

America is Going Fascist

The signs are all there for anyone to see, and time is getting short for action

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Reading Naomi Wolf's *The End of America: Letter of Warning to a Young Patriot* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2007), I realized the hour is later than I thought.

Many of us have watched the Bush regime's actions with a growing feeling of horror intertwined with a sense that somehow we've seen all of this before, but we aren't sure where. We're confused because what we're seeing conflicts with unexamined and deeply held assumptions we have about American freedom. Wolf's short but meticulously documented book shows that what is happening in America has indeed happened many times before, not in the United States, but rather in places like Chile, Italy, Russia, and Germany. In each case, people couldn't understand why they didn't recognize where they were heading before they passed the point of no return.

It's shifting fast

Wolf argues that the United States is undergoing a "fascist shift" from an authoritarian but still relatively open society to a totalitarian society. The techniques for forcing this shift have evolved over the last century and are now studied by aspiring tyrants the world over. These methods are even part of the formal curriculum in places like the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, previously known as the School of the Americas, in Fort Benning, Georgia, where thousands of Latin Americans have been trained by the United States government in the most savage techniques of insurgency and counterinsurgency. Fascists use ten basic strategies to shut down open societies. They invoke an external and internal threat in order to convince the population to grant their rulers extraordinary powers. They establish secret prisons that practice torture, prisons that are initially few in number and only incarcerate social pariahs, but that quickly multiply and soon imprison "opposition leaders, outspoken clergy, union leaders, well-known performers, publishers, and journalists." They develop a paramilitary force that operates without legal restraint. They set up a system of intense domestic surveillance that gathers information for the purposes of intimidating and blackmailing citizens. They infiltrate, monitor, and disorganize citizens' groups. They arbitrarily detain and release citizens, especially at borders. They target key individuals like civil servants, academics, and artists in order to ensure their complicity or silence. They take control of the press. They publicly equate dissent with treason. Finally, they suspend the rule of law. All of these strategies are being employed in America today.

Consider the evidence

The Bush administration and its supporters have consistently portrayed the security threat posed by international terrorists as a threat to the very survival of Western civilization in

order to justify permanent war and to keep the American public in a state of panic and paranoia.

The prisons at Guantanamo and God-knows how many CIA “Black Sites” torture their inmates, even though human rights organizations have demonstrated that the majority of at least Guantanamo’s inmates are innocent victims of mass arrests. The inmates are designated as “enemy combatants” who have no rights under international or American law. And there is nothing stopping American presidents from filling these prisons with American citizens. In an April 24 2007 article for the Huffington Post, Wolf writes that thanks to the Military Commissions Act of 2006, “the president has the power to call any US citizen an ‘enemy combatant’. He has the power to define what ‘enemy combatant’ means. The president can also delegate to anyone he chooses in the executive branch the right to define ‘enemy combatant’ any way he or she wants and then seize Americans accordingly. Even if you or I are American citizens, even if we turn out to be completely innocent of what he has accused us of doing, he has the power to have us seized as we are changing planes at Newark tomorrow, or have us taken with a knock on the door; ship you or me to a navy brig; and keep you or me in isolation, possibly for months, while awaiting trial.” She points out that while currently Americans in such situations will be spared any torture except psychosis-inducing isolation and can look forward to eventual trials, these rights typically evaporate in the final stages of a fascist shift.

They’re called “mercenaries”

Military contractors are the regime’s paramilitary force. Blackwater’s mercenaries, many of whom were trained by Latin America’s most horrific police states, have operated in Iraq outside of Iraqi, American, and military law, and have murdered uncounted innocent Iraqis with impunity. Domestically, Blackwater was contracted to provide hundreds of armed security guards in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, and there’s evidence that they fired on civilians. Blackwater’s business plan calls for their use in future disasters and emergencies throughout the United States, and it’s supported by some of the biggest powerbrokers in America.

American intelligence agencies are now bypassing court orders to wiretap citizens’ telephones, spy on their e-mails, and monitor their financial transactions, and the USA Patriot Act forces corporations, booksellers, librarians, and doctors to turn over previously confidential information about Americans to the state.

Thousands of human rights, environmental, anti-war, and other citizens’ groups have been infiltrated by government agents, many of whom have clearly acted as agent provocateurs in order to undermine the groups’ solidarity and to legitimize police actions against them.

Political opponents listed

America’s Transportation Security Administration maintains a terrorist watch list of tens of thousands of Americans who are now subjected to security searches and arbitrary detention at airports. The list includes people like Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy and respected constitutional scholar Walter F Murphy.

US Attorneys, CIA agents, military lawyers, and other civil servants who’ve disagreed with the Bush administration have been threatened and fired. David Horowitz and his colleagues have mounted a well-funded nation-wide intimidation campaign that has university students

spying on their professors and that has successfully coerced regents at State Universities to discipline or fire left-leaning professors like Ward Churchill. The regime's supporters have organized campaigns to damage the careers of artists like the Dixie Chicks for criticism of the president and his policies.

The administration has Fox News in its pocket, it has paid journalists for positive coverage, it has disseminated misinformation through the media, and it's ferociously attacking critical journalists. Arrests of US journalists are at an all-time high. The Bush administration's outing of CIA operative Valerie Plame was done in retaliation against her husband, Joseph Wilson, whose New York Times op-ed piece exposed lies that the Bush administration used to lead the nation to war. Worse than this, independent journalists appear to be marked for death by American forces in Iraq. In her Huffington Post article, Wolf writes, "The Committee to Protect Journalists has documented multiple accounts of the US military in Iraq firing upon or threatening to fire upon unembedded (meaning independent) reporters and camera operators from organisations ranging from al-Jazeera to the BBC. . . . In some cases reporters have been wounded or killed, including ITN's Terry Lloyd in 2003. Both CBS and the Associated Press in Iraq had staff members seized by the US military and taken to violent prisons; the news organisations were unable to see the evidence against their staffers." The goal of these tactics, as she writes in *The End of America*, is to create "a new reality in which the truth can no longer be ascertained and no longer counts."

Dissent = treason

In recent years, prominent Republicans like Ann Coulter, Melanie Morgan, and William Kristol have accused liberal journalists of treason and espionage for publishing leaked material damaging to the administration, and in February 2007, Republican Congressman Don Young said "Congressmen who wilfully take actions during wartime that damage morale and undermine the military are saboteurs, and should be hanged." This would be amusing, were it not for the Bush administration's revival of the draconian 1917 Espionage Act after half a century's slumber.

And finally, the Bush administration shows contempt for the law. In *The End of America*, Wolf writes that Bush has used more signing statements than any previous president, and by doing so has relegated "Congress to an advisory role. This abuse lets the President choose what laws he wishes to enforce or not, overruling Congress and the people. So Americans are living under laws their representatives never passed. Signing statements put the president above the law." He has also gutted the Posse Comitatus Act, which was created to prevent the president from maintaining a standing army for use against American citizens. Wolf writes that the 2007 Defence Authorization Bill lets the president "expand his power to declare martial law and take charge of the National Guard troops without the permission of the governor when 'public order' has been lost; he can send these troops out into our streets at his direction—overriding local law enforcement authorities—during a national disaster, epidemic, serious public health emergency, terrorist attack, or 'other condition.'" On its own, this is an incredible expansion of presidential power, but when combined with the use of military contractors like Blackwater it gives the president almost dictatorial authority.

Wolf shows that fascist shifts don't happen overnight, but rather over a course of years during which the fascists' plans unfold at an accelerating pace. Germany in 1933 was further along this path than it was in 1931, and Germany in 1935 was farther along than it was in 1933. Similarly, America in 2007 is farther along the path than it was in 2005, or will

be in 2009, provided that a massive pro-democracy movement, complete with impeachment proceedings, doesn't reverse the shift while there's still time. A simple Democratic victory in the 2008 presidential election won't do the job unless the institutional and legal environment created by the Bush administration is thoroughly dismantled. Regardless of whether the next president is a Republican or a Democrat, he or she will inherit a legacy of centralized power that a democracy simply can't tolerate.

Left behind

Unfortunately, during the shift opposition politicians and activists still tend to perceive the world through a democratic frame of reference, and this prevents them from seeing that their opponents are no longer operating within this frame. As the opposition is tying its boxing gloves, the fascists are breaking out the machetes.

Wolf's work has its problems. She doesn't acknowledge that Black and Indigenous Americans have long lived under quasi-fascist rule, she doesn't examine the role that previous administrations have played in setting the stage for the Bush regime, and she doesn't acknowledge the roles played by corporatism, widespread social dislocation and the radical Christian right in the rise of a fascist American zeitgeist. Despite this, *The End of America* needs to be read by as many people as possible.

Wolf writes about America, but Canadians don't have any cause for comfort. Canadian and American military forces are already deeply enmeshed. Thanks to NAFTA, we're tied at the hip to the American economy, while the Security and Prosperity Partnership is integrating our countries' security forces and harmonizing our no-fly lists. The Harper government is eager to kowtow to the Americans, even to the point of refusing to advocate for Canadian citizens on American death rows. The powerful think tanks and lobbying groups that influence our provincial and federal governments, such as the Fraser Institute and the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, either can't see the shift for what it is or they don't care. More than all of this, however, is the simple reality that once the shift is complete, the American government will act even more irrationally and belligerently than before. Canada has resources like oil and water the United States is going to need, and the Canadian border is less defensible than the French border was in 1940.

Americans and Canadians have to fight back more fiercely than ever before, to organize and lobby and fill the streets with mass protests, to raise awareness and forge alliances with anyone opposed to totalitarianism regardless of whether they're liberals, socialists, or conservatives. We have to take all the steps that have rescued dying democracies in the past, and to take them immediately, in the desperate hope that it isn't already too late.

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