

US Mid-Term Elections: The Death of Hope and Change

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To be brutally honest, those of us concerned with “national security” issues ([indefinite detention without charge or trial](#) at Guantánamo and elsewhere, [trials by Military Commission](#) and [accountability](#) for the Bush administration’s torturers) and foreign policy (the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan) could tell by May 2009 that “hope” and “change” were dead in the water.

Whereas Barack Obama had never disguised his desire to step up the military occupation of Afghanistan, while scaling down operations in Iraq, he had promised — or had [seemed to promise](#) — a thorough repudiation of the detention policies at Guantánamo and Bagram, and the coercive interrogations and torture that had stalked their cells and interrogation rooms.

However, although he [promised to close Guantánamo](#) within a year and to uphold the absolute ban on torture in a series of executive orders issued on his second day in office, fine words were followed by months of inactivity, as a cautious Task Force of career officials from government departments and the intelligence agencies was [convened](#) to [review the Guantánamo cases](#).

By May 2009, with Republicans seizing on the President’s court-ordered release of [a notorious series of “torture memos,”](#) issued by Justice Department lawyers in the Office of Legal Counsel in 2002 and 2005, as a demonstration of his untrustworthiness on national security issues, [a fundamental change occurred](#).

The reviled Military Commission trial system for Guantánamo prisoners, which Obama had [suspended on his first day in office](#), was [reintroduced](#), as was indefinite detention without charge or trial as an official policy, even though this was the heart of the Bush administration’s program, and even though progressive supporters of the President had presumed that there were only two options for the remaining prisoners: federal court trials, or release.

This was followed by another deeply unsavory official policy — resisting any more embarrassing disclosures about the Bush administration’s torture program by inappropriately invoking sweeping “state secrets” privileges, as, for example, in the case of [five men subjected to “extraordinary rendition” and torture](#), who sought to sue Jeppesen Dataplan Inc., a Boeing subsidiary that had operated as the CIA’s torture travel agent.

There were also several other disgraces: [fighting a court order](#) providing new homes on the

US mainland to Guantánamo prisoners (the Uighurs) who had [won their habeas corpus petitions](#) but who could not be repatriated (to China) because of the risk of torture in their home countries; [fighting a court order](#) extending habeas corpus rights to [a handful of foreign prisoners](#) rendered to Bagram from other countries; [preventing the release](#) of any cleared prisoners to Yemen after a hysterical overreaction to the news that the failed Christmas Day plane bomber, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, was recruited in Yemen; replacing the Bush administration's detention and interrogation policies with [drone attacks on Pakistan](#); and [approving the assassination of US citizens](#) anywhere in the world.

Although Republicans in Congress — and cowardly members of Obama's own party — [bear considerable blame](#) for [the descent into paralysis](#) of those few parts of the President's bold promises that he had not already undermined voluntarily, the end result of the last 21 months of cowardice and compromise is that, on foreign policy and national security issues, there was little positive momentum that a shift of political power in the mid-term elections could actually erode.

That said, [losing control of the House of Representatives](#) guarantees that anything the administration might have still contemplated doing — standing up to critics and insisting that, [as announced a year ago](#), the trial of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and four others accused of involvement in the 9/11 attacks will take place in federal court, or moving any of the Guantánamo prisoners to [a prison on the US mainland](#) — has no chance of happening at all, making the United States a slightly gloomier place than it was before the mid-term elections.

Moreover, given the deepening of Obama's paralysis that this signifies, it also makes it seem less, rather than more likely that the President and his party will be able to do anything meaningful to lure back the progressive base that helped secure victory in 2008, in time for the 2012 Presidential election, unless, by some miracle, someone decides to try to rein in the Pentagon and the military-industrial complex as an economic necessity (if for no other reason).

That, however, sounds too much like "hope" and "change," which, to reiterate, are dead in the water in America today.

Andy Worthington is the author of [The Guantánamo Files: The Stories of the 774 Detainees in America's Illegal Prison](#) (published by Pluto Press, distributed by Macmillan in the US, and available from Amazon — click on the following for the [US](#) and the [UK](#)) and of two other books: [Stonehenge: Celebration and Subversion](#) and [The Battle of the Beanfield](#).

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