

Right-wing rampage by Obama administration

Balance sheet of a week of reaction

By [Patrick Martin](#)

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The past week has provided a definitive demonstration of the subservience of the Obama administration and the Democratic Party to the military-intelligence apparatus of American imperialism. Day by day, the White House and the Democratic-controlled Congress delivered decisions along the lines demanded by the Pentagon and CIA, in many instances directly repudiating the campaign promises made to win popular support during the 2008 election.

On Monday, the US military commander in Afghanistan, General David McKiernan, was ousted after only 11 months and replaced by the military's top specialist in "dirty war" tactics, General Stanley McChrystal, longtime head of the Joint Special Operations Command. The removal of McKiernan by Defense Secretary Robert Gates was part of the reorientation of US policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan to escalated military conflict and far greater civilian and military casualties.

On Tuesday, the White House spokesman indicated that the decision to release photos of torture and abuse of prisoners at US facilities in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantánamo Bay was under review. Obama initially approved the release of the photos, ordered by a US Court of Appeals, but this action was strenuously opposed by the Pentagon and the US commander in Iraq, General Raymond Odierno.

On Wednesday, Obama himself announced that he was reversing the decision on the torture photos. The administration will either appeal the decision to the US Supreme Court, which could delay any order to release the photos until next year, or issue an executive order classifying them as "secret," which would set up a new and more difficult legal hurdle for the human rights groups seeking release.

On Thursday, the House of Representatives voted by 368 to 60, with only 51 Democrats in opposition, to approve a \$97 billion supplemental funding package for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The number of House Democrats opposed to funding the continued illegal occupation of both countries was barely a third of the opposition in 2007 and 2008, when the Democratic-controlled Congress gave similar approval to supplemental war spending bills proposed by the Bush administration.

Finally, on Friday, Obama announced that the Pentagon would restart the military commissions established by the Bush administration and suspended for 120 days by Obama after he took office. There will be minor procedural changes, according to the brief statement issued by the White House, but the fundamental character of the tribunals remains: they are kangaroo courts, packed with military officers serving as judges, juries and defense attorneys, and operating under a travesty of legal procedure.

The political trajectory of the Obama administration is so reactionary that it has evoked praise from its erstwhile right-wing critics, including congressional Republicans and the editorial board of the Wall Street Journal, who hailed the reversals on release of the torture photos and use of military commissions as a vindication of the “war on terror” policies of the Bush administration.

Senator Lindsey Graham, a top Republican spokesman on detainee policy, declared, “I agree with the president and our military commanders that now is the time to start over and strengthen our detention policies. I applaud the president’s actions today.” Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell called the decision an “encouraging development.”

The Wall Street Journal published an editorial headlined “Obama’s Military Tribunals,” which gloated over the new administration’s embrace of the policies of its predecessor: “Mr. Obama deserves credit for accepting that the civilian courts are largely unsuited for the realities of the war on terror. He has now decided to preserve a tribunal process that will be identical in every material way to the one favored by Dick Cheney.”

The decision on the torture photos is perhaps the most politically significant of the week’s actions. It demonstrates the extraordinary sensitivity of the Obama White House to the concerns of the military and CIA, which are focused mainly on the danger that top commanders and CIA officials could face criminal liability for the torture and abuse of prisoners.

As one commentator noted in the Washington Post, “By appealing the court order authorizing the photos’ release and thereby delaying publication of viscerally powerful evidence of detainee abuse, Obama may be attempting to reduce political pressure to investigate Bush administration officials who crafted arguably illegal policies on interrogation and detention. In choosing this tack, Obama makes clear how deeply potential prosecution is affecting every decision he faces about detention, interrogation and torture.”

In the internal discussion on resumption of military commissions to try detainees held at Guantánamo, the final decision was made by “Obama eventually siding with the generals and other military officials who feared that bringing some detainees before regular courts would present enormous legal hurdles and could risk acquittals,” the Post reported.

This was the context for the extraordinary exchange between House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and the CIA on Thursday and Friday. Pelosi held a press conference Thursday to charge that CIA officials lied to Congress at a classified briefing in September 2002 about whether prisoners were being waterboarded. CIA Director Leon Panetta—a former Democratic congressman from California—rebuffed Pelosi’s claim in an e-mail sent to all CIA employees on Friday and then made public. The White House declined to comment on the dispute, effectively siding with the CIA against Pelosi.

While the focus of the past week’s events has been the White House reversal of policy on torture and military tribunals, the Obama administration has adopted right-wing policies all down the line, in domestic as well as foreign policy.

Its economic policy seeks to safeguard the Wall Street bankers and financial speculators while proceeding with complete ruthlessness against not only the working class, but sections of small and middle-sized businesses, like the thousands of auto dealerships that will be eliminated under the administration’s plan for restructuring the auto industry.

In its two major domestic policy initiatives, healthcare and energy policy, the Obama administration has made common cause with big corporate interests. The week began with lobbyists for the drug industry and other healthcare profiteers assembling at the White House to back plans for massive cost-cutting, and ended with the House Energy and Commerce Committee approving a “climate change” program applauded by the Edison Electric Institute, the chief lobbying group for utility polluters.

On Friday, the White House budget director, Peter Orszag, published a column in the Wall Street Journal headlined “Health Costs Are the Real Deficit Threat. That’s why President Obama is making health-care reform a priority.” The column emphasized that cutting costs was the central drive of administration healthcare policy and made no mention of Obama’s election campaign promises to expand healthcare to cover the more than 50 million Americans currently uninsured.

The right-wing course of the Obama administration cannot be explained from the standpoint of the personality of the new occupant of the White House—the “pragmatism” now being hailed by the media—any more than the policies of the Bush administration could be explained simply from the ignorance and backwardness of the previous “commander-in-chief.”

The program of the Obama administration reveals the real social and class interests served by the American state. The United States is ruled by an alliance of Wall Street financiers with the military and intelligence apparatus in Washington. The bankers and generals are the real decision makers in America, not the American people who cast their votes in November 2008 seeking a much different domestic and foreign policy.

Obama’s embrace of the foulest aspects of the Bush administration, repudiating his promises of “change” only a few months after taking office, demonstrates the hollow shell that American democracy has become. Elections mean nothing and decide nothing. The real decisions are made behind the scenes and implemented by the ruling elite’s political frontmen in the White House and the Capitol.

The struggle against the war, social reaction and attacks on democratic rights must take as its starting point that the Obama administration is the enemy of working people in the United States and in the entire world, the instrument of the most rapacious and reactionary ruling class on the planet.

The working class must reject the poisonous illusion that Obama represents some sort of “reform” alternative to the program of the ultra-right. The way forward is to break with the Democratic Party and build an independent mass political movement of working people, based on a socialist and internationalist program. This means building the Socialist Equality Party.

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