

Book Review

## **State Power and Democracy: Before and After The Presidency Of George W. Bush,**

by Andrew Kolin. New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. \$85.00 U.S., paper. ISBN: 978-0-230-10935-3. 262 Pages.

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Did America under George W. Bush become a police state? Andrew Kolin's book traces the centralization of control in the presidency at the expense of Congress and American democracy. Kolin argues the extreme security measures taken during the Bush administration are not unique in American history, but part of a longer trend to limit democratic institutions and curtail individual rights and freedoms. According to Kolin, under the Bush presidency America became a police state. The administration used measures to quell opposition through the USA PATRIOT Act, and tortured enemy combatants in military prisons. While Kolin provides a compelling account of the immoral and—under American law—illegal policies before and during the presidency of George W. Bush, the book makes a less persuasive argument that this led to the elimination of domestic American democracy.

The first chapters provide a brief historical account of the consolidation of political power in the executive branch. Starting in the 19th and early 20th century, the American government used the police to investigate political opponents, such as black rights groups, communists, and women's rights advocates. With ascendancy of the United States after World War II, this increased in scope with the formation of the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The external threat of the Cold War and the conflict in Vietnam led to the American executive using the CIA and FBI to infringe on the legal rights of American citizens. Though many facets of the police state started with Nixon in order to repress protest, it has culminated with George W. Bush's response to the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001.

The strongest part of the book is the evidence that the American executive is allowed free rein to conduct foreign policy. Other domestic institutions and social forces such as Congress, the media and the public

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ignore or are indifferent to the extreme measures taken by American presidents dating back to Richard Nixon. Among the most alarming recent abuses were the use of torture in Guantanamo Bay and the Iraqi Abu Ghraib prison, and the policy of extraordinary rendition to kidnap foreign nationals. All the while, the presidency insulated itself from criminal liability and Congressional oversight. Kolin goes into great detail to outline the lack of accountability for the military and the CIA when it carries out presidential orders, and the need for substantial changes in the way America conducts its foreign policy. Moreover, Kolin outlines how American institutions failed to limit the actions of the Bush administration in fighting the war on terror, a problem that continues under President Obama.

However, Kolin's argument that the Bush administration has instituted a police state in America is less persuasive. A significant issue is that several key concepts are left unclear throughout the book, such as 'police state,' 'democracy' and 'mass democracy'. This is not necessarily problematic—terms and concepts can vary depending on time and location—but there needs more discussion why concepts shift throughout the book. Since the definitions are vague, it often obscures their meaning. For example, there is no discussion of why mass democracy movements such as the Black Panthers and the Socialist Party are favourable to American democracy, while others such as the religious right and Tea Party are not, since they are both mass movements albeit with different agendas. Also, there is little comparative historical analysis of police states. If the United States has developed into a police state under George W. Bush, then some comparison between it and other obvious police states such as Maoist China, Stalinist Russia, and North Korea under Kim Il-sung would have strengthened the book's analysis and provided a more explicit conceptual framework.

More substantively, the Bush administration's elimination of American internal democracy and subversion of the constitution is less convincing when examining contemporary resistance movements in the United States. Kolin argues the Bush administration took radical measures to eliminate formal democracy in reaction to the September 11th terrorist attacks through the USA PATRIOT Act for warrantless wiretaps, and imprisoned and deported over 6000 Muslim non-citizens. However many Muslims detained after 9/11 returned to the United States and sued the Bush administration for compensation. Even some of the more controversial pieces of legislation –such as the warrantless wiretaps –have been struck down by the courts showing that formal democracy

may not have been entirely subverted. Such legal recourse does not exist in Guantanamo Bay or in Abu Gharib. Moreover, despite the actions of the Bush presidency to limit dissent, there were mass social movements against the invasion of Iraq and throughout his presidency. The book shows the Bush administration did go too far restricting liberties in the war on terror against enemy combatants, but there was more domestic dissent than presented. Many social groups and formal institutions such as activist groups, the courts, Congress and the media combated the extremism of the Bush presidency. So unlike foreign policy, domestic political forces in the United States had the ability –albeit with varying degrees of success- to contest the extreme policies of the American president.

Kolin's book is an effective warning to readers that the media, Congress and the courts, and social forces must work to prevent the executive from abusing its power and control over America's foreign policy. Without the public forcing American institutions to keep watch, the president can commit illegal or immoral acts in the name of security. This book is recommended for those interested in a comprehensive, and thorough, overview of covert actions taken by the CIA and FBI before and during the Bush presidency, particularly in reaction to the September 11th terrorist attacks.