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The Government's Us? Not Last Time I Checked

Kevin Carson

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In a speech last month about proposed gun control legislation, President Obama decried opponents' attempts to encourage "suspicion about government." "The government's us," he responded. "These officials are elected by you. They are constrained as I am constrained, by a system that our founders put in place."

But if government were "us," why would we have ever needed a Bill of Rights or defense attorneys?

In order for the government to be "us," and for its elected officials to be our "representatives" in any meaningful sense, a number of prerequisites would have to be met.

For government to be us, the policies candidates campaigned on would have to be reliable indicators of the policies they would pursue once elected. Remember Obama the peace candidate in 2008, who ran against warrantless wiretapping and torture? Remember his promises of common sense reform of the worst excesses of marijuana laws and copyright law? The changeling who replaced Obama in early 2009 has gone full speed ahead on illegal wiretaps, refused to end extraordi-

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nary rendition, quietly turned Baghram AFB into a new Gitmo with even less oversight, pursued an ultra-hawkish line on “intellectual property” law, and actively pursues every means at his disposal to shut down medical marijuana dispensaries.

If government were us, the public positions taken by elected officials during major policy debates would bear at least some vague resemblance to the policies they were actually making behind the scenes. Remember Summer 2009, when Obama was publicly demanding healthcare reform legislation that included a public option, while quietly assuring the insurance industry that the public option was off the table? Remember when the Obama administration quietly capped the amount drug companies would be asked to reduce their enormous patent-bloated monopoly prices, and promised not to use the purchasing power of Medicare to negotiate lower prices?

If government were us, it wouldn't treat us as an enemy to be propagandized and manipulated into voting the way the government wants us to. The Obama administration's record of prosecuting and harassing whistle-blowers is even worse than the Bush administration's abysmal record. Bradley Manning has been tortured in solitary confinement for almost three years for allegedly leaking documents that revealed actions of the U.S. national security establishment 180 degree opposite what government officials have told the American public. Manning is accused of “giving aid and comfort to the enemy” — which makes a lot more sense if you remember that the “enemy” is us. Lest you dismiss that as hyperbole, recall former Clinton National Security Adviser Sandy Berger's statement in 2004: “We have too much at stake in Iraq to lose the American people.” The American people clearly are not “us” from the standpoint of the corporate state and its policy establishment.

If the government were us, the policy alternatives presented to the public for consideration and debate would represent the range of actual possibilities, rather than the options acceptable

to the right and left wings of the corporate-state ruling class. The only policy alternatives presented to the American people are those consistent with the continued dominance of the existing political and economic political framework. Anything outside this permissible range is dismissed as “radical,” “extremist,” and utterly naive and unrealistic. Even when the American people take a wide range of positions, the policies considered by the ruling elite itself generally range from about L to O. Probably 80% of issues never even appear as such because the two parties are in total agreement on them. The only stuff presented to the American people for debate are second-order issues that don't concern the fundamental system of power.

For government to be us, elected representatives and their publicly stated policy preferences — not an unelected “permanent government” of civil servants and corporate lobbyists that start coopting those elected officials the same day they enter office — would have to be the primary influence on what government does. How's that workin' out for ya?

For government to be us, it would have to actually matter what the law said — all those “constraints” Obama says he and other elected officials operate under. But if constitutional protections like the Fourth Amendment meant a damned thing, warrantless wiretapping would never have been an issue in the first place. And by his very threat to veto the proposed CISPA cyber-security bill, Obama made it clear it doesn't really matter what the law is. The FBI has long privately assured Internet Service Providers that they're protected from prosecution if they cooperate with “the authorities” in providing confidential customer information.

Next time Obama or anyone else of his ilk says “government is us,” give them a one-fingered salute.