

Asking Republicans for a Favor

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My dear Republicans friends, it's probably not my place to ask. I'm not one of you, but I'm not your enemy either. I'm not an apologist for the other party or a third party. I'm an advocate for replacing the two parties with three branches. We still teach our children about the three branches of our government, but I'm afraid most adults have forgotten what that was supposed to mean.

Like you, I'd like us to be able to unelect people as well as elect them in fair and verifiable elections. Like many of you, I oppose massive bailouts for Wall Street, bipartisan gerrymandering, corporate control of government, warrantless spying, ballot access restrictions, budget deficits, lying politicians, and the so-called mainstream media.

And, like you, I think President Barack Obama has way, way, way too much power. But, unlike you, I'm not principally to blame for that. Obama was handed his power by Bush, and Bush seized his power with hardly a peep of protest from most Republicans. In fact, I was often called "unpatriotic" by Republicans when I protested. Of course, the Democrats in Congress didn't resist Bush's power grab, but they're Democrats. They're wimps. They never resist anything.

Republicans know how to play offense and fight for their goals. The trouble is that stripping the presidency of unconstitutional, illegal, and dangerous powers is not a Republican goal any more than it is a Democratic one. Both parties are delighted to have nearly all governmental power in the hands of one person, they just want the next such person to be a member of their team. Republicans grouse about czars and department heads, but there is no organized Republican effort to roll back the imperial presidency's central power gains.

When Bush altered laws with signing statements, you guys didn't say a word, because Bush was a Republican. When Obama, after having condemned the practice as a candidate, began engaging in it himself, as well as maintaining Bush's signing statements, most Democrats didn't object for a minute. Some Democrats now even advocate a greater use of signing statements. We can't expect Democrats who wouldn't fight this abuse when it was new and Bush's to fight it now. But it seems to me that you Republicans might have the nerve (as well as the short-term partisan interest) to fight it now. After all, it was your guys who invented this abuse and handed it to Obama.

The same goes for making laws with executive orders, making laws with secret memos legalizing blatant crimes, launching and escalating wars without Congress (including strikes into Pakistan and other such actions that nobody calls wars), operating in secret, spending money in secret without Congress, making treaties and appointments without Congress, running the nation through czars not overseen by Congress, granting immunity to unnamed criminals, imprisoning people without charge or trial, spying without warrant, engaging in

rendition and torture, obstructing justice, and claiming immunity for crimes. All of these abusive, unconstitutional powers were dramatically expanded by Bush and Cheney, and you guys didn't protest. Now Obama is further expanding on the same abusive powers, and your objection seems to be that he's a socialist or a liberal or a Democrat or was born in Africa.

Forgive my directness, but what the hell difference does it make to future generations what you call him? The actions he is taking that will have by far the greatest impact on the world are those he is taking to increase and solidify imperial presidential powers. Do you imagine that Democrats who would not fight this trend when Bush was president will fight it now? They're afraid of their own shadows. They've left the fate of our system of government in your hands. But your hands seem to be too full of posters and guns and teabags. You've stuck the Constitution in your pocket or dropped it in the gutter.

Whatever your political persuasion, you are not going to love every future president. But the way you're allowing presidential power to accumulate suggests that you plan to worship every future president, even if none of them are Republicans. The Democrats and Independents are doing the same thing, but that's mostly because they're cowards. You guys have, time and again, proven your willingness to fight aggressively, even for the most ludicrous fantasies. I'm asking you to fight for a representative republic before it becomes a monarchy.

How do you do that? First you insist that Congress reclaim its place of power and use it to represent US, not money, not media, and not parties. This means that congressional committees must subpoena members and former members of the executive branch and enforce those subpoenas with the Capitol Police rather than begging the Justice Department to enforce them. Congress has to conduct oversight of the executive branch regardless of whether the executive belongs to the same party as the committee chairs. The bill in the House that would allow Congress to see what the Federal Reserve does with our money has a majority of cosponsors already, but Speaker Nancy Pelosi refuses to allow a vote. The warrantless spying programs are continuing, and Congress still doesn't know what they involve. Jay Bybee, who signed memos purporting to legalize aggressive war and torture, is now an appeals court judge. Congress must be willing to hold impeachment hearings on someone like Bybee regardless of what party he belongs to or whether he worked for the Justice Department.

Obama's Justice Department is fighting tooth and nail to cover up any wrong doing by Bush and Cheney. In the process, Obama is claiming the power to shut down whole categories of law suits just by saying the words "state secrets." Democrats can't see the danger in this because they imagine Obama is their friend. You think he's a socialistic grandmother killer, and yet I don't hear any complaints out of you about the incredible powers he's seizing. A full and open review by a select committee of Congress into presidential power abuses would not have to become a partisan lynching in one direction or the other. The presidents who've claimed the power to "render" kidnapping victims to nations that torture are named Clinton, Bush, and Obama.

But such a review would require a shift in attitude toward "the war on terror" as a catch-all excuse for stripping away any of our rights and imposing any new power desired by a president. The founders of this country knew that if presidents were going to evolve into royalty they would do it through wars. That's why the founders gave Congress the exclusive power to determine whether to engage in wars. The question is not whether or not you think

it is wise to be blowing our grandchildren's unearned pay on illegal and counterproductive killing sprees in the Middle East. The question is whether you think a vague announcement of eternal war against an emotion or a tactic should excuse the aggrandizement of the presidential office that James Madison warned us to avoid.

If you will not push back against this trend because presidents are sometimes Republicans and you like supporting wars, and if Democrats will not push back because presidents are sometimes Democrats and pushing back is scary, then who exactly is going to prevent the gradual loss of our republic? The peace movement won't even ask Congress to oppose wars any more. Now it asks the president, because he's a Democrat. We're lost without you. Please think about it. Don't do it for me. Do it for your children.

David Swanson is the author of the new book "Daybreak: Undoing the Imperial Presidency and Forming a More Perfect Union" by Seven Stories Press. You can order it and find out when tour will be in your town: <http://davidswanson.org/book>.

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