

# An Alternative to the “Keeping Us Safe” Principle

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Government officials and political conservatives defend the use of spying and authoritarian actions and laws as “keeping us safe from terrorists.” This mantra is reflexively exercised by authoritarian types to defend every government action from use of drones to U.S. presidential assassinations, to engage in “all means necessary” to get Edward Snowden and Bradley Manning, and now also to defend not only past, but continued NSA domestic spying. Even progressives reflexively pick up this mantra and run with it when they deny that U.S. government actions “keep us safe” from “those who “threaten us.” Not only are those two just-stated claims are mirror images of one another, but they simultaneously provide direct support to U.S. terrorist actions abroad and authoritarian actions at home. Lost in the conversation is the question of why we need to be “kept safe” from “terrorists” to begin with, that allegedly justifies programs like NSA spying. So let’s ask that question here.

We begin with a review of the evidence demonstrating the factors that fuel terrorism’s fire. Study after study has shown that, whether it is Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Israel, Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq, Chechnya, Bosnia, Somalia, or various other African countries, it is the oppression and suppression of a people by a government, its own or another, through the means of denying them their basic human rights, or by denying them the right to governance, that leads to terrorism. Additionally, key factors leading to terrorism have been seen to be poverty and economic and political inequality. (There are many good sources for this analysis, but for a good one, see Cornelia Beyer, “Ways Forward in Global Counterterrorism,” *Journal of International Affairs*, 2/27/12). Beyer says:

“The evidence suggests that repressive counterterrorism measures may not be the optimal way to fight terrorism. Government crackdowns and harsh repressive measures funded by foreign aid can create a societal backlash and lead to more support for terrorist groups and thereby increase the supply of terrorist attacks” (italicized in the original). (For more evidence on the direct causal link between foreign or domestic oppression and terrorism, see Osama bin Laden’s fatwa, Chalmers Johnson’s book *Blowback*, Jeremy Scahill’s *Dirty Wars*, or Trevor Anderson’s *The Terror Factory*, among many others.)

If these analyses are correct, then there we need to trace the causes of terrorism not “over there,” but “right here” in the U.S. While our military interference in other nations is traceable back to at least World War I, there is no question that it escalated sharply after 9/11. The terrorist philosophy that has gripped our country’s military aggressions, allegedly in response to 9/11, is synopsised in the Project for a New American Century’s philosophy that still reigns supreme in the halls of government; for example, that the U.S. should seek to extend its power in the world by maintaining the preeminence of U.S. military forces, and that the U.S. engage in “preventive strikes” against any nation that would “potentially” threaten U.S. dominance in any region of the world.

This results in escalating the operating status government to a “state of exception,” allowing extraordinary governmental actions to result from distinctively political crises. States of exception are those in which a government in fact suspends the rule of law for itself, while attempting to maintain some semblance of legal order, for the purpose of consolidating its power and control (see Giorgio Agamben, *States of Exception*, Chapter Two). This happens both domestically and internationally, as we see going on with the Obama administration right now.

Reaction to this state of affairs from the left has so far been largely symptomatic, taking the form of reaction to specific issues and events, such as the NSA spying controversy, etc. Climate change protests here; NSA spying protests there; and never the two shall meet under a common banner of being “for” something. More inclusive, principled responses to the entire U.S. government “state of exception” are usually done under a tacit liberal acceptance of the conservative principle of “keeping us [U.S. citizens; no one else] safe” Conservatives argue that actions such as the NSA spying keep us safe; liberals argue that either it doesn’t, or that it does so at the cost of civil liberties and human rights. When progressives feel the need to respond to the “keeping us safe from terrorists” justification, they are automatically on the defensive.

However, if we switched the framing of both intra-liberal and national discourse from “defense against terrorists,” used by authoritarians to justify government draconian actions such as warrantless spying, and if we stop simply reacting to single events as they come at us, and move instead to a unifying principle that speaks to, for example, “the people’s government,” we stand a better chance not only of unifying progressive groups and individuals, but of stopping the symptomatic reactions to individual government actions. We also remove the power from authoritarian defenses of government actions when we ask “does this government work for the good of the people?”

Empirical studies (I will quote one below) conclude that there are distinct characteristics of a “people’s government.” They include a cohesive character to their society—not nationalism, but a sense of a common good. They have a social structure in which group grievances are not only heard, but addressed. There is a respect for human rights. Most of all for our purposes here, a “people’s government” does not have a dominance principle (imperialism) at the heart of its relations with other nations. Obviously, no nation is a stellar example of this, but there are nations that have these as conscious priorities, two of which we will name below. Other studies, such as those used by Gar Alperovitz, in his book *What Then Must We Do?: Straight Talk about the Next American Revolution*, also illuminate the traits of the shift in social understanding that is already underway in America. Alperovitz calls it “the pre-history of a great transformation.” This essay is attempting to make that transformation conscious, and thus to make it more planned, intentional, and perhaps even to hasten its development.

Advocating for “the people’s government” and what that implies has several strengths that are currently lacking in progressive pushback against authoritarianism: first, such a focus keeps us from capitulating to the narrow and limited debate over whether U.S. imperialism and domestic authoritarian actions “keeps us safe from terrorists.” Second, the “people’s government” focus demands rather that we address the larger issue: what is the proper function of government, and whether our government right now, by its collective actions and policies is responsible for the terrorism that we face by abandoning its function as accountable to the people it serves. Third, the principle of the “people’s government” directly points out that our government is currently run by a few parties with moneyed-

backing, for their own self-interested purposes: profit, power, and military dominance.

The greatest strength and advantage of all to “the people’s government” is that it is directly focused on democratizing—i.e. decentralizing—our political and economic institutions, moving them to local control. Examples of this movement are already underway, with the rise of co-ops, worker-owned businesses, land trusts, and more. Such decentralization changes our institutional and social structures from favoring the individual interests of its owners and CEO’s, to favoring every person in the organization. This structurally eclipses the unethical and community-devastating self-interest/individualist notion that so defines our contemporary corporate structure, and reduces it to a “one person, one vote only” communal emphasis.

This idea of having a consciously embraced, unifying principle is what conservatives have been doing since the time of Reagan, who famously provided them with a unifying principle for their economic strategies: “Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.” But note that with a progressive principle regarding “the people’s government” in tow, we can not only unify disparate causes, but more importantly, we can turn the conservative mantra against them, perhaps even by quoting Reagan in regard to things like NSA spying, and thereby point out to authoritarian conservatives the contradictory nature of their philosophy of government, to wit: reduce and shrink it, except when it comes to authoritarian measures used against its own people.

The point here is that there is a real need for offering people an alternative principle around which people might organize, and not to respond in an ad hoc fashion for each draconian action and event that our government takes, domestically or abroad. Furthermore, since the notion of “human rights,” as good as it is, has been completely co-opted by capitalism, right-wing libertarianism, and individualists to the point that it has lost its meaning as a stand-in for the government’s obligation toward others, a progressive principle of “the people’s government” is primed to both include human rights, and to offer a serious alternative to current U.S. government authoritarianism and home and imperialism abroad.

We can now end where we began: what is the most effective progressive response to the focus on terrorism and to the authoritarian defense of a security-state government on the basis of the principle that such a government philosophy “keeps us safe”? We can reply that the notion of “a people’s government” has direct statistical correlation with that nation’s experience of and/or preoccupation with terrorism. For example, the nations in which “terrorism” is at its lowest level are those that are not security states/states of exception, and where there are no colonizing or imperialist foreign policy concerns. On this basis, the lowest numbers of terrorist experiences include Canada (ranked 116 in the world) and Australia (ranked at 120). Terrorism is no problem for governments which don’t have a dominance principle at the heart of its actions. The result is that their experiences of terrorism are extremely low (see the Global Terrorism Index, drawn up by the Institute for Economics and Peace). But when the “people’s government” is lacking, and where there is rogue violations of international accords, incidents of terrorism rise. For example, it has been widely concluded through various studies that the U.S. military interventions into Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan were directly related to the rise of terrorist activities and plans, while the question of whether or not they made the US homeland safer was impossible to prove (see “Global terror attacks ‘level out’: Study,” *The Nation*, December, 2012).

Unless there is a unifying and thematic, principled approach to our analyses of our

government and its drastic actions, then any hope for any movement in a more positive direction will have to recognize that change as something in the more distant future, while progressives remain locked into an ad hoc, case-by-case, issue-by-issue response to government actions, until unconscious processes develop a unified movement against government and corporate abuses: hardly a way to return the government and our social institutions to the people that is so urgently needed today.

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