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To understand how the U.S. government became a police state, look no further than how it freed itself from colonial rule. For the American Revolution was, by and large, the result of a mobilization of the masses by the elites to liberate the colonized from a colonizer. It was the starting point of the myth of how the post- Revolutionary government would embody democracy.

The truth was that after the American Revolution, the thinking among economic and political elites was that America had become too democratic, especially as mass democracy expressed itself on the state level. The appearance and growth of democratic practices was perceived by elites as a threat to the expansion of state power. The government responded primarily through the use of force and violence, seeking to extend control over people and territory within North America through genocidal and ethnocidal measures against American Indians. Slavery was increasing in importance to the economy, in service of the expansion of state power. It is no coincidence that American Indians and slaves were the earliest groups defined by the government as political outsiders. Groups depicted as enemies of the state throughout U.S. history and described as “others” served as a convenient justification to enlarge state power at the expense of democracy.

Organized labor, especially its more radical elements, also challenged elite rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and political repression was turned loose against them. In surveying U.S. history, it becomes clear that the actions of the government in the end were intended to disrupt and eliminate progressive, mass- based political movements. The state viewed labor organizations as political outsiders, seen as seeking to subvert the government by forming an alliance with external enemies of the United States. Whether applied to organized labor, Socialists, Communists or terrorists, state ideology remained the same in perceiving the threat as coming from political outsiders, hence the need to employ emergency measures.

As police states are, by their nature, hostile to rule of law, political repression is accomplished through the use of essentially illegal measures, such as the Alien and Sedition Acts and the Espionage Act. This outlawing of political thought and alternative viewpoints persists as an ongoing theme. From the 1920s onward, in order to combat political outsiders, many state

governments formed a partnership with local police officials with the goal of stamping out grassroots democracy. These Red Squads, a political police force, engage in surveillance, disruption, and, in many instances, the destruction of political organizations active in nonviolent political expression. The Red Squads acted in similar ways to the FBI, as agents of the state seeking to instill in American society social and political conformity.

The development of other essentially political police agencies within the federal government, to supplement the work of the FBI, such as the CIA, NSA, and a host of other intelligence gatherers on the federal and state levels, were an ominous sign. State repression was accelerating during the Truman administration with the passage of the National Security Act, and the growth of the CIA. Inside the federal government, there was an increasing subordination of the legislative branch to the executive branch., concentrating power in the context of a permanent emergency—and causing the government to become more determined to eliminate mass democracy. For instance, during World War II and in the name of a national emergency, Roosevelt ordered the internment of Japanese American citizens. This targeting of outsiders identified as an internal and external threat, continues to the present day; the alleged menace, was first Communism, and later, terrorism.

While mass democracy was being crushed in the United States, foreign policy in the postwar period remained consistent, extending control over more people and more territory, resulting in alliances with dictatorships so as to crush democracy overseas as well. After World War II, the military industrial complex became another key component in the twisted road to police state practices, based on the premise of permanent war making, with a cold war arms race, the sending of troops, and the establishment of military bases across the globe. This is another defining feature of a police state: a nation placed in an ongoing state of mobilization to prepare and fight wars throughout the globe. Police states, incorporate war-making into normalized state functions. Permanent war making translates into the global subversion of democracy. Supplementing the military in undermining democracy overseas, the CIA was one of many federal agencies during the second half of the twentieth century that was carrying out an essentially antidemocratic mission in the name of national security.

In assessing the successes and failures of progressive movements in the United States, in many ways, their limitations can be attributed to the intensive scale and scope of political repression, such as the FBI's Cointelpro Program, which clearly diminished their effectiveness and in most cases, fundamentally undermined them. In many ways, Cointelpro was significant in paving the way for a police state, for progressive movements that developed after Cointelpro were much smaller and less effective in advancing mass democracy.

The ending of procedural democracy was yet another step toward the establishment of a permanent police state. The Constitution is supposed to place legal limits on the concentration of power within parts of government. Instead, with political repression of mass-based movements justified by declarations of national emergency, the government consistently stepped outside Constitutional legal boundaries. As a result, by the early 1970s, large-scale political movements were on the wane, in particular, as the events of Watergate unfolded, in many ways, a dress rehearsal for a police state. Watergate represented a political assault, not just on the supposed external threats to the Nixon administration, but political repression was extended to the government's internal enemies. That meant taking action against the Democratic Party by seeking to rig an election, one of the most blatant attempts to destroy procedural democracy.

The concentration of power within one branch of government had been manifesting itself increasingly as an imperial presidency. Postwar presidential administrations define their power largely in relation to foreign policy initiatives. The foreign policies of post-Nixon administrations were outwardly anti-Communist and antiterrorist but in reality were driven by the maintenance and extension of a global American empire. Post-Watergate administrations were largely successful in finding various ways around the so-called Watergate reforms, seeking to enlarge the powers of presidents at home and overseas.

By the time we reach the presidency of George W. Bush, the executive branch had become a branch that saw itself as above the law while making law. The state came to embody the will of Bush and his inner circle. The spark that ignited the transition toward the final form of an American police state was the attacks on the World Trade Towers in 1993 and 2001. In response, the government acted outside the Constitution by passing the Patriot Act, the Military Commissions Act, and other measures, producing a direct assault on civil liberties.

The clearest indication of American police state practices is the use of preventive detention. In one example—extraordinary rendition—all the government has to do is accuse anyone of anything related to terrorism, sufficient reason to seize and ship individuals elsewhere to be tortured.

The twisted and extensive use of signing statements also indicates that an administration is functioning outside the law. In a distorted extension of the theory of a unitary executive, President Bush's excessive use of signing statements resulted in dictatorial powers.

What is the future of the American police state? If history tells us anything about police states, it is that they all eventually crumble, in large part, because over time, they become dysfunctional. The same can be said of the police state of the Bush administration. During the second term, there were indications of a breakdown in how this police state functioned. Some of the clearest symptoms of this dysfunction were the revelations of torture at Abu Ghraib, the National Security Agency's surveillance program, and the large number of prisoners released from Guantanamo Bay. In addition, opposition mounted to the reauthorization of the Patriot Act and the Supreme Court ruling in the Boumediene case, which called into question the use of the Military Commissions Act. In the early days of the Obama administration, the trend seemed to point toward an American police state that will be modified, but not eliminated.

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