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Democracy and Accountability in U.S. America: Theory versus Practice

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* "Because of its power and global interest U.S. leaders have committed crimes as a matter of course and structural necessity. A strict application of international law would -- have given every U.S. president of the past 50 years Nuremberg treatment" (Edward Herman, Z magazine Dec.1999, p.38)

* " As such, America's present system of government hardly serves as a shining example of what the rest of the world should aspire to, least of all a nation like Iraq, which is torn apart by America and is now hoped to be reconstructed in the American image." [Noam Chomsky]

As many scholars, political scientists, historians and statesmen from across the globe and in particular from the Anglo-Saxon parts of the world often assert firmly, the epitome of Western democracy has always been U.S. America since the eighteenth century. Though the oft-trumpeted tenet of American foreign policy, and one that has been utilized as a pretext to advance global ambitions, has been "making the world safe for democracy" and assisting/supporting democratization processes throughout the world, yet this very tenet is no longer true in the very nation that gave it birth. Successive American governments have trampled on the democratic and human rights, civil and political liberties of ordinary Americans (especially African-Americans, Hispanics and other minorities) with impunity, refused to account to their constituencies/electorate on crucial national issues that directly affected them, and plunged the nation again and again into senseless wars abroad without any sense of accountability and compassion for the lives of American soldiers and the poor masses on the receiving end, manipulated national election results at will and even ignored the votes of American minorities. Further, the September 11 terrorist attacks have shattered the American sense of freedom and security, casting the very idea of freedom or security in a new light, forcing Americans to suffer from a sort of 'siege mentality'. Civil liberties of law-abiding citizens are deeply constricted or abridged since then, hopefully, in exchange for security against terror.

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Federal agents enjoy expanded investigatory powers in the wake of September 11 that allow them more than ever to track and verify e-mail, poke through financial transactions, peruse library and consumer histories, and overhear private telephone calls and conversations-- even sign up neighbors to spy; the state runs torture chambers in Abu Ghraib (Iraq) and in Guantanamo Bay (Cuba) in utter disrespect of international law and human dignity. This is not all. The Patriot Act allows the government to indefinitely detain immigrants--even permanent residence holders--without criminal charges. Profiling for Middle Easterners and Arabs and those who fit their description, and thus targeting them as potential criminals has become a major tool for U.S. airport officials and law enforcement agencies. Thus, innocent people are treated as if they were criminals. The question is, when and where do the Americans stop this senseless hysteria that completely guts their Constitution's freedoms? Do America and its vocal congressmen have any moral authority to craft any democracy and accountability act for any country on earth today? Not at all.

Given the unlimited power and influence that corporations have today on both national political and socio-economic affairs, any vestige of former true democracy that may have previously existed is no longer present or possible in American society. Representative democracy as experienced in America today is not only NOT representative of the collective will, best interests and highest aspirations of the vast majority of ordinary Americans, it works conveniently as a tool of powerful corporate capitalists to ensure that the average American has very little true freedom in determining the moral or ethical standard for the conduct of national affairs. Today, Americans live in a nation in which, due to the huge costs involved in political campaigning, only the very wealthy, most powerful and economically successful individuals can serve as their erstwhile "elected" representatives, since they alone are able to afford the millions of dollars it costs to run for public office in today's American economy. As a result, American political representatives no longer effectively represent the ordinary people (despite all the rhetoric that Americans are constantly exposed to), but rather the corporate interests whose lavishly funded lobbies and legal minions see to it that only agendas favorable to the corporations are supported in Congress. Besides, contrary to the promises of creating the "basis for decency and prosperity and democratic governments in the underdeveloped world" by successive American governments since the time of Woodrow Wilson, many Third World countries which came under the direct influence of America since World War II have suffered tremendous political instability and chaos, social and economic hardships, internecine conflicts and bloodshed never before seen in their long political history as nations. The Philippines, Haiti, and many Latin American nations are

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illustrative examples.

As Noam Chomsky has pointed out, the policies of an imperial power toward the nations within its sphere of influence reveal the character of its policies and culture:

"... In the Caribbean and in Central and South America, the United States has acted as an imperial power for more than a century, and during that time U.S. political and business elites have exerted a guiding influence in the establishment of political systems. The portrait that comes into focus through the lens of empire reveals that the elites who manage the U.S. foreign policy have an attachment to democracy except as a device to legitimate their political and economic domination. For this purpose the symbols of democracy are useful indeed, and this explains why elections in the nations south of the U.S. border have been sponsored by the United States both as instruments for managing client states and as a means to influence American public opinion. Such elections are carefully-staged media events designed to "demonstrate" the worthiness of U.S.-supported regimes." [Daniel Hellinger and Dennis R. Judd-Brooks, *The Democratic Facade*, Cole Publishing Co., 1991]

Even democratically elected governments in Latin America founded on principles of social justice, land reform, and national independence faced a reign of terror from the U.S. military because of their desire for independence from the control of international corporations and U.S. imperial ambitions. This lesson was brought home in unmistakable terms to the Dominican Republic in 1962 and 1965, to Guatemala in 1954 and to Chile in 1973, where popularly elected governments were brutally toppled and replaced by client regimes because, in these cases, popular democracy became inimical to the interests of the American ruling class and business elites. As Tim Weiner stated at length in the *New York Times* some six or so years ago,

"The United States---supported authoritarian regimes throughout Central and South America during and after the Cold War in defense of its economic and political interests ... In tiny Guatemala, the Central Intelligence Agency mounted a coup overthrowing the democratically elected government in 1954, and it backed subsequent right-wing governments against small leftist rebel groups for four decades. Roughly 200,000 civilians died...In Chile, a CIA-supported coup helped put Gen. August Pinochet in power from 1973 to 1990. In Peru, a fragile democratic government is still unraveling the agency's role in a decade of support for the now-deposed and disgraced president, Albert K. Fujimori, and his disreputable spy chief, Vladimiro L. Montesinos... The United States had to invade Panama in 1989 to topple its narco-dictator, Manuel A. Noriega, who, for almost 20 years,

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was a valued informant for American intelligence. And the struggle to mount an armed opposition against Nicaragua's leftists in the 1980s by any means necessary, including selling arms to Iran for cold cash, led to indictments against senior Reagan administration officials...Among those investigated back then was Otto J. Reich, a veteran of Latin American struggles. No charges were ever filed against Mr. Reich. He later became United States Ambassador to Venezuela and now serves as assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs by presidential appointment..." [Tim Weiner, "A Coup by Any Other Name", New York Times, April 14, 2002].

Thus the overriding concern always remained the national interest of America---ensuring American imperial ambitions of political and economic domination of the world. This political strategy is not a new development in the American foreign policy but a strategy that goes far back to the end of WWII. Since then, U.S. political strategy has always focused on designing ways and means of conquering the whole world and perpetuating its hegemonic control over the resources and peoples of this planet. The highest authorities in the U.S. government have expressed this ambition at every occasion when celebrating their two hundred years old history as a nation. One of the first vocal advocates of this hegemonic policy was George Kenan, Chief Planner in the U.S. State Department, 1948. In his Strategic Report forwarded to the U.S. government on Feb. 24, 1948, Kenan boldly and unambiguously stated the policy content and direction in the following words:

"We have about 50% of the world's wealth, but only 6.5% of its population.... In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in this coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without detriment to our national security. To do this, we will need to dispense with all sentimentality and day-dreaming; and our attention will have to be concentrated everywhere on our immediate national objectives. We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford today the luxury of altruism and world-benefaction...We should cease to talk about vague--and for the Far East--unrealistic objectives such as human rights, the raising of the living standards, and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are then hampered by idealistic slogans, the better." [As quoted by Titus Alexander, Unravelling Global Apartheid].

Exactly fifty years later, the March 28, 1998 issue of the New York Times Magazine contained an informative article on this age-long U.S political strategy. Its content is summed up by an eloquent image that takes up one page of the publication: a boxing

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glove in the colors of the American flag, accompanied by the following caption:

'What the world needs now--for globalization to work. America can't be afraid to act like the ALMIGHTY SUPERPOWER it is.'

The reason for the announced punches is elucidated in these terms:

"The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist. McDonald's cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the designer of the F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley's technologies is called the U.S. ARMY, AIR FORCE, NAVY and MARINE CORPS.'

The writer of the above words is not a provocative joker, but none other than Thomas Friedman, Madeline Albright's advisor. Such a political strategy has been supported and advanced by many think tanks in the U.S. for many decades. The Project for the New American Century or PNAC, for example, is a Washington-based think-tank created in 1997. Above all else, PNAC desires and demands one thing: The establishment of a global American empire to bend the will of all nations and to bring them under the umbrella of a new socio-economic PAX AMERICANA. The overt theme is unilateralism, but it is ultimately a story of domination. It calls for the United States to maintain its overwhelming military superiority and prevent new rivals from rising to challenge it on the world stage. It calls for dominion over friends and enemies alike. It says not that the United States must be more powerful, or most powerful, but that it must be absolutely powerful. [Ernesto C., *The USA Democracy Facade: Who Counts Your Vote?*, 2004]

There is no question of intervention in favor of democracy in the Gulf, for example, no more than--there has never been any question of hampering Mobutu of Zaire and Savimbi of Angola yesterday, and many others tomorrow. Peoples' rights are sacred in certain cases (Kosovo yesterday, perhaps Tibet today), and forgotten in others (Palestine, Somalia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Iran, etc.). Even the terrible genocide in Rwanda in 1994 gave rise to no serious investigations into the responsibility of diplomats and French soldiers based in Rwanda who had supported the governments that were openly advocating it.

Certainly, the despicable behavior of certain regimes--like those of Saddam Hussein or Slobodan Milosevic--makes the task easier by offering pretexts that are easy to exploit. But the complete silence that meets other cases deprives the discourse of democracy and peoples' rights of any measure of credibility. It would be impossible to do a greater disservice to the fundamental requirements of the fight for democracy and human

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respect, without which no progress is possible.

The avowed goal of the U.S. strategy is not to tolerate the existence of any powers capable of resisting Washington's orders, and therefore to seek to dismantle all those countries deemed 'too big', as well as to create the largest possible number of pawn states---easy prey for the establishment of American bases guaranteeing their 'protection.' Only one state has the right to be 'BIG,' to be 'SUPERPOWER'...the USA.

While watching some of the international news channels, U.S. Republican Senators seemed to suggest that the abuse of Iraqi prisoners was justifiable because of that fiendish beheading of an American citizen by an Iraqi militant group. This is an eye-opener to all those who supported the invasion of Iraq. The only credible reason that can still be advanced was that regime change was necessary so that the Iraqis could enjoy their freedom. That is no longer the case. It is official; the occupiers are not better than the old regime.

The Americans should also understand that the Iraqi groups that carry out these atrocities have never claimed to be the good guys; they have not forced government changes because of human rights and have not invaded another country in a quest to give freedom to its inhabitants. We have always known that these are bad guys; yes, vitriolic terrorists. Suggestions that America had regained the moral high ground because of the murder carried out by the Iraqis are preposterous, to say the least.

Whether it is the beheading of an American or the despicable treatment of Iraqi prisoners, it is all crime.

As they say, fate is a great joker; it always laughs last. United States (U.S) President George Bush stood before the American people and the world on July 12, 2003 and announced that with the fall of Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, the dictator's "torture chambers will no longer cause grief to Iraqis". Today, sadly, we know that Saddam's torture chambers have been replaced by U.S. and British torture chambers in Iraq.

Just to recap: U.S. defense secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, told Congressional Committee hearing on May 7,2004 that the U.S. public has not yet seen the worst pictures of torture of Iraqis by American soldiers in Iraq.

He described the unseen pictures as "sadistic, cruel and inhuman" adding that "words cannot

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describe it; the pictures give a vivid realization of what actually took place."

A CNN Pentagon correspondent said there are even video pictures of U.S. soldiers forcing Iraqi prisoners to masturbate before them. Reports by the International Committee of the Red Cross even talked of an American soldier raping an Iraqi prisoner. In some instances, the reports said, torture led to death.

I am shocked, but certainly not surprised by this. What do you expect from a pig but a grunt? What do you expect from a colonial authority but dehumanization, torture and oppression? Bush promised to "build democracy in Iraq" adding that Iraq would then become the springboard for democratic movements throughout the Middle East.

With the pictures of torture in Iraqi prisons the people of Iraq and the Middle East are certainly better off without democracy--at least not the one from Bush. Will it be any different under Obama? I personally don't think so. But it is better to wait and see for some time to come. Yes, only time will tell.

America's involvement in other countries has always been troubling. The U.S. is a democracy that in many cases has promoted and propped some of the most brutal and corrupt dictatorships in other countries---the Shah of Iran, the Saudi Royal Family, President Mubarrak of Egypt, Saddam Hussein of Iraq, Baby Doc Duvalier of Haiti and Marshal Mobutu Setse Seko of former Zaire being the eminent examples. The U.S. has also helped create, finance and arm some of the worst terrorist groups in this world, the Mujahedin in Afghanistan (now ferociously resisting the same Americans who trained and armed them a few decades ago), the Contras in Nicaragua, and UNITA in Angola being in the top of the list.

However, Bush's America was taking this game too far. Other administrations in the U.S. have run dictatorships by proxy.

Bush in his time was running his own in Iraq directly, complete with an appointed colonial governor in the name of the U.S. Iraq administrator.

The Bush administration run its own prisons in Iraq complete with torture chambers.

The U.S. military have powers to arrest, detain and interrogate prisoners. U.S. prisoners in Iraq rot in jail without appearing in court to be formally charged.

There was a reported instance where a 19-year-old American soldier pulled out his gun and shot

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an Iraqi whose only crime was to ask why they were searching him up to his underwear.

In this case, the person who was killed was a member of the U.S.-appointed governing council for some city in Iraq, a clear case of impunity.

Bush's America was even more troubling because it has had created a legal regime that threatened civilized jurisprudence like categorizing some prisoners as "illegal combatants." These "illegal combatants" in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, are detained without trial for years on end and without access to attorneys.

Although these people are primarily civilians from different countries across the globe suspected of being terrorists, the U.S. says it will try them before a military court.

The choice of detaining people without trial and of categorizing them as "illegal combatants" carries a strong undercurrent. Why? Because U.S. citizens arrested under such circumstances like John Walker Lindh were not detained in Guantanamo Bay, would not be tried by military courts, have had access to an attorney, etc.

What is the United States telling the world? That its citizens are more human than other human beings and therefore deserve to be treated under more civilized legal regimes?

If you have read Prof. Mahmoud Mamdani's book, Citizen and Subject, Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism, then you get to see the rolling American imperial and colonial project in Guantanamo Bay. Mamdani's thesis is that late colonialism was defined by the creation of a bifurcated state with two legal regimes: one civil and governing the colonizing race who were considered "civilized;" the other customary, governing the natives considered barbaric.

Those governed under the civil law enjoyed civil rights; the right to an attorney, right of appeal, etc. while those governed under customary law faced administratively driven justice-- the chief who administered the customary law was the judge, the prosecutor and the person who executed the sentence in Mamdani's words, customary law was a "decentralized despotism."

That is the system of justice, President Bush introduced first in Guantanamo Bay, and now in Iraq--i.e. colonial justice.

As William Blum in his book, *Rogue State*, explains:

"Most Americans find it difficult in the extreme to accept the proposition that terrorists' act against the United States can be viewed as revenge for Washington's policies abroad. They

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believe that the U.S. is targeted because of its freedom, its democracy, and its wealth. The Bush administration, like its predecessors following other terrorist acts, has pushed this as the official line ever since the attacks." But how misguided the American public is can easily be deduced from the above innocent and shallow contention. American government officials know better about their sinister policy of " global apartheid," as Alexander Titus dubs it Or, as Howard Zinn sarcastically puts it:

"In the United States today, the Declaration of Independence hangs on schoolroom walls, but foreign policy follows Machiavelli." Former president Jimmy Carter, some years after he left the White House, was unambiguous in his agreement with this:

"We sent Marines into Lebanon and you only have to go to Lebanon, to Syria or to Jordan to witness first-hand the intense hatred among many people for the United states because we bombed and shelled and unmercifully killed totally innocent villagers--women and children and farmers and housewives__ in those villages around Beirut--- As a result of that ---we became kind of a Satan in the minds of those who are deeply resentful..."

Not only Lebanon, Syria or Jordan but countless nations such as Viet Nam, Cuba, Nicaragua, Chile, Mexico, El Salvador, Haiti, Colombia, Honduras, Laos, Afghanistan, Korea, Cambodia, Somalia, Grenada, Panama, Iraq, etc. faced the same wrath of American power. This is what the American current regime is also threatening the peaceful people and government of the Republic of Iran today. Let us, for instance, cite what befell Laos in the 1970s. From 1964 through 1973, the United States flew 580, 000 bombing runs over Laos--one every p minutes for 10 years. The United States dropped 80 million cluster bomb lets on Laos. Ten percent to 30% did not explode, leaving 8 million to 24 million scattered across the country; 15 of Laos's 18 provinces are contaminated with UXO. Three decades after the bombing stopped, two or three Laotians are killed every month and another six or seven are maimed by unexploded ordnance, called UXO, left over from the war. The presence of unexploded cluster bomb lets and other ordnance limits economic development in Laos, one of the poorest countries in Asia. Savannakhet (1 of 18 provinces) is the most heavily bombed province in the one of the most bombed countries in the history of warfare. "Certainly, on a per capita basis, Laos remains the most heavily bombed nation in the history of warfare," says Martin Stuart-Fox, a historian at Queensland University in Australia and author of " A History of Laos. Cluster bombs, known as "bombies," account for about half the unexploded ordnance on the ground and most of the casualties. Since the bombing ended in 1973, 5,700 Laotians have been killed and 5,600 have been injured by UXO. Through the end of August, 14 of the 30 Laotians reported killed this year and 33 of the 58 injured by UXO have been children. The situation in Laos is worse than in Iraq, where U.S. forces used far fewer cluster bombs with much lower dud rates than the ones used in the Vietnam

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[war](#). [USA Today]

And what are American soldiers doing in Iraq today? Bringing peace, democracy and prosperity to the Iraqi people, or dehumanization, colonization, mass destruction and havoc upon millions and millions of innocent civilians day in, day out, since they invaded Iraq?

The U.S. public should know that the rest of the world does not hate Americans and America (as people from the whole world ardently yearn to immigrate to the USA, the land of great opportunities) but the arrogant and satanic policies of successive U.S. governments. As correctly observed by a Vietnam veteran, Robert Bowman,

"We are not hated because we practice democracy, value freedom, or uphold human rights. We are hated because our government denies these things to people in Third World countries whose resources are coveted by our multi-national corporations. That hatred we have sown has come back to haunt us in the form of terrorism and in the future, nuclear terrorism" (Robert Bowman, Vietnam Veteran, presently bishop of the United Catholic Church in Melbourne Beach, FL., from The National Catholic Reporter, October 2, 1998)

The U.S. public has a great challenge, but also a duty and opportunity because America is a democracy.

Whatever its flaws, American democracy gives U.S. citizens power to challenge crimes against humanity committed by its armed forces abroad, ostensibly on behalf of "the American people."

Humiliating people, after conquering their state and occupying their territory, can only build resentment against Americans as a people. Yet the American people are as appalled by the behavior of their armed forces as the victims of these acts.

Equally so, when elections in a democratic country are openly rigged in Florida, and the government that comes to power through such fraud, arrests prisoners without trial in military detention centers, invades other countries in complete disregard to international law, establishes a naked colonial administration over another sovereign country, has its military torturing and killing prisoners in the conquered country, then such a government becomes a shining example of dictatorships everywhere and, surely, not democracy.

President Robert Mugabe must be smiling along with his guest the notorious dictator and former military ruler of Ethiopia, Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, in Zimbabwe and will now grab more White-owned farms (if any are still remaining) and beat his opponents more brutally than ever

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before into submission. Our own immediate neighbor, President Issaias Afewerki, will now increase the number of underground prisons or dungeons, and secret houses across the Eritrean lowlands and add hyenas and wolves to crocodiles and snakes in his great arsenal of torture instruments in the Eritrean deserts.

Whenever we talk of democracy, we love to quote America as an example. What a misguided notion, what an ignoble folly!

The challenge-- and opportunity-- for the American people is to redeem or recapture the image of their country by asking their governments to account, not only preach about democracy and accountability to the rest of the world but to practice them at home.

Bush and his hawks should have been reined in a long time ago for the good of America and for the good of humanity by the American people. But that never happened while he was in office nor after he was out. Bush never stood for and believed in democracy and he never cared for peace and democracy at home and abroad but for American hegemonic control of the whole world. His arrogant position was eloquently addressed to the world by himself in 1992 when he stated thus:

"A world once divided into two armed camps now recognizes one sole and pre-eminent power, the United States of America. And they regard this with no dread. For the world trusts us with power and the world is right. They trust us to be fair, and restrained. They trust us to be on the side of decency. They trust us to do what's right."

Is this what the Americans want to portray to the rest of humanity and in turn expect love and admiration from the vanquished peoples of the earth? Is this the sort of government/democracy and accountability many Third World nationals in the Diaspora (such as Al Mariam or Alemayehu Gebre Mariam and co or the Ginbot Movement of Dr. Birhanu Nega, etc.) or the Donald Paines tirelessly fret to implant or impose on Ethiopia and other countries in the Third World? What an illusion!

Lastly, many great empires have crumbled in human history because of their power-mongering adventures and sheer arrogance. John Perkins, in his recent book *CONFESSIONS OF AN ECONOMIC HIT MAN*, succinctly puts: *"...History tells us that unless we modify this story, it is guaranteed to end tragically. Empires never last. Every one of them has failed terribly. They destroy many cultures as they race toward greater domination, and then they themselves fall. No country or combination of countries can thrive in the long term by exploiting others."* [John Perkins, 2005, p. xiii]. As the old adage goes, "pride always precedes failure". I wish the Americans could learn some lessons from world history of the past and rectify their misguided

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foreign policies in time for their own good and for the greater good of the whole world. "Time and tide wait for no one", as they say.

