

The US is a Police State

Review of Andrew Kolin, State Power and Democracy

By [Prof. John McMurtry](#)

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Global Research Editor's Note

This article by Professor McMurtry first published by Global Research in November 2011 had been commissioned by an academic journal called New Politics.

Upon receiving Professor McMurtry's text, the *New Politics* editorial board decided to reject it: "We are sorry to inform you that the Editorial Board finds it inappropriate".

It is now "inappropriate" to mention the Police State.

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Review of Andrew Kolin, *State Power and Democracy* (2011), New York: St. Martin's Press/Palgrave Macmillan, 248 pp.

Many readers may have thought the U.S. is "like a police state" - - think of the security dress down of everyone boarding a flight within the U.S. sphere of control. Political scientist Andrew Kolin goes far beyond hasty analogue. He argues with rich factual substantiation that the U.S is a police state all the way down - not only since the stolen elections and war state of George Bush Jr., but before and since in a cumulative throughline of bureaucratized despotism across borders.

Documented examples are reported in detail from 1950 on to disclose a record that is as systematic in suppressing public dissent as its client dictatorships elsewhere - albeit far more successfully kept out of public and scholarly attention. Since the electoral contests of, by and for the rich in America are proclaimed as "the leader of the Free World" in the ad-vehicle media many still watch and read, an example helps to clarify the reality not reported. When three nuns protested before the war-criminal bombing of Iraq in 2002 where no war crime was left undone, "they were arrested, handcuffed, left on the ground for three hours and then jailed for seven months before trial - - [for] sabotage and obstruction of justice" (p. 153).

Every step of their police repression was within the laws that had been concocted before and after 9-11, in particular by the provisions of "the Patriot Act" - with here as elsewhere

the legislative title as integral to the Orwellian language of rule. The symbolic action of the nuns – painting blood on a missile silo – was in fact backed by international law against the “supreme crime” of non-defensive armed invasion of another country. Indeed their protest occurred just before the saturation bombing of civilian Baghdad which ended in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of children. But mass-murderous facts, citizen responsibility, moral courage and peaceful expression of the law of nations do not detain U.S. legal machinery. It is this *legal* machinery that Kolin focuses on to make his case that the U.S. is a police state.

What is a police state? Kolin states no criterion, but it can be deduced as *unlimited state power of armed force freely discharged without citizen right to stop it*. Anyone who has lived in the U.S. or its client dictatorships may recognize the concrete phenomena, but what is featured in this account are the laws and directives which empower the police state norms. While the men at the top always proclaim their devotion to the defence of freedom as armed force assaults on domestic dissent and dissident countries increase, none have been found guilty of breaking the law or repressing freedom of speech or assembly. It is U.S. laws and policies which form the U.S. police state, the argument is, and they are continuously made to enable an endless litany of crimes against human life.

The sustaining concern of this work, however, is not to define ordering principles, but to track the bureaucratic trails of legally terrorist offices, directives, and channels. The result is a detailed history of the inner workings of the U.S. state which exposes the legal suppression of democratic speech and action (omitting the use of laws against harmless non-pharmaceuticals as *lettres de cachet* to imprison the poor and the rebellious by the millions). Beneath continuous corporate-state and media proclamation of America’s freedoms and simultaneous academic fear to expose the lines of despotism, this work largely succeeds in providing the procedural workings of the U.S. police state building both before, and dramatically after, the turning point of 9-11.

The manufacture of pretext imprinted in the very timing and naming of the high-tech destruction of the World Trade Center as “9-11”, and the fact that the Bush Jr. presidency needed a war or two to distract from its illegitimacy and to empower its program of “full spectrum dominance” are *not*, however, raised in this book. They remain unspeakable facts within the official conspiracy theory now normalized as fact. Yet this canonical theory of the 9-11 tragedy assumes the collapse of the fireproof steel-cored buildings into their footsteps near the the speed of gravity – an impossibility within the laws of physics – and the first legal question of any homicidal crime – *cui bono, who benefits?* – is erased from its record. So although this official story allowed all the post-9-11 police state legislation and unlimited powers Kolin focuses on, he avoids the pretext itself.

Critical attention is instead confined to the silencing of questions, alternatives and dissent by the legal machinery of repression justified by it. Such “institutional analysis” is favoured by America’s lead critics, and positivist social science rules out what is not so corroborated. The clear exception to this methodological silencing here is attachment of the descriptor “police state” to the U.S., and the legally well informed record of demonstration. The maze-like bureaucratization of operations of repression is not ultimately covert, Kolin shows, but sanctified by official policies and laws.

Kolin’s attention to dated laws, directives, offices, and machinations behind the spotlight and personalization of politics is a welcome re-grounding amidst the daily media kaleidoscope of ever-changing images and personalities. In contrast to the usual academic fear of ideological non-conformity, Kolin clearly summarizes at the outset: “In the latter part

of the twentieth century, when mass movements for all intents and purposes were eliminated, what remained was for the most part was procedural democracy, which in a short period, would also be eliminated, to be replaced by a form of absolute power in which government had been made into a permanent police state. Much of this took place after the attacks of 9-11, during which the administration of George Bush in a very short time, was able to put in place many of the essential features of what is now an American police state" (p.2).

U.S. Police State in Formation from the Revolution through Reagan to Bush-Obama

Kolin goes back to the U.S. state's foundation to find the dictatorial impulse. "The truth of the matter", he says, "is that after the American Revolution there was thinking among economic and democratic elites that America had become too democratic, especially as mass democracy was expressing itself on the state level"(p. 3) - a view better known since a Rockefeller-founded Trilateral Commission Report made it famous centuries later. The Founding Fathers' anti-democratic politics have been explored before by Michael Parenti, who blurbs for the book. For Kolin, it is "mass democracy" that frightens the dominant ownership class from the start because it threatens their ruling proprietary control. But this economic diagnosis is not pursued by Kolin. He conceives the motor force as "control over people and territory by *the state* in itself. This non-Marxian thesis is historically associated with theoretical anarchism, but is here conjoined to the idea of "mass democracy", a motivating idea behind this work which is not given further definition.

Yet we may surmise that mass democracy entails popular assemblies - the traditional "town hall meeting" of classical American democracy - in place of representation by professional politicians controlled by corporate and financial lobbies. The meta-argument is that the nature of the U.S. state itself is disposed towards power after power "over people and territory" and is thus structured against mass democracy from the beginning. It is implied that mass democracy could not itself lead to a police state. This implied argument is not secure.

Desires of popular masses can be as overwhelmingly compelled to control people's thought, action and dissent by force as state elites are, and they can be as driven to seize the territories of other people and to lord it over them via great majorities - as in the popular witch-hunts through American history and as, more broadly, age-old ethnic warfare and killing and enslavement of losing societies. Something deeper than the will of the *demos* to which it is accountable is required - rules to live by which protect and enable life itself. This may be the most fundamental gap in democratic theory.

Annihilating Not Only Democracy, But Countless Lives and Life Supports

For perhaps the majority in the U.S., loathing of government is a national pastime except for "our men in uniform" - that is, arms-laden American enforcers chasing, shooting and bombing designated enemies of America at home and abroad. Wars seem in fact very popular with the majority if they are not being lost, and public pillories and prisons for deviators from the American Way seldom lack similar support. Police state laws, the invasion of Iraq and so on seem to have been popular if they are successful. Yet Kolin's work is more concerned to expose the state which is represented as the world leader in democracy while it rules by armed force, secrecy and terror and - especially since 9-11 - violently suppresses dissent in its own society. The inside mechanisms of legalist-

bureaucratic rule not discussed or connected in the dominant media or political science are uniquely laid bare. There were many designated “enemies” from the beginning – from American Indians and genocidal laws against them to the FBI, Sedition, Alien and Espionage Acts of 1917-18, the CIA founding in 1947, followed by the Internal Security Act of 1950, McCarthy’s House UnAmerican Activities Committee from 1957, and the Patriot and Homeland Security Acts of today. All of these legal mechanisms, he shows, have been structured to silence alternative thoughts and voices in the public sphere. When to be merely *unAmerican* brings life ruin to U.S. citizens and designation as “the enemy” can justify the saturation bombing of weaker societies, the derangement becomes clear amidst a sustained train of such abuses over generations.

When these systematic attacks simultaneously annihilate *life-serving* advocacy and institutions at home and elsewhere, a more sinister and unidentified pattern emerges. Not only non-conforming speech and thought are repressed, but standing up for other people’s lives and life means becomes criminalized. An invisible war is waged on social conscience and defence of life itself. Indeed this is the unrecognized selector of what the U.S. police state invariably attacks inside and outside its borders – social movements and orders to enable the lives of citizens opposed to transnational private money sequencing to more. Consider here for immediate example what the police protected in New York in the Wall Street protests until world attention no longer allowed the savage beating to continue with the dominant media cheering it on. Government armed force did *not* protect the lives of citizens or their cause of life justice or real market businesses on the street. Armed protective attention was directed instead to Wall Street operations by barricades, long swinging truncheons, continuous special vehicles of service to the money-men, and moving lines of trap and assault of the citizens standing for “the 99%”. In the wider world, the seven-month U.S.-NATO bombing of Libya – not to defend citizens as pretended, but to bomb main cities and government capacities, seize control of the country’s wealthy financial assets and sub-soil oil fields – went on with hardly a voice of dissent. That it destroyed Libya’s social state of free healthcare, higher education and guaranteed subsistence in food, housing and fuel was never reported even by public broadcasters.

The U.S. state is in these ways structured not only towards total force and control. It is, more deeply, programmed to *liquidate what serves the lives of people so as to grow transnational corporate profit for the few*. Always however, there is a pretext of a demonic enemy that people are being protected from – “communism”, “subversives”, “Islamic militants”, “terrorists”, “violence-threatening protestors”, all with no criteria. Most warred upon by the U.S. state are societies’ social life support systems – including public water, electricity, health and living subsidies. Consider here the bombed former Yugoslavia, Iraq and Libya – not to mention trillions of dollars of defunding of U.S. social security itself to pay for private bank bailouts by public dollars. This is the deeper shadow side of the U.S. state and its global allies.

On the other hand, the *non-police* state dimension of America – the relative but important freedom of people to say what they want in private – is an anomaly not engaged by this text. The strength of its analysis is its encyclopaedic report of the U.S. record through successive repressive laws, witchhunts and official policies, from cancelling the passports and rights of alleged communists to run for office to ever more “outlawing of dissident thought. For Kolin, this propulsion towards “absolute control” where citizen security is usurped not protected is a silent *telos* of the police state. Some of the revelations are hair-raising (although published errors like “Senglarb” for “Singlaub” and “Chili” for “Chile” do

not assist disclosure of what most are reluctant to face). President Ronald Reagan supported El Salvador's death-squad leaders, remained complicitly silent in the murder of Archbishop Romero and Jesuit priests calling for social justice, and backed Guatemala's bible-fundamentalist Rioss Montt who mass-murdered Mayan peasant villagers in the tens of thousands, saying "beans for the obedient; bullets for the rest"(p. 117). His administration also secretly funded war crimes against Nicaragua by drug sales into the U.S. and arms to Iran, repudiated guilt and damages awarded by the World Court, and mounted endless attacks on "any individual or organization that voiced discontent toward the military or government", including a 1992 CIA training manual for torture, false imprisonment and extortion including of Americans. Effective impunity - the primary marker of a police state - ruled. The Bush Jr. presidency then outdid Reagan in criminal impunity, war crimes and direction of mass murder, while the Obama presidency sustained all the mechanisms, added a third war and further stripped the social security system.

Command over ever more external territory and peoples is always the direction. Permanent war is the omnibus vehicle of its advance, and mass mind control including by torture is a standard method, along now with serial murders across borders by drones. While seldom penetrating these generic principles of the global police state, Kolin follows the *specifica* of the inside workings of the legal-bureaucratic machine through many phases, acronyms and abhorrence of real democracy built into policies and laws. One better knows why the U.S. becomes a failed state when one sees the absolutist overriding of every attempt to bring it back into line with life-respecting values during the last half century. The Fulbright and Church Committees, the mass progressive movements of the 1960's and 70's, all come to nought until post-9-11 laws, terror and surveillance make the police state a formal affair, and what is not mentioned here, Congress increasingly degenerates into the best frontmen the banking, oil, weapons, med-insurance and pharma corporations can buy. The apogee of police state method follows - military tribunals in place of due process to deal with endless arrests for an open-ended charge of terrorism against people in their own countries, systematic rendition and torture against international laws, abolition of habeus corpus and all procedures protecting against false charge, simultaneous denial of legal standing as prisoners of war, and evidence kept secret without possibility of disproof. The legal limbo of the Guatanomo prison has helped to permit evasion of any accountability to the rule of law. After promising to eliminate it, President Obama did not.

If one ignores the blinkering out of the private transnational corporate-financial system behind ever more people and territory for natural resource, market, labor, and strategic exploitation without limit, the book is a treasure-trove of the U.S. state-machinery for undemocratic world rule. The despotic compulsion to intimidate, control and terrorize innocent and conscientious citizens across the world including within the U.S. is hard to deny in face of such organized evidence. Just about every horror story one has heard of U.S. state rule finds a reference here. Even Franklin Roosevelt (internment of Japanese citizens) and Robert Kennedy (greenlights to FBI spying and bugging without cause, including of M.L. King) are flagged. As for Bill Clinton, he led genocide of Iraqi's social state, attack on social security at home, and refused to ratify the International War Crimes Court.

"*Abstract wording*" of laws against "terrorism" from the 1960's on is the means whereby progressive non-violent organizations and people have been criminalized for standing against mass-murderous U.S. state policies from Latin America to the Middle East to Indonesia to Vietnam. "Empire rolling back democracy" is the stated theme across decades and continents, but it might be more disquietingly understood as an ecogenocidal program

of money-party rule across borders. People are replaced, but the mechanism rules on. With the presidential brand change of Obama, for example, no law, directive and policy of disemployment, union-busting, social security elimination, or foreign war was stopped, whatever the promises to do so. All have in fact increased, including by new bombing of a defenceless oil country. Least of all is the Wall Street license to print debt-money and siphon trillions of dollars more of taxpayers' money reversed. Rather taxpayers at home and abroad are increasingly ruined to pay for the bankers' fraud while ever more lose their homes, jobs, social security supports, and futures of their children.

Yet the economic level of the U.S. police state remains in the shadows. From the start, the founding of the U.S. was on the basis of protecting private wealth and its accumulation with no common life interest defined. It allowed the limitless seizure of Indian people's lands and territories West of the Appalachians which George III had forbidden, and extended the unregulated rights of the private money power so fast and far that Thomas Jefferson himself warned that "banking institutions are more dangerous to our liberties than standing armies. Already they have raised up a monied aristocracy that has set the government at defiance. The [money and credit] issuing power should be taken from the banks and restored to the people to whom it belongs". Over 230 years later, the problem is clearer as U.S. state rule by force and dictate becomes a visible dead-end. But as to whether the Wall-Street money power behind the state that predates the world is brought under control is a question not posed in this study. So far the first step solution of public-bank utilities and non-profit loans to government has been silenced wherever it is raised.

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