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Obama's Betrayals **by Sheldon Richman**

After President Obama announced he would fight the release of photographs showing American soldiers abusing “war on terror” detainees, Richard Haass, president of the quintessentially mainstream Council on Foreign Relations, said that Obama had learned the difference between campaigning and governing. He wasn’t being ironic.

It was said during the presidential campaign that one of the candidates was running for George W. Bush’s third term. Did you think it was Obama?

Obama has been doing a lot of “growing” in office. That’s the term the establishment uses when a candidate who apparently holds maverick views gets into office and abandons those views in favor of those more congenial to the permanent ruling elite.

The president campaigned against military tribunals as a substitute for regular criminal proceedings for terrorist suspects — a “legal black hole,” he called them. Now he embraces them. His promise of increased protections for defendants fails to impress even the military people charged with defending the suspects. The tribunals are regarded as kangaroo courts. Although Obama says evidence obtained by torture will not be admissible in the tribunals, he won’t let tortured detainees have their day in a real court.

Obama has adopted Bush’s position on state secrecy and more to stop lawsuits over torture and eavesdropping. Translation: People who were wronged by the government may not sue to bring abusive officials to justice.

Consistent with that, Obama appears to have no interest in prosecuting the Bush officials who illegally authorized and carried out torture. Even a “truth commission” seems unlikely. In the name of looking to the future, we are being asked to forget the past.

Obama still says he wants to close the Guantanamo prison, but the one at the Bagram air base in Afghanistan — where detainees have zero rights — is still in operation. And Obama’s pledge on Guantanamo must be judged against the fact that he is considering indefinite and even *preventive* detention of terrorist suspects his administration is afraid to bring before even a military tribunal.

This is truly astounding. In Obama we have a new Jekyll and Hyde. From harsh critic of Bush's trampling of individual rights, Obama has transmogrified into a champion of the omnipotent state that cannot let the niceties of the traditional criminal-justice system stand in the way of "national security."

The logic behind his decisions and reversals is bizarre. Obama said releasing the abuse photos would "inflame anti-American sentiment" and endanger the troops. Does he really think that is not happening every day through the brutal U.S. occupations and bombing of civilians in Afghanistan and Pakistan? Does he think that withholding the much-publicized photos doesn't itself inflame anti-American sentiment?

As for his fear of trying suspects in regular criminals court, what about the several that have already gone through the system without incident?

Obama has clearly adopted not only Bush's policies, but also his premise: that the United States is in a war in which the world is the battlefield and restraints on the power of government are a luxury we can't afford. He has dropped the more realistic view that acts of terrorism are crimes — provoked by years of U.S. intervention — that can be dealt with through normal procedures that protect basic freedoms.

It is instructive that the neoconservatives who gave us the Bush war program are now delighted with Obama's policies, including his escalation in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

This all should be troubling to anyone who thinks elections can bring needed change. Presidents come and go, with little obvious effect on foreign policy, no matter what they say during their campaigns. Republican and Democrat, right and left — those terms are more about style than substance. In subtle ways and with staunch corporate media support, the system maintained by the ruling elite ensures that no successful national candidate will deviate too far from its plumb line. The marginalization of real anti-war candidates during the 2008 election was just the latest demonstration.

It's time for the opponents of empire to see the man in the White House for who he is. Fortunately, that is starting to happen.

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