

The Trump-Bannon Government: Rule by Decree

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The Trump administration's order to halt the admission of refugees into the United States and bar entry to visitors and returning residents from seven countries—all majority-Muslim, all the targets of US military aggression or economic sanctions—underscores the unprecedented nature of the new government.

This is a government that will not be constrained by laws or the Constitution. Notwithstanding the fact that Trump is a minority president, his administration intends to utilize its control over the state to the maximum, operating on the principle that “possession is nine-tenths of the law.” It has already established a pattern of rule by decree.

Without any congressional vote, without any judicial process or finding of guilt for any crime, more than 100 people have been detained by federal customs and immigration agents and in some cases deported. The victims include the elderly, small children, wives returning to their husbands and people who have lived in the United States legally for many years, even decades. Hundreds more have been barred from boarding flights bound for the United States. And this is the toll just of the first weekend. The potential victims number in the many thousands, even millions.

A series of federal judges have issued court orders barring the deportations, ruling that there is a great likelihood that those challenging the Trump-ordered actions will be upheld once their cases are fully adjudicated. While some individuals have been released from detention, federal officials claim that the White House order is still in force and will be carried out.

The actions of the government in its first ten days make all the more sinister the central role being played by Trump's “chief strategist,” Stephen K. Bannon. The media has largely downplayed the fact that Trump named Bannon, former boss of Breitbart News, a sounding board for the white supremacists, anti-Semites and neo-Nazis of the alt-right, to a White House position coequal with Chief of Staff Reince Priebus.

It was unmistakably Bannon's voice sounding in Trump's inaugural address, with its open embrace of the “America First” slogan first popularized by Nazi sympathizer Charles Lindbergh in the early days of World War II. His speech followed the fascist model in appealing to genuine social grievances—the devastating decline in jobs and living standards in many industrial areas—while diverting popular anger away from the American capitalist elite and toward a politically useful scapegoat, in this case China, Mexico and other foreign countries.

Bannon, a former Goldman Sachs executive, Hollywood producer and ultra-right media mogul with no national security experience, is a fervent advocate of the racist and anti-

immigrant stance expressed by Trump in a series of statements and executive orders last week, from the order to build a wall on the US-Mexico border, to a crackdown on so-called “sanctuary cities,” to Friday’s ban on travelers and refugees.

Trump underlined Bannon’s central position in his White House with an executive order Saturday restructuring the National Security Council (NSC), the principal White House instrument for directing foreign and military policy. The order added “the Assistant to the President and Chief Strategist,” namely Bannon, to the list of top officials entitled to attend every meeting of the Principals Committee, a subcommittee of the NSC that plays a critical role in preparing decisions for the president, and includes the national security adviser, the secretary of state and the secretary of defense.

The same order removed from the Principals Committee the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the director of national intelligence.

There is one further action at the weekend that provides the most chilling insight into the mentality of Trump’s chief political adviser. The White House issued a statement commemorating International Holocaust Remembrance Day that lamented the “innocent people” murdered by the Nazis, but made no mention of Jews or anti-Semitism. A White House spokesman confirmed that the omission of Jews from the 117-word statement was deliberate and not a mistake.

This is a trope taken straight out of the playbook of the neo-Nazi alt-right: the Holocaust is emptied of its specific content, the attempted extermination of the Jewish population of Europe, and transformed into a generic tragedy in which many people were killed.

The Democratic Party will do nothing to oppose the march of the Trump administration towards authoritarian rule. The Democrats have devoted their efforts to playing down the extreme-right character of the new government while centering its criticisms on Trump’s conflict with US intelligence agencies.

After a transition period in which outgoing President Obama portrayed his successor as respectable and reasonable, and said nothing about his ties to ultra-right and neo-fascist elements, the first ten days of the Trump administration have seen Democrats such as Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer and former presidential candidate Bernie Sanders profess their desire to cooperate with the White House on its nationalistic economic policies.

It is significant that when challenged on what legal authority justified the ban on entry, Trump’s spokesmen cited the actions of the Obama administration, which designated the same seven countries—Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen—as those posing the greatest danger of terrorist attacks on the United States. This demonstrates that Trump is basing himself on the antidemocratic foundations laid by Bush and Obama and taking them to a qualitatively new level.

Trump also follows Bush and Obama in excluding from sanctions Saudi Arabia, home of nearly all of the 9/11 hijackers, but also a source of vast wealth for American big business from oil and gas as well as arms contracts. This confirms that the executive order has nothing to do with defending the American people from terrorism: its purpose is to intimidate working people, both immigrant and native-born, and pave the way for a frontal assault on the democratic rights of the American people as a whole.

The events of this weekend have demonstrated the hollowed-out character of American democracy. In its contempt for democratic and constitutional norms, the Trump administration gives naked expression to the oligarchic character of American society. His method of government is the form of rule appropriate to the social forces that his billionaire cabinet and the entire political establishment represent.

The decisive question is the independent intervention of the working class, fighting for its own class interests, including the defense of immigrant workers.

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