of people that control all communications data in the U.S.: the NSA and a few large corporations.

This technology and these practices are not limited to the federal level, either. Now local police use the same spying programs and practices as their federal mentors have done. In fact, the "trickle down" of totalitarian technology and practice has infiltrated local police departments. The Washington Post reports (December 8) that local police departments now have technology to obtain what are called cell phone "tower dumps" from all telecommunication companies that use the towers. Additionally, police agencies are using fake cell phone towers to simply collect data, period. None of this information collection is done with warrants. [This means that local police now randomly collect all cell phone information, including GPS location information, email addresses, and web sites](#).

[According to USA Today](#), this is being done by local police in 33 states.

We can thus conclude first, that NSA actions are not an attempt to thwart terrorism; they are an attempt to maintain full control of citizen association, movement, and information.

But there is a second, even more alarming conclusion that we must draw from this. It was summarized poignantly by Judge Richard J. Leon, who ruled that the NSA's collection of metadata from phones is "almost Orwellian," stating forthrightly that the U.S. government had failed to cite "a single case in which analysis of the NSA's bulk metadata collection actually stopped an imminent terrorist attack." Couple this judgment with the ruling of Judge Reggie Walton (referenced by Judge Leon), that the NSA was in "systematic noncompliance" with the Federal Intelligence Surveillance (FISA) Court.

Perhaps most egregious of all in the NSA's "Orwellian" programs is the NSA SIGINET document that in essence states "the law has not kept up with us, so we can violate the law with impunity." This document, again courtesy of Edward Snowden, states that the law must be adapted to the NSA practice of unlimited spying, rather than the other way around, as is normal the case for a government that abides by the rule of law. It details how the NSA intends to have "mastery of the global network," and makes open mention of their corporate partners in this venture.

Contrary to the NSA antics, it is certainly well within the confines of the authority of the Justice Department and of Congress to both investigate and criminally prosecute NSA members who are violating our Constitutional rights, specifically in this case, the First and Fourth Amendments. Instead, the U.S. Justice Department defended the NSA spying programs in New York federal court, in November. Additional to that, the Obama administration's hand-picked "advisory committee" on the abuses of NSA spying recommended only surface changes to the program. Thus, not only have our "democratic" institutions been almost completely silent on this issue, but congressional members have

even gone to lengths of engaging in scare tactics in order to continue the unchecked operations of the NSA.

For example, both Democrat Senator Diane Feinstein, and Republican Representative Mike Rogers have publicly claimed that “we are not safer now than we were a year ago,” and that “terror is up worldwide” (both of these quotations come from their appearance on the CNN program “State of the Union,” on December 1). However, when one examines the facts, the total number of deaths that have been classified as “terrorist-related” in 2011 was nine, and six of those were from the lone shooter who murdered worshippers at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin. Likewise, the FBI has listed a total of nine terrorist incidents on U.S. soil, less than half what they were in 2011. The scare statistics are instead drawn from four countries in which terrorist activities have been on the rise: Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Syria. This shows clearly that Feinstein and Rogers are lying when they make their claims. Could it be that this is due to the fact that both of their spouses are deeply involved in “private security” contracts with the U.S. military and State Department? (Bill Van Auken, “U.S. Congressional Intelligence Chiefs Promote Terror Scare,” World Socialist Web Site, December 6, 2012).

Roosevelt’s Third Freedom: Freedom from want, especially economic want.

This clearly implies economic equality, as opposed to inegalitarian views of individualist economic gain. Where we stand today in regard to this freedom may readily be demonstrated by two facts: first, the top ten CEO’s today in the U.S. make an average of over \$13 million each. On the extreme end, Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, took home \$2.27 billion, while Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, made \$143 million, and Howard Shultz of Starbucks made \$117.5 million this year. The richest increased their wealth by over \$2 trillion this past year, according to the Forbes 400 report from September. To put this in perspective, Andre Damon states in his report of these numbers that “the wealth of these 400 individuals is more than twice the amount necessary to cover the federal budget deficit, which is being used as the justification for slashing food stamps, education, housing assistance, and health care programs” (World Socialist Web Site, October 24, 2013).

For the second fact, compare these obscene salaries with the normal U.S. household, whose income has fallen by approximately ten percent over the past ten years. In fact, according to a report by the Southern Education Foundation, nearly half of public school children in the U.S. are now poor, where “poor” is defined as an annual income of \$29,000 for a family of four. Additionally, the report states, of the 45 wealthiest countries in the world, the U.S. ranks second in the level of child poverty rate. If that isn’t enough, with the lack of congressional action for the unemployed, benefits for over one million of the unemployed will expire next week. This news comes as the Federal Reserve continues to add \$85 billion per month into the financial system, in order to keep Wall Street profits at a maximum.

While the corporate mentality propagandizes that the destitute are “parasites” on the body politic, corporate millionaires in the fast food industry have conspired to take taxpayer money both “from the top” and “from the bottom.” According to the report “Fast Food CEO’s Rake in Taxpayer-Subsidized Pay,” the CEO’s of these corporations—KFC, Taco Bell, McDonalds, and Pizza Hut named among them—have created and used a tax loophole to let themselves deduct performance-based executive pay from their taxes, so that the higher the CEO salary under this category, the less tax they pay. This is “from the top” of the tax monies. “From the bottom” is the fact that fast food corporations like McDonald’s pay their employees such low wages that the employees need government programs like the

Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) to feed their families. In fact, McDonald's has a program that assists its employees to get on the food stamp and welfare programs, thus taking taxpayer money to fund the wage gap that they have deliberately created.

Of course, this class inequality is insufficiently wide for the elites. Thus, there are several other actions they have planned in order to widen the class divide in America and to consolidate their complete economic and political power. First, according to a report in The Guardian, their main lobbying group, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), is now planning a 34-state assault on education, health, tax, worker compensation, and the environment (Ed Pilkington and Suzanne Goldenberg, "State Conservative Groups Plan U.S.-wide Assault on Education, Health, and Tax," The Guardian, December 5, 2013).

Second, workers are seeing their pensions slashed. The test cases for this assault on the politically unrepresented, helpless class are in Detroit and Chicago. In an excellent analysis of the Detroit bankruptcy issue, Wallace Turbeville argues that the real crisis in Detroit has absolutely nothing to do with pensions or expenses. Rather, the real problem lies in numerous other factors, including "emergency manager" Kevyn Orr's shady accounting, revenue reductions, state revenue sharing, corporate subsidies, and most of all, questionable financial dealings in such things as interest rate swaps. All of this contributed to the city's cash flow problem, while the city's pension contributions and expenses remained relatively stable ([Wallace Turbeville, "The Detroit Bankruptcy."](#))

In Chicago, corporate Democrat Rahm Emanuel announced his plan to entirely eliminate health insurance subsidies for retired city workers, effective on January 1, 2017. This will place far more financial burden on the workers by increasing their premiums, eliminating subsidies, cutting retired workers from the city's health care plan, and requiring employees to purchase insurance through the Affordable Care Act, otherwise known as "Obamacare." However, like Detroit, worker pensions are not the problem. Rather, the deficits have been created by reducing tax rates on the wealthy and by raiding pensions, among other things, all with union backing.

Third, Obama and the Democrats' new federal budget has eight key items that constitute what David Cay Johnston, among many others, has characterized as a huge giveaway to the economic elites who now run the country. The budget cuts 1.3 million Americans out of unemployment insurance, provides no job creation, provides additional tax cuts for the wealthy, maintains tax loopholes for corporations, cuts Head Start back, cuts medical research back, and increases Pentagon spending (by \$20 billion) (see "Democracy Now," December 16, 2013). Johnston could easily have added other serious "class warfare" cuts such as reduction of retirement benefits to federal workers and retired military personnel, and leaving intact sequestration cuts (thus reducing social spending even more). That the Democrats are not merely "conceding," but have been in on this whole class war from the beginning, is nearly commonplace knowledge by now (for evidence of this assertion, see the Democrat's report entitled "State Budget Crisis Task Force," released in July, 2012).

Fourth, while Obama's speech on inequality on December 4 was crafted to make him appear as the great defender of equality, in point of fact Obama has done everything in his power to maintain a distinct inequality in society, doing his corporate master's bidding all the way. While these examples are not exhaustive, the following will suffice to indicate support for this claim. First, Obama's restructuring of the auto industry in 2009 was done precisely to cut wages and benefits to the workers. In that same year he intervened to

prevent legislation directed at blocking executive bonuses at various bailed-out banks and insurance companies. Additionally, he has rejected providing federal assistance to states and cities hit hard by the economic crisis, while continuing to pump money into the very banks and Wall Street companies that crashed the economy in 2008. While the average income for average Americans has fallen by several percentage points during his tenure, Obama has failed to advocate strongly for a fair increase in the minimum wage. Simultaneously, he heralds education for all, while cutting Head Start programs from his budget and advocating corporate-owned schools in his “Race to the Top” education program.

Fifth, we should take note of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the top-secret, closed-door negotiations between the U.S., Canada, and ten Asian and Latin American countries. This “free-trade agreement” establishes supranational litigation tribunals, to which any given domestic court would be required to defer, for the purpose of ruling on economic and trade matters. Lest this sounds too removed from we, the people, this new capitalist-based court system, which will have no human or civil rights limitations, would rule on issues affecting all of us, such as food production (i.e. genetically modified foods [GMO’s]), individual rights, civil liberties, publishers, internet service providers, internet privacy, and the intellectual and environmental commons (WikiLeaks, “Secret Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement”). Here is the key part. According to Bloomberg News, “the treaties would elevate individual corporations to equal status with nation states, empowering them to drag the U.S. government before closed-door extrajudicial tribunals.” These tribunals would be composed of three private lawyers who are unaccountable to anyone else, least of all to the electorate, and would have the power “to order taxpayer payments for domestic policies or government actions the corporations oppose.” In its most corrupt part, the TPP calls for judges serving on these tribunals to rotate between serving as judges and actually arguing cases for corporations against governments. There is no independent judicial mechanism to appeal their decisions (Ralph Nader and Lori Wallach, “Congress Shouldn’t Fast-Track Covert Trade Deals,” Bloomberg News, December 11, 2013).

Roosevelt’s Fourth Freedom: Freedom from fear, especially from military aggression.

So who are the military aggressors from whom everyone should be free of fear? How about beginning with the largest spender on military, and the nation that aggresses the most against others? The U.S., which spends three times what the rest of the world spends in total on military weaponry, just gave its military yet another budget boost, this time for \$633 billion, while most of its citizens are suffering from a deep recession. Part of that money will no doubt go toward fulfilling our new agreement, announced in November, for the permanent U.S. occupation of Afghanistan. Much like the Iraq agreement, and directly contradictory to Obama’s proclamations, the agreements with both countries allow U.S. troops and bases to continue their operations through 2024. This is not something that the U.S. was “asked” to do, either. As Susan Rice, Obama’s national security director, very publicly put it, it was the U.S. position that Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai sign the U.S.-drafted accord, or face a complete cut-off of U.S. funding and troops. In comparison, a paltry \$76.4 billion could fund the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). For those whose unemployment insurance is being suspended by the government at the end of the month, just \$25.6 billion would suffice to take care of that.

Part of the money being piped into the U.S. military, at the expense of its citizens, is also destined for support of U.S. military provocations in Southeast Asia. Although much ado was made in the U.S. mainstream media over China’s declaration of an air defense identification

zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, followed by North Korea's doing the same, and while much was made (rightfully) about U.S. deliberate provocations of China in this zone by the flight of B-52's directly into the ADIZ, much less attention was paid to two events that demonstrate the military seriousness of Obama's "Asia pivot." Both stories indicate how much Obama and his military-corporate masters are itching for a war of territorial control. The first story concerns the U.S. guided missile cruiser USS Cowpens nearly colliding with a Chinese naval vessel in the South China Sea, on December 5. Although the U.S. claimed it was operating in international waters, in point of fact the U.S. was playing chicken with the Chinese fleet formation, by sailing within that formation. What could more incendiary than for the U.S. to deliberately sail their ships into the fleet formation of a country that the U.S. has already very publicly targeted for economic war, and publicly stated its preparedness for a military war? As regards to how serious the U.S. is about the U.S. itch for a "hot war," in November, the Rand Corporation, an allegedly independent "think-tank" but that just happens to do much of its studies advocating Pentagon issues, released a strategic plan for engaging China in war. It advocates (indeed, it even claims that what has already started is) an "arc" of land-based anti-ship missiles with which to attack China. These missiles, the report claims, should be and are being stationed in Korea, Okinawa, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

Finally, the long shadow of U.S. military and imperialist presence in Syria is once again making the news, with the United Nations now reporting that three-quarters of Syria's 22.4 million people will need humanitarian assistance just to survive, by the end of 2014. This report says nothing about the roughly three million refugees who have already fled Syria, due to the U.S. proxy war there. This is the inevitable result when a country whose sole concern is military power and economic and social control puts its footprint on a country such as Syria. Note that the Obama administration has said nothing at all concerning these reports, let alone taken any responsibility for the immense social problems that its attempt to control Syria has brought in its wake. The Syrian people, much like the Palestinian people, simply do not exist in the eyes of Totalitarian and militaristic leaders such as our current U.S. regime.

In this examination of U.S. military aggression worldwide, we have not even mentioned the numerous drone strikes that President Obama has ordered and continues to order and publicly support, in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Yemen, to name but three prominent places. This practice of asymmetric remote-control war shows only signs of increasing in U.S. practice in years to come.

Putting this militarism into perspective, Chalmers Johnson warned in his book *Nemesis* that we can either have an Empire (i.e. abroad) or we can have a democracy, but we cannot have both. I have been arguing that FDR's Four Freedoms is a good synopsis of what the side of having a democracy truly means, and arguing that Totalitarianism at home is at least morally equivalent to Empire abroad.

The conclusion of this article seems so obvious that it almost doesn't need stating, but state it we must:

the United States has rushed headlong into a Totalitarian, if not a Fascist, regime of government-corporate control of the culture and citizens, and we are only seeing the beginnings of it, in part because the Snowden revelations are incomplete, and in part because the government is not forthcoming with just how many and how far its actions go that contradict the Four Freedoms. But with regard to this conclusion, just because our

government has the trimmings of a democracy matters not, when the fact is that regardless of who is elected, the political bureaucrats put in office tend to the interests of the ruling regime of corporations and their desire for authoritarian control of all of the information of the culture and the citizens.

This is what Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg no doubt at least partially had in mind when she stated that if aggregate limits on individual political contributions are not limited, then "500 people will control American democracy." This makes U.S. elections a sham and a farce. Worse, it bodes ill for the immediate future, in that Totalitarian regimes are extraordinarily difficult to overthrow without a complete revolution in the mindset (i.e. worldview) of the vast majority of citizens. The obvious mindset or worldview change argued for in this article is that if we want to put the brakes on this bullet-train into headlong Fascism, we must reiterate and organize around these Four Freedoms adumbrated by Roosevelt. They are user-friendly, and nicely encapsulate the primary values for any true democracy. That change of mindset is worth re-committing ourselves to in the year to come. Unlike Obama's empty campaign rhetoric, it is truly our only "hope" for "change."

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